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Character Is Caught, Not Taught: Narrative Inquiry into How Santri Experience Moral Formation, Kiai Authority, and Character Education in Indonesian Pesantren

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ABSTRACT

Background. The study is motivated by the increasing attention to character education as a response to moral crises, social transformation, and challenges of Islamic education in the digital era.

Purpose. This study aims to analyze the development of scientific publications on character education in Islamic boarding schools during the 2016–2025 period through a bibliometric approach.

Method. The research employed a bibliometric method using data obtained from the Scopus database. Data collection was conducted using keywords related to character education, moral education, pesantren, Islamic boarding school, and Islamic education. After the screening process based on publication year, document type, and language, 111 documents were selected and analyzed using VOSviewer software.

Results. The findings reveal that publications on character education in pesantren increased significantly after 2020 and reached their peak during 2024–2025. Research themes evolved from normative approaches toward more multidisciplinary issues such as religious moderation, anti-bullying, digital transformation, and entrepreneurship. Indonesia emerged as the dominant contributor to publications in this field, accounting for approximately 90% of the analyzed documents.

Conclusion. This study contributes by providing a scientific mapping of research trends, collaboration networks, and future research opportunities related to character education in Islamic boarding schools based on a predominantly Indonesian research landscape indexed in Scopus. The findings confirm that pesantren-based character education holds a strategic role in the development of contemporary Islamic education while highlighting opportunities for broader international collaboration and comparative research.

KEYWORDS

Bibliometric Analysis, Character Education, Islamic Education, Islamic Boarding School

INTRODUCTION

Character education within Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) has become one of the strategic issues in the development of contemporary Islamic education studies. Pesantren are not only regarded as institutions for the transmission of Islamic knowledge, but also as centers for the formation of morality, spirituality, and the social

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character of Muslim communities (Banks, 2008; Björk & Solomon, 2012; Geertz, 1960; Zagonari, 2023). In the global context, character education has increasingly gained attention as a response to moral crises, the ethical degradation of younger generations, radicalism, bullying, and the challenges of digital transformation in education (Taguchi, 2018; Hanim, 2019; Zulfikar et al., 2023). The rapid development of information technology and social change has encouraged Islamic educational institutions, including pesantren, to adapt toward more contextual, moderate, and multidimensional models of character education (Rusmana et al., 2024; Mawardi et al., 2025; Gürel, 2019). Therefore, pesantren-based character education has become an increasingly relevant theme in modern Islamic education studies because it is considered to have an important contribution in creating a balance between scientific knowledge, morality, and religious values.

The development of research on character education in pesantren over the last decade demonstrates a continuously increasing trend. Early studies were still dominated by normative approaches concerning the internalization of moral values and moral education within pesantren traditions (Suresman et al., 2025; Abitolkha, 2022; Thalgi, 2019). Subsequently, research expanded to issues such as religious moderation, multicultural education, pesantren culture, and strengthening students' character in facing the challenges of modernity (Rahmah & Fadhli, 2021; Taufik, 2020). After 2020, studies began to shift toward more multidisciplinary approaches by linking character education with the Industrial Revolution 4.0, anti-bullying initiatives, digital educational transformation, students' social communication, and pesantren-based entrepreneurship (Mahanani et al., 2022; Abubakar et al., 2025; Amal, 2025). The bibliometric analysis conducted in this study indicates that the number of scientific publications related to character education in pesantren experienced significant growth during the 2016–2025 period, particularly after 2020, and reached its peak in 2024–2025 with more than 30 publications per year. These findings indicate that the issue of character education in pesantren has evolved from a marginal topic into a strategic theme in contemporary Islamic education studies.

Nevertheless, research on character education in pesantren still contains several research gaps. Based on the co-occurrence keyword visualization results, research themes remain highly dominated by socio-humanities and normative approaches, while studies related to artificial intelligence, digital transformation of pesantren, students' mental health, data-based evaluation, inclusive education, and the integration of educational technology remain very limited. In addition, international collaboration networks are still relatively weak because publications are dominated by Indonesia and a small number of other Southeast Asian countries. This condition indicates that the development of research on character education in pesantren still requires more innovative, multidisciplinary, and globally oriented approaches (Jamaluddin et al., 2016; Huda et al., 2024; Safitri et al., 2025). Preliminary data from this study also show that out of 150 initial documents identified in the Scopus database, only 111 documents met the criteria of relevance and international publication quality. This finding demonstrates that studies on character education in pesantren are still developing and have not yet achieved strong thematic consolidation and global academic networking.

This study aims to address these gaps through a bibliometric approach that maps the development of scientific publications, research theme trends, author productivity, international collaboration networks, and the direction of future studies on character education in pesantren during the 2016–2025 period. Unlike previous studies, which have primarily employed conceptual, qualitative, or localized case-study approaches, this study not only provides a quantitative and visual bibliometric mapping of research on character education in pesantren using the Scopus database and VOSviewer software, but also offers a conceptual perspective on how the field has evolved. The mapping reveals a gradual shift from traditional discussions centered on moral transmission toward

broader multidimensional perspectives encompassing religious moderation, digital transformation, entrepreneurship, and social engagement. These findings suggest that contemporary character education in pesantren is increasingly understood as an adaptive educational framework that integrates Islamic values with responses to emerging societal and technological challenges. The bibliometric approach enables the identification of publication growth, dominant themes, relationships among keywords, the most influential articles, and the evolution of research patterns in a more systematic, objective, and comprehensive manner (Lindgren et al., 2024; Arif et al., 2024; Toosi et al., 2019). The findings reveal that studies on character education in pesantren are shifting from normative approaches toward more multidisciplinary and contextual approaches, as reflected in the emergence of new themes such as religious moderation, anti-bullying, entrepreneurship, and the digital transformation of Islamic education. However, issues such as artificial intelligence in Islamic education, students' mental health, inclusive education, and data-based educational evaluation remain very limited, thereby providing substantial opportunities for future research that is more innovative and adaptive to technological developments and global social challenges. Therefore, this study is expected to contribute theoretically to the development of contemporary Islamic education studies while also serving as an academic foundation for the development of more relevant, modern, and globally oriented pesantren-based character education policies in the digital era.

The novelty of this study lies not only in its application of bibliometric analysis but also in its ability to provide a comprehensive and systematic understanding of the global intellectual structure of research on character education in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). Unlike previous studies, which have primarily focused on conceptual discussions, qualitative analyses, or local case studies, this study integrates publication trends, thematic evolution, collaboration networks, influential authors, and research gaps into a single analytical framework using Scopus-indexed publications and VOSviewer visualisation. More importantly, it identifies major shifts in the research landscape by demonstrating how the focus of character education research has evolved from traditional normative perspectives toward more multidisciplinary and contemporary themes, including religious moderation, anti-bullying, digital transformation, entrepreneurship, and the potential integration of artificial intelligence into Islamic education. At the same time, the study highlights underexplored areas, such as students' mental health, inclusive education, and data-driven educational evaluation, thereby revealing significant gaps that should guide future research. By uncovering these emerging trends, thematic transitions, and future research opportunities, this study goes beyond methodological mapping and provides a strategic conceptual foundation for advancing both the theory and practice of *pesantren*-based character education in response to contemporary educational challenges and the demands of the Society 5.0 era.

Based on the above discussion, this study aims to analyze the development of scientific publications on character education in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) during the 2016–2025 period by employing a bibliometric approach. Specifically, the study seeks to identify publication growth, dominant research themes, thematic evolution, author productivity, institutional and country collaboration networks, influential publications, as well as existing research gaps and future research directions. Through a comprehensive bibliometric mapping, this study provides a systematic overview of the intellectual structure and knowledge development within the field of *pesantren*-based character education.

Beyond describing publication trends, this study also aims to provide a deeper conceptual understanding of how research on character education in pesantren has evolved in response to contemporary educational challenges. The findings are expected to demonstrate that character education in pesantren is no longer conceptualized merely as the transmission of moral and religious

values, but has gradually developed into a multidimensional educational framework integrating religious moderation, social responsibility, entrepreneurship, digital transformation, and educational innovation. In this regard, the study contributes not only methodologically through bibliometric mapping but also conceptually by highlighting the evolving theoretical orientation of character education within contemporary Islamic education.

Furthermore, this study seeks to strengthen the understanding that pesantren-based character education occupies a strategic position in addressing the challenges of modern education, particularly in fostering moral development, religious moderation, social cohesion, and the transformation of Islamic education in the Society 5.0 era. The results are also expected to provide valuable insights for researchers, educators, and policymakers in formulating evidence-based strategies for strengthening character education within Islamic educational institutions. Implicitly, this study assumes that research on character education in pesantren has experienced significant growth toward more multidisciplinary, contextual, and adaptive approaches in response to technological advancement, globalization, and the increasingly complex social challenges faced by contemporary education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a bibliometric approach (Snyder, 2019; Moro & Valgimigli, 2021). to analyze the development of scientific publications related to character education within Islamic boarding schools during the period 2016–2025. The bibliometric approach was selected because it provides a quantitative and visual overview of the structure, trends, and knowledge networks within a particular scientific field based on publication metadata. This method also enables researchers to identify research trends, influential authors, collaboration networks, and emerging themes in the field of Islamic character education.

The research data were obtained from the Scopus database, which is recognized as one of the largest and most internationally reputable scientific databases for academic publications. The initial search yielded 150 documents using the following search query: *TITLE-ABS-KEY ((“character education” OR “moral education” OR “character formation”) AND (“Islamic boarding school” OR “pesantren” OR “Islamic school” OR “madrasah” OR “Islamic education”))*

To refine the search results and ensure their relevance to the research objectives, several filtering criteria were applied. The filtering process included: (1) publication period limited to 2016–2025, (2) document type restricted to journal articles and review articles, and (3) publication language limited to English. After filtering the publication year, 121 documents remained, while 29 documents published outside the period 2016–2025 were excluded. Furthermore, six non-article documents were excluded, followed by the exclusion of four non-English publications. After the screening process, 111 documents were retained for the final bibliometric analysis.

The selection and screening process was conducted to ensure that the analyzed publications were directly relevant to the topic of character education in Islamic educational institutions while maintaining the quality standards of international academic publications. The workflow of the article selection process is presented in Figure 1.

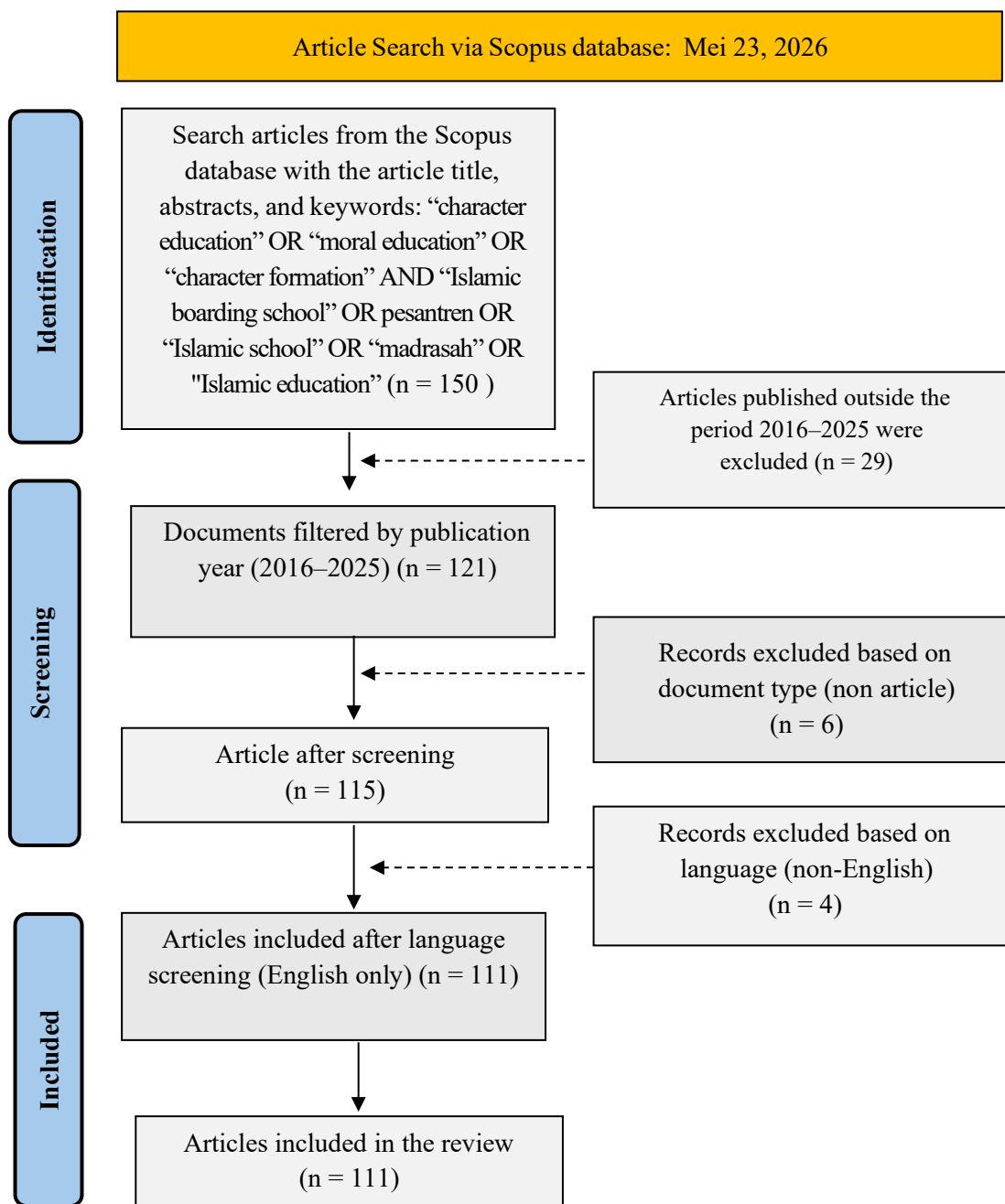


Figure 1. The article selection process based on the PRISMA method.

The final dataset was exported from Scopus in CSV format and analyzed using bibliometric software, including VOSviewer (version 1.6.20). The bibliometric analysis consisted of two major stages, namely descriptive analysis and network visualization analysis (Sununianti, 2025; Yusuf, 2024; van Eck & Waltman, 2010).

Descriptive analysis was conducted to identify the annual publication trends, the most productive authors, leading institutions, source journals, and countries contributing to the research field. Meanwhile, network visualization analysis was used to examine scientific relationships among publications through co-authorship analysis, co-occurrence of keywords, citation analysis, and co-citation analysis. These analyses enabled the researchers to identify collaboration patterns, dominant research themes, and the evolution of scientific discussions related to character education within Islamic boarding schools over time.

The use of bibliometric visualization tools also facilitated the mapping of emerging research trends and thematic developments in the field, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the current research landscape and potential future directions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Trends in Scientific Publication Development (2016–2025)

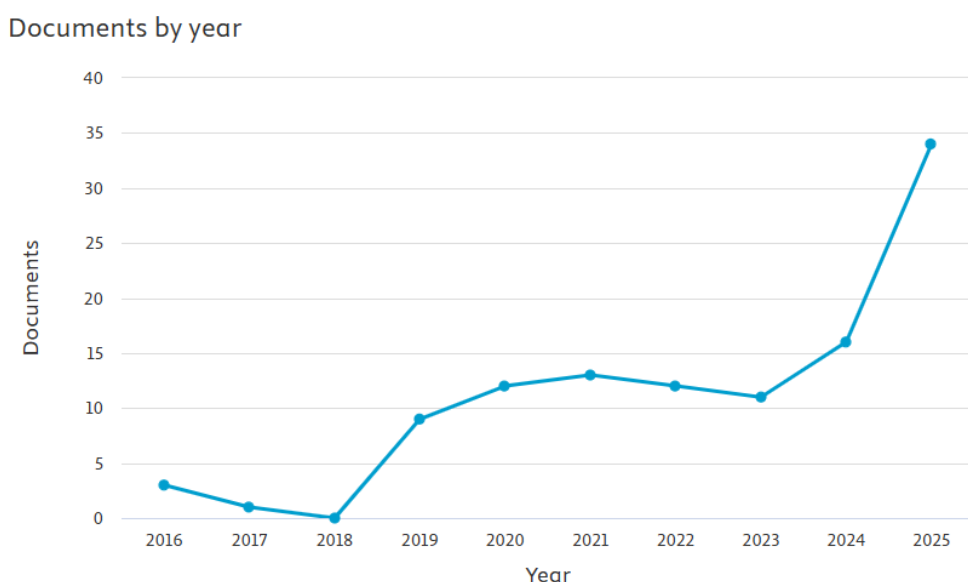


Figure 2. Trends in Scientific Publication Development (2016–2025)

Based on the “Documents by Year (2016–2025)” graph, the development pattern of scientific publications on character education within Islamic boarding schools appears to be quite dynamic. In the initial phase (2016–2018), the number of publications was still very low and tended to stagnate; in fact, almost no publications were found in 2018. This phase can be categorized as the initial or incubation phase, a period in which the research topic was still limited, sporadic, and had not yet become a major concern within the international academic community.

Entering the 2019–2021 period, a significant increase occurred, with the number of publications gradually rising from approximately 9 documents to 13 documents per year. This condition indicates a shift in academic attention toward the issue of character education within Islamic boarding schools, particularly in the context of contemporary Islamic education, the strengthening of moral values, and religion-based character development. During this phase, the research topic began to evolve from a local issue into part of a broader educational discourse.

Furthermore, during the 2022–2023 period, a slight decline and stabilization in the number of publications can be observed. However, the trend increased sharply again in 2024 and reached its peak in 2025 with more than 30 documents. This surge indicates that research on character education in Islamic boarding schools has entered a rapid growth phase. The increase was likely influenced by several factors, such as growing global attention to character education, concerns over the moral crisis among younger generations, the transformation of Islamic education in the digital era, the increasing number of Scopus-indexed journal publications, and the expansion of research collaborations among institutions and countries.

More deeply, this development pattern not only demonstrates an increase in the number of publications but also reflects a transformation process in which the research theme has shifted from being relatively marginal to becoming an increasingly relevant and strategic topic in Islamic education studies. This phenomenon can also be explained through the network effect and the Matthew effect, whereby once a topic becomes popular, more researchers, institutions, and journals become interested in developing studies in that field, thereby accelerating the growth of scientific literature.

Nevertheless, the interpretation of this publication trend should be undertaken with caution. Although the bibliometric analysis indicates a substantial increase in the number of publications, particularly during 2024–2025, this pattern cannot be interpreted solely as evidence of a genuine rise in scholarly interest in character education within pesantren. Since the dataset was retrieved exclusively from the Scopus database, the observed growth may also have been influenced by several methodological and technical factors, including the continuous expansion of Scopus index coverage, the inclusion of newly indexed journals, changes in journal indexing policies, the rapid growth of open-access publications, and time lags in the indexing process, especially for the most recent publication years. In addition, increasing institutional support for international publication and the growing number of Indonesian journals indexed by Scopus may have further contributed to the apparent rise in publication output. Consequently, the publication trend identified in this study should be interpreted as reflecting both the actual development of research activities and the evolving characteristics of the Scopus indexing system. Recognizing these factors is essential to avoid overestimating the magnitude of research growth and to ensure a more balanced and methodologically rigorous interpretation of the bibliometric findings.

These findings have important implications for researchers and policymakers. First, the increasing number of publications indicates that character education in Islamic boarding schools has become a strategic issue in modern Islamic education research. Second, this condition provides substantial opportunities for the development of more in-depth studies, such as research on the digital transformation of Islamic boarding schools, character education based on Islamic values, religious moderation, and the development of contemporary Islamic pedagogy. Third, for the advancement of bibliometric studies, future research may examine burst keywords, thematic trend analysis, topic modeling, and patterns of international collaboration in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the evolution of research on character education in Islamic boarding schools. The growth of publications also reflects increasing academic awareness of the importance of Islamic boarding schools as institutions that play a central role in shaping students' moral, spiritual, and social values in response to contemporary educational challenges. Furthermore, expanding research into emerging themes will not only enrich the theoretical foundations of character education but also provide evidence-based recommendations for improving educational policies and practices in Islamic boarding schools. Finally, the integration of advanced bibliometric approaches with qualitative and empirical analyses can generate a more holistic understanding of research trends, identify existing knowledge gaps, and guide future research agendas in this field.

Contributions of the Most Productive Authors, Institutions, and Countries

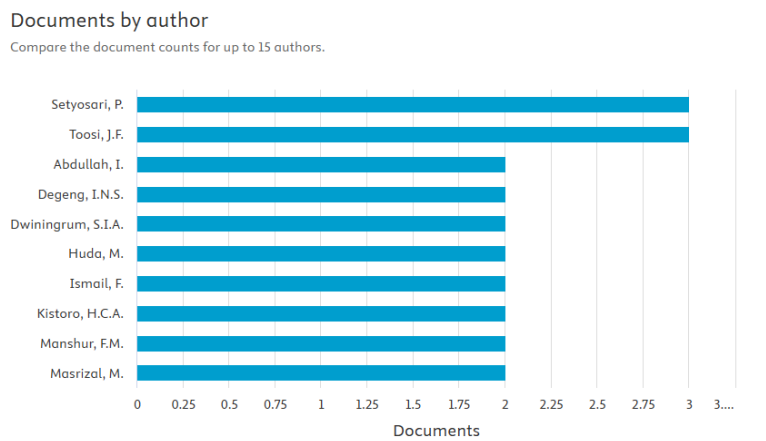


Figure 3. Contributions of the Most Productive Authors, Institutions, and Countries

The “Documents by Author” graph shows that research productivity in the field of character education within Islamic boarding schools is still dominated by several key authors with a relatively limited number of publications. Setyosari, P. and Toosi, J.F. occupy the highest positions with approximately three documents each, while other authors such as Abdullah, I., Degeng, I.N.S., Dwiningrum, S.I.A., Huda, M., Ismail, F., Kistoro, H.C.A., Manshur, F.M., and Masrizal, M. each contributed around two documents. This pattern indicates that the distribution of author productivity in this research field remains relatively dispersed and has not yet become highly concentrated within a particular academic group.

This phenomenon reflects the characteristics of an emerging research field, in which the number of active researchers is beginning to increase, but strong dominance by a few leading scholars has not yet been established. Unlike more mature fields, which typically demonstrate a high concentration of publications among a small number of core authors, research on character education in Islamic boarding schools still exhibits a relatively open and dynamic pattern of collaboration. This indicates that opportunities for scientific contribution remain widely available for new researchers and other institutions.

In addition, the small differences in the number of publications among authors suggest that research on this topic is still developing collectively and does not yet depend heavily on particular academic figures. This condition can be viewed positively because it reflects a more inclusive distribution of contributions within the Islamic education research ecosystem. On the other hand, this pattern also indicates that the field still requires stronger academic communities, increased international collaboration, and the consolidation of research networks in order to generate greater scientific influence at the global level.

From a bibliometric perspective, these results also indicate that author productivity does not necessarily correspond to scientific impact. Therefore, further analyses such as co-authorship analysis, citation analysis, and author impact analysis are needed to determine whether the most productive authors also possess significant citation levels and academic influence in the development of research on character education within Islamic boarding schools.

Dominant Journals and Source Publications

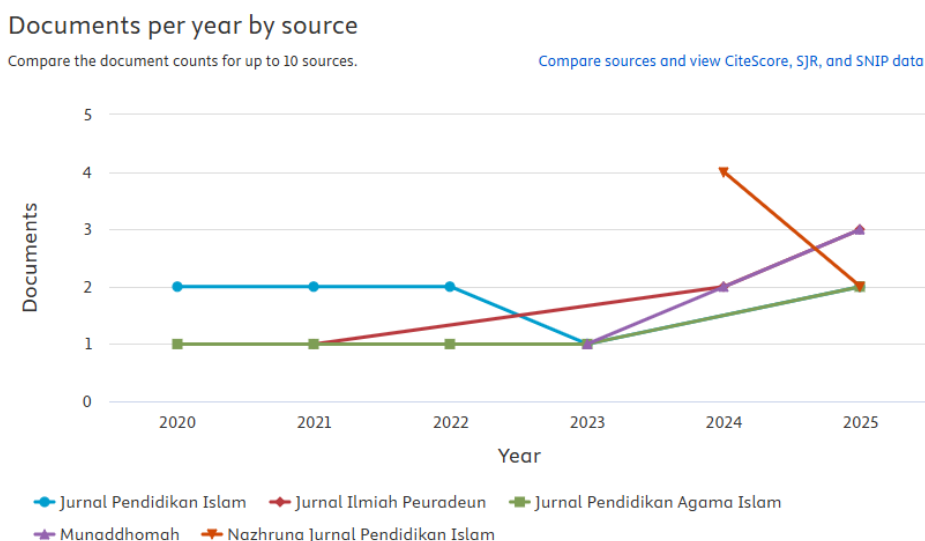


Figure 4. Dominant Journals and Source Publications

The “Documents per Year by Source” graph illustrates the dynamics of publication development across several major journals that published research on character education within Islamic boarding schools during the 2020–2025 period. In general, the graph demonstrates uneven publication growth among journals, with several journals experiencing significant increases in recent years.

Jurnal Pendidikan Islam (blue) shows a relatively stable pattern during the 2020–2022 period, with approximately two documents per year, followed by a decline to one document in 2023 before increasing again in subsequent years. This pattern indicates that the journal has remained one of the important publication sources, although its growth has been relatively moderate.

Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun (red) demonstrates gradual growth, increasing from approximately one document in 2021 to two documents in 2024–2025. This trend indicates growing attention to themes related to character education and Islamic education within the journal’s scope.

Meanwhile, Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam (green) exhibits a relatively consistent growth pattern. The number of publications increased gradually from one document in the earlier period to two documents in 2025. This condition suggests that the journal has made a fairly stable contribution to supporting the development of research on character education based on Islamic values.

On the other hand, Munaddhomah (purple) emerged as one of the journals with the most significant growth. After recording only approximately one document in 2023, the number of publications increased to two documents in 2024 and reached around three documents in 2025. This increase indicates that Munaddhomah is becoming an increasingly active publication outlet in the fields of Islamic education and character education.

In addition, Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam (orange) also shows a noteworthy development. The journal began to appear significantly in 2024 with approximately four documents, although it experienced a slight decline in 2025. This phenomenon may indicate the presence of a particular thematic momentum or increased researcher interest in the journal during a certain period.

Overall, the pattern shown in this graph indicates that research on character education within Islamic boarding schools has received increasing attention in several Islamic education journals, particularly since 2023. The growth of publications in several journals also suggests an expansion of academic discussion related to character education, Islamic values, and the transformation of Islamic boarding school education in the contemporary era.

From a bibliometric perspective, these inter-journal dynamics may be influenced by various factors, such as the increasing indexation of journals in Scopus, editorial policies, the publication of special issues, growing research collaboration, and global trends related to character education and Islamic education. Nevertheless, the interpretation of the number of documents should be conducted carefully because publication quantity does not always reflect the quality or scientific impact of a journal. Therefore, further analyses such as citation analysis, impact metrics, and source impact analysis are necessary to determine whether the increase in publication numbers is also accompanied by an increase in academic influence within this research field.

Mapping of Research Topics and Author Keywords

Documents by subject area

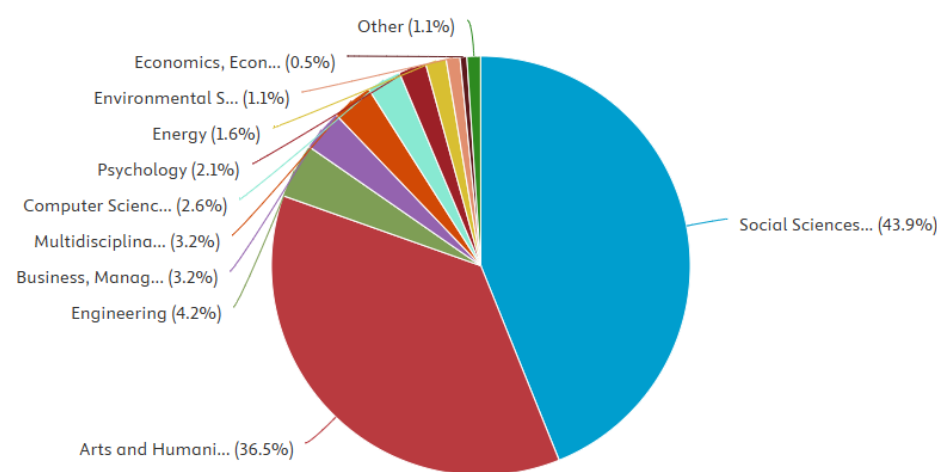


Figure 5. Mapping of Research Topics and Author Keywords

The “Documents by Subject Area” diagram shows that the distribution of publications on character education within Islamic boarding schools is highly dominated by the fields of Social Sciences (43.9%) and Arts and Humanities (36.5%). Together, these two fields account for more than 80% of the total documents analyzed. This dominance indicates that the studies in the dataset primarily focus on social, educational, cultural, religious, and humanitarian aspects, which are highly relevant to the themes of character education, Islamic education, and the development of moral values within Islamic boarding school environments.

Other fields such as Engineering (4.2%), Business, Management and Accounting (3.2%), Multidisciplinary (3.2%), and Computer Science (2.6%) contribute smaller proportions; however, they still indicate a tendency toward interdisciplinary integration in Islamic education research. The presence of these fields suggests that issues related to character education in Islamic boarding schools are increasingly being linked to aspects of educational technology, educational institution management, and digital transformation in Islamic learning systems.

In addition, the field of Psychology (2.1%) also makes a relevant contribution because it is closely related to character formation, moral development, and student behavior. Meanwhile, contributions from Energy (1.6%), Environmental Science (1.1%), and Economics, Econometrics and Finance (0.5%) remain very limited, indicating that applied science and economic approaches have not yet been widely utilized in research related to character education within Islamic boarding schools.

The “Other” category (1.1%) indicates the presence of several studies from minor fields that nevertheless contribute to enriching research perspectives. Overall, this distribution pattern demonstrates that the analyzed research landscape remains strongly oriented toward the social sciences and humanities, with dominant approaches that are normative, qualitative, and religious in nature. This is consistent with the characteristics of Islamic education research, which tends to emphasize values, morality, culture, and character formation.

These findings also provide significant opportunities for the development of more interdisciplinary research in the future. The integration of Islamic education with technology, educational psychology, educational management, and data-based approaches may broaden the scientific contribution of research on character education within Islamic boarding schools, enabling

it to focus not only on normative aspects but also on practical, innovative, and applicable dimensions in the context of modern education.

Collaboration Networks among Authors and Countries

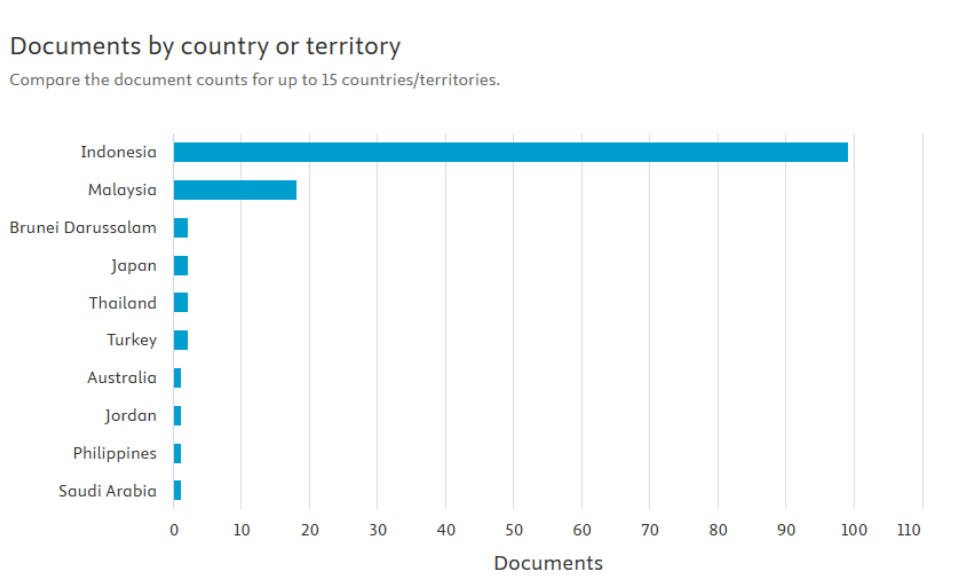


Figure 6. Collaboration Networks among Authors and Countries

The “Documents by Country or Territory” graph shows the very strong dominance of Indonesia in publications related to character education within Islamic boarding schools. Indonesia produced nearly 100 documents, far surpassing the other countries included in the dataset. This dominance indicates that Indonesia has become the primary center for the development of research in the field of character education within Islamic boarding schools, which is closely connected to the social, cultural, and Islamic educational context of the country.

Malaysia ranks second with a fairly significant number of publications, although still far below Indonesia. This indicates that these two Southeast Asian countries have become the main centers for the production of scientific publications related to Islamic education and character education. This condition is highly relevant considering that Indonesia and Malaysia possess strong Islamic educational traditions, including the existence of pesantren, Islamic schools, and educational institutions based on religious values.

Other countries such as Brunei Darussalam, Japan, Thailand, Turkey, Australia, Jordan, the Philippines, and Saudi Arabia contribute relatively small numbers of publications. Nevertheless, the presence of these countries indicates that issues related to character education in Islamic education are beginning to receive international attention, both through academic collaboration and through cross-cultural and religious education studies.

Indonesia’s dominance in this graph indicates that research in this field is still strongly influenced by the local and regional context of Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia as the center for the development of pesantren and Islamic education studies. This also demonstrates that Islamic boarding schools are not only viewed as traditional educational institutions but also as academic research objects that are becoming increasingly relevant in the discourse of modern character education.

However, the publication distribution, which remains concentrated in only a few countries, indicates that the level of internationalization in this research field is still relatively limited. Contributions from Western countries and other regions remain very small, meaning that

opportunities to expand international collaboration are still widely open. Strategies such as cross-country collaborative publications, strengthening global research networks, and integrating character education issues with global themes such as digital transformation, religious moderation, and multicultural education may enhance the international visibility of research on character education within Islamic boarding schools.

Overall, this graph confirms that Indonesia plays a central academic role in research on pesantren-based character education, both in terms of publication quantity and thematic influence in the development of contemporary Islamic education studies.

Most Influential and Highly Cited Publications

Tabel 1. Most Influential and Highly Cited Publications

Rank	Authors	Title	Year	Cited by
1	Anam S.; Degeng I.N.S.; Murtadho N.; Kuswandi D.	The moral education and internalization of humanitarian values in pesantren	2019	39
2	Mujahid I.	Islamic orthodoxy-based character education: creating moderate Muslim in a modern pesantren in Indonesia	2021	39
3	Taufik M.	Strategic role of islamic religious education in strengthening character education in the era of industrial revolution 4.0	2020	31
4	Noboru T.; Amalia E.; Hernandez P.M.R.; Nurbaiti L.; Affarah W.S.; Nonaka D.; Takeuchi R.; Kadriyan H.; Kobayashi J.	School-based education to prevent bullying in high schools in Indonesia	2021	30
5	Arif M.; Aziz M.K.N.A.; Abdurakhmonovich Y.A.	Trend Strategy To Prevent Bullying In Islamic Boarding Schools (Pesantren)	2024	24
6	Mahanani P.; Akbar S.; Kamaruddin A.Y.B.; Hussin Z.B.	Educational Analysis to Develop Character in Malaysia and Indonesia	2022	21
7	Muassom M.	Believe in Character Education Learning Method in Pesantren	2020	24
8	Miftahud D.	Islamic Character Education through Islamic Boarding School Culture	2024	24
9	Hastari H.	Students' Communication Pattern in Islamic Boarding School	2022	35
10	Umar S.	The role of pesantren in strengthening moderate Islamic character	2024	18

The “Most Global Cited Documents” table presents the ten publications with the highest number of global citations in research related to character education within Islamic boarding schools. The citation distribution indicates that studies focusing on moral education, Islamic character development, and pesantren-based educational transformation have received considerable academic attention at the international level.

The article by Anam S., Degeng I.N.S., Murtadho N., and Kuswandi D. (2019), entitled *The Moral Education and Internalization of Humanitarian Values in Pesantren*, ranks first with 39 citations. The study highlights the role of pesantren in instilling humanitarian and moral values, demonstrating that Islamic boarding schools function not only as religious institutions but also as centers of character and peace education. Similarly, Mujahid I. (2021), through the article *Islamic Orthodoxy-Based Character Education: Creating Moderate Muslim in a Modern Pesantren in Indonesia*, also received 39 citations. This reflects the strong global interest in issues of religious moderation, orthodox Islamic values, and character education within contemporary pesantren contexts.

The third most cited publication is Taufik M.'s (2020) work entitled *Strategic Role of Islamic Religious Education in Strengthening Character Education in the Era of Industrial Revolution 4.0*, with 31 citations. This article demonstrates the increasing relevance of integrating Islamic character education with the challenges of digital transformation and the Industrial Revolution 4.0. Meanwhile, the study by Noboru T. et al. (2021), entitled *School-Based Education to Prevent Bullying in High Schools in Indonesia*, received 30 citations, indicating that issues related to bullying prevention, moral education, and school culture have also become important themes within the broader discourse of character education.

Several recent publications have also demonstrated significant citation performance despite having been published only within the last few years. Arif M., Aziz M.K.N.A., and Abdurakhmonovich Y.A. (2024), through the article *Trend Strategy To Prevent Bullying In Islamic Boarding Schools (Pesantren)*, received 24 citations, reflecting growing concern regarding bullying issues within Islamic educational institutions. Likewise, Muassom M. (2020) and Miftahud D. (2024) each obtained 24 citations through their studies on character education methods and Islamic boarding school culture, suggesting that practical and cultural approaches to character formation continue to attract academic interest.

In addition, Hastari H. (2022), through the article *Students' Communication Pattern in Islamic Boarding School*, received 35 citations, indicating that communication patterns and social interaction within pesantren environments are becoming relevant topics in educational and sociocultural studies. Mahanani P. et al. (2022), through *Educational Analysis to Develop Character in Malaysia and Indonesia*, obtained 21 citations, demonstrating the emergence of comparative and cross-national perspectives in character education research. Meanwhile, Umar S. (2024), with the article *The Role of Pesantren in Strengthening Moderate Islamic Character*, received 18 citations, emphasizing the important role of pesantren in promoting moderate Islamic values and social harmony. Overall, these highly cited publications indicate that recent pesantren research has expanded beyond traditional religious education to encompass communication, character development, and the promotion of moderate Islamic values. The citation performance of these studies also reflects growing academic interest in understanding pesantren as institutions that contribute not only to education but also to broader social, cultural, and national development. Furthermore, the diversity of research themes suggests that contemporary pesantren scholarship is becoming increasingly interdisciplinary, integrating perspectives from education, communication, sociology, and Islamic studies.

Overall, this table confirms that the most influential publications in this research field are closely associated with themes of moral education, religious moderation, anti-bullying strategies, communication culture, and the transformation of Islamic education in contemporary society. The citation patterns also indicate that interdisciplinary studies combining Islamic education, sociology, psychology, and educational transformation tend to achieve higher academic visibility and global impact.

These findings suggest that highly cited publications are generally those that address educational issues with broad theoretical relevance while simultaneously offering practical solutions to contemporary challenges faced by Islamic educational institutions. Topics such as moral education, religious moderation, anti-bullying initiatives, and communication culture have attracted considerable scholarly attention because they respond to both local educational needs and global concerns regarding character formation, social cohesion, and inclusive education. Moreover, the prominence of interdisciplinary research demonstrates that integrating perspectives from Islamic education, sociology, psychology, and educational sciences enables researchers to produce more comprehensive analyses and innovative approaches. This interdisciplinary orientation not only enhances the scientific quality of the studies but also increases their potential to be referenced by scholars across different academic disciplines, thereby strengthening the international visibility and impact of research on character education in Islamic boarding schools.

Identification of Research Gaps and Future Research Directions

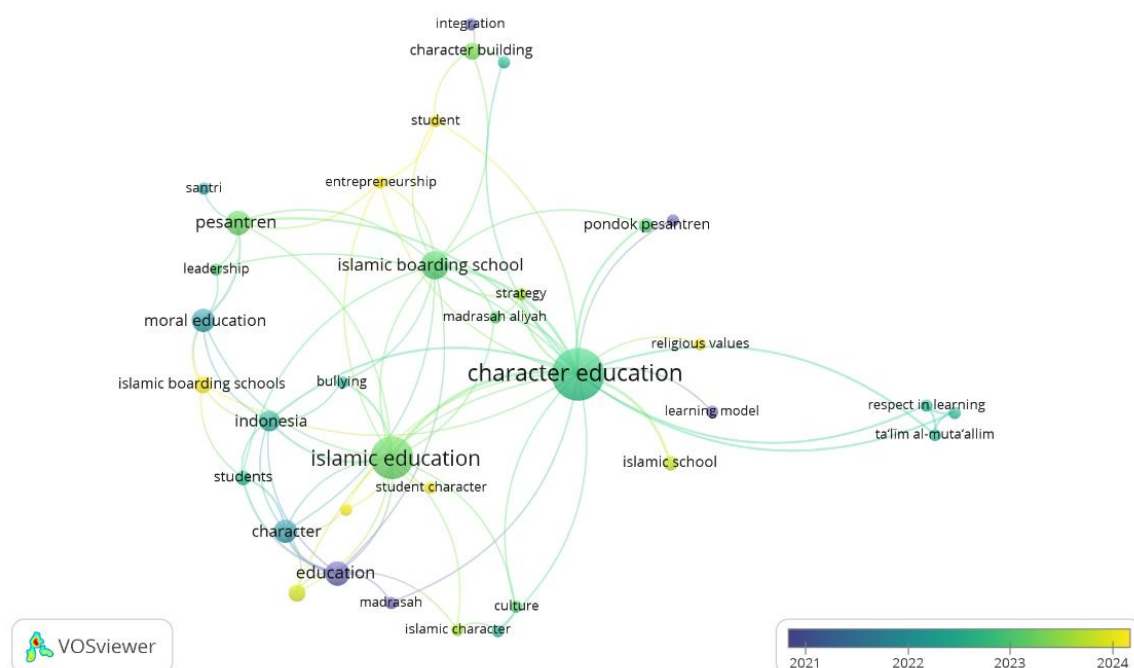


Figure. 7. Identification of Research Gaps and Future Research Directions

The overlay visualization in the keyword co-occurrence analysis illustrates the development of research themes and the evolution of studies on character education within Islamic boarding schools during the 2016–2025 period. In this visualization, the node size represents the frequency of keyword occurrences, while the colors indicate the average publication year. Blue-colored nodes represent themes that were explored earlier, whereas green to yellow nodes indicate newer and emerging themes that have developed in recent years.

The visualization results show that the themes “character education” and “Islamic education” serve as the main centers within the research network, as they have the largest node sizes and the broadest connections with other keywords. This finding indicates that these two themes are the dominant focus in research on character education within Islamic boarding schools. In addition, keywords such as *pesantren*, *Islamic boarding school*, *moral education*, and *education* also demonstrate strong interconnections, suggesting that research in this field remains highly oriented toward Islamic education, moral development, and the reinforcement of religious character values.

Based on its temporal development, the visualization also reveals a shift in research themes toward more contextual and multidimensional issues. The most recent themes, indicated by green to yellow colors, include *religious values*, *Islamic school*, *student*, *entrepreneurship*, *bullying*, and *student character*. The emergence of these themes suggests that recent studies have begun linking character education with student behavior, leadership, local culture, entrepreneurship, and social challenges within contemporary Islamic education.

Furthermore, the appearance of keywords such as *ta'lim al-muta'allim*, *respect in learning*, and *learning model* indicates a growing research tendency toward the development of learning models based on classical Islamic educational values and learning ethics. This phenomenon demonstrates that research on character education in Islamic boarding schools no longer focuses solely on general moral concepts, but also increasingly explores pedagogical approaches and the transformation of Islamic learning systems in more practical and applicable ways.

Nevertheless, this visualization also reveals several research gaps that remain widely open for future exploration. First, themes related to educational technology, digital learning, artificial intelligence, social media, and the digital transformation of Islamic boarding schools have not yet appeared significantly within the research network. Second, issues concerning students' mental health, inclusive education, gender, and data-driven evaluation in character education are still very limited. Third, the relationships among emerging themes remain relatively weak, indicating that the integration of multidisciplinary research in the field of character education within Islamic boarding schools is still at an early stage of development.

Based on these findings, future studies have substantial opportunities to develop more innovative and interdisciplinary research, such as digital technology-based character education, the integration of Islamic values with artificial intelligence in education, strengthening religious moderation in the digital era, students' mental health, and the development of adaptive character education models in response to the challenges of Society 5.0. In addition, increasing international collaboration and interdisciplinary approaches are essential to expanding the academic contribution of research on character education within Islamic boarding schools at the global level.

Overall, this overlay visualization demonstrates that research on character education in Islamic boarding schools continues to evolve from foundational themes toward more complex, contextual, and multidimensional issues. These findings confirm that this field of study still offers broad opportunities for scientific exploration and the development of new research agendas in the future.

Publication Trends and the Evolution of Character Education Research in Pesantren

The results of the bibliometric analysis indicate that research on character education within Islamic boarding schools experienced significant growth during the 2016–2025 period. The increase in the number of publications became especially visible after 2020 and reached its peak in 2024–2025. This phenomenon demonstrates that character education in pesantren environments has evolved into a strategic issue in contemporary Islamic education studies. This trend aligns with global developments that position character education as a response to moral crises, social transformation, and educational challenges in the digital era (Komarudin, 2021; Asiyah & Ghofur, 2019; Saumur et al., 2025). According to Lickona (1996), character education constitutes an important foundation for students' moral development and is closely related to strengthening social and religious values. In the context of pesantren, character education is understood not merely as the transfer of religious knowledge, but also as the internalization of moral and spiritual values in everyday life (Azizi et al., 2025; Cahyanto et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the increase in publications after 2020 indicates a shift in research orientation from normative approaches toward more multidisciplinary approaches. Recent studies no longer focus solely on the theoretical aspects of Islamic education curricula, but also connect character education with social and cultural issues, religious moderation, digital transformation, and students' mental health. This shift demonstrates that research on character education in pesantren has begun to adapt to the needs of modern society and developments in educational technology (Setyosari & Kamdi, 2021; Nasrulloh & Kholis, 2025). This condition is consistent with the study by (Said et al., 2024), which emphasizes that modern Islamic education must be able to adapt to technological developments and social change without losing its Islamic values and identity. In addition, the integration of technology into Islamic education is also considered capable of enhancing learning effectiveness and expanding access to education (Achadi & Fithriyana, 2020; Kistoro et al., 2023; Puspitarini et al., 2023).

Beyond reflecting publication growth, the observed research patterns are closely associated with broader transformations in Islamic education and contemporary society. The increasing emphasis on religious moderation, anti-bullying, digital transformation, and entrepreneurship reflects the growing expectation that pesantren should not only preserve religious traditions but also respond to complex educational, technological, and social challenges. Government policies promoting religious moderation, the expansion of digital learning following the COVID-19 pandemic, and the increasing demand for twenty-first-century competencies have encouraged researchers to examine character education from broader interdisciplinary perspectives. Consequently, the thematic evolution identified in this study represents an adaptive response of Islamic education research to changing societal needs rather than merely a change in research preferences.

Publication Trends and the Evolution of Character Education Research in Pesantren

The dominance of the Social Sciences and Arts and Humanities subject areas in the analysis indicates that research on character education in pesantren remains strongly oriented toward social, cultural, and humanities approaches. This is understandable because character education is closely related to moral formation, social behavior, and the strengthening of religious values (Wulandari, 2022; Adiyono & Sholeh, 2025). These findings also demonstrate that pesantren are viewed not only as traditional educational institutions, but also as social spaces that shape cultural identity and the character of Muslim communities. According to Geertz (1960) and Dhofier (2011), traditional Islamic educational institutions possess a strong social function in preserving cultural values and social structures. Therefore, character education in pesantren has significant relevance in promoting social harmony, tolerance, and religious moderation (Hajaroh et al., 2025; Aulia, 2025).

Author Productivity and Scientific Collaboration

The analysis of author productivity indicates that research in this field can still be categorized as an emerging research field. Publication productivity remains distributed among several authors with relatively limited numbers of documents and has not yet shown strong academic dominance. This condition suggests that opportunities for research development remain widely open, both for new researchers and for other institutions. From a bibliometric perspective, such a pattern commonly occurs in developing research fields because academic collaboration networks are still in the early stages of formation (Fawait et al., 2020; Muhammad et al., 2021). According to Price (1963), the development of scientific knowledge in its early phase is generally characterized by a relatively even distribution of author productivity before eventually becoming concentrated among core researchers.

In addition, Lotka's law explains that most authors usually produce only a small number of publications, while only a few become core contributors within a research field (Aziz et al., 2020).

Country Contribution and Indonesia's Dominance

The results also indicate that Indonesia is the country contributing the highest number of publications compared to other countries. Indonesia's dominance suggests that research on character education in pesantren is strongly influenced by local social and cultural contexts, considering that pesantren are among the largest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia (Warul, 2023). Malaysia ranks second and demonstrates the strengthening of regional collaboration within Southeast Asia in the development of Islamic education studies. This phenomenon indicates that Southeast Asia is becoming an important center for the development of global Islamic education research (Suhra et al., 2020). According to Azra (2015), pesantren and Islamic educational institutions in Southeast Asia possess unique characteristics that distinguish them from Islamic educational systems in the Middle East, particularly in terms of moderation, tolerance, and the integration of local culture.

Indonesia's dominance in the publication landscape can be explained by several interconnected factors. First, Indonesia has the largest number of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in the world, making pesantren one of the country's most influential Islamic educational institutions. Second, character education has become a national educational priority through educational reform policies emphasizing character building and religious moderation. Third, the rapid growth of Indonesian journals indexed in international databases, together with institutional incentives for Scopus-indexed publications, has substantially increased research productivity. These conditions collectively explain why Indonesian scholars currently dominate the scientific literature on character education within pesantren.

Scientific Publication Channels and Highly Cited Research

The development of publications in journals such as *Munaddhomah* and *Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* indicates changing dynamics in scientific publication channels. The emergence of new journals actively publishing themes related to character education reflects growing academic attention toward contemporary Islamic education issues. In addition, the increasing number of publications in these journals has also been influenced by the expansion of open-access policies and the growing indexation of journals in international databases such as Scopus. According to Björk and Solomon (2012), the open-access publication model can enhance the visibility and dissemination of scientific research globally because access to articles becomes easier and faster.

Findings regarding the most highly cited articles indicate that themes such as moral education, religious moderation, anti-bullying, and pesantren culture have become major topics receiving international academic attention. Articles discussing the internalization of humanitarian values, the formation of moderate Muslim character, and character education strategies in the era of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 have achieved high citation rates because they are considered relevant to current global social challenges. This demonstrates that research on character education in pesantren is moving toward more applicable and contextual approaches. According to Banks (2008), character education and multicultural education play important roles in building tolerant, democratic societies capable of addressing the challenges of globalization.

Emerging Themes and Future Research Opportunities

The overlay visualization in the keyword co-occurrence analysis reveals a shift in research themes toward more multidimensional issues. Keywords such as religious values, bullying, student

character, and entrepreneurship have emerged as developing themes in recent years. However, several important themes such as artificial intelligence, digital transformation of pesantren, students' mental health, and inclusive education remain very limited within the research network. This indicates the existence of research gaps that may provide substantial opportunities for future studies. The limited attention to these emerging themes suggests that future research should move beyond conventional discussions of moral education toward more innovative and interdisciplinary approaches. Artificial intelligence has considerable potential to support personalized learning, curriculum development, and educational assessment within Islamic education. Likewise, mental health has become increasingly relevant because students are facing growing psychological challenges in the digital era, while inclusive education remains underexplored despite increasing demands for equitable educational opportunities. Expanding research in these areas would enable pesantren to strengthen their role as adaptive educational institutions capable of addressing contemporary educational challenges without neglecting Islamic values. According to Holmes et al. (2019), the integration of artificial intelligence in education has significant potential to improve learning effectiveness and educational personalization.

Theoretical Implications for Character Education in Pesantren

From a theoretical perspective, the findings indicate that the conceptual orientation of character education within pesantren has undergone significant development. Earlier studies primarily viewed character education as the transmission of moral and religious values. However, the emergence of themes such as religious moderation, entrepreneurship, digital transformation, and social engagement suggests that character education is increasingly understood as a multidimensional educational framework integrating moral formation, technological adaptation, social responsibility, and institutional innovation. This conceptual evolution enriches existing theories of Islamic character education by demonstrating that pesantren function not only as institutions for preserving religious traditions but also as dynamic educational environments capable of responding to contemporary societal challenges.

Implications for Future International Research

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that research on character education within pesantren environments continues to evolve from traditional approaches toward more interdisciplinary, contextual, and adaptive approaches in response to contemporary developments. Future research should develop more innovative approaches through the integration of digital technology, the strengthening of religious moderation, the development of data-driven Islamic pedagogy, and the enhancement of international collaboration. In addition, qualitative research based on case studies and mixed-method approaches is also important in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the implementation of character education in pesantren. Thus, pesantren should be viewed not only as traditional religious educational institutions, but also as centers for character development and social transformation in modern society.

The findings also provide important implications for future international research. Although the current research landscape is predominantly represented by Indonesian publications, the identified themes including religious moderation, digital transformation, entrepreneurship, inclusive education, and artificial intelligence represent educational challenges shared by many countries. Future comparative studies involving Islamic educational institutions in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and other regions could broaden the theoretical understanding of character education across diverse cultural contexts. Strengthening international collaboration would also contribute to the

development of more globally relevant conceptual frameworks for character education within Islamic educational institutions.

Based on the overall findings, it can be concluded that research on character education within pesantren environments continues to develop toward more multidisciplinary, modern, and globally relevant directions. Strengthening the integration of technology, religious moderation, multicultural education, and innovative pedagogical approaches presents substantial opportunities for future research (Mujahid, 2021; Bujuri et al., 2023; Basori et al., 2023). Furthermore, increasing international collaboration and publication in reputable journals are also necessary to ensure that pesantren-based character education research achieves broader academic impact at the global level.

CONCLUSION

This study found that research on character education within Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) experienced very significant development during the 2016–2025 period and entered a rapid growth phase after 2020. The most important finding of this study is the shift in research orientation from normative-traditional approaches toward more multidisciplinary, contextual, and adaptive approaches in response to contemporary global challenges. Research no longer focuses solely on the internalization of moral values and moral education, but has begun to connect character education with issues such as religious moderation, anti-bullying, digital transformation, entrepreneurship, students' social communication, and character strengthening in the Society 5.0 era. In addition, the bibliometric analysis results indicate that Indonesia has become the dominant center of pesantren-based character education publications at the global level, while contributions from other countries remain relatively limited. These findings demonstrate that pesantren are no longer viewed merely as traditional educational institutions, but have evolved into strategic objects of study within the discourse of modern Islamic education and the social transformation of Muslim societies.

This study contributes academically by strengthening and simultaneously developing new perspectives in the study of character education in pesantren. The findings confirm that *pesantren* play an important role in character formation, religious moderation, and the strengthening of Islamic moral values. Nevertheless, this study also offers a new perspective through a bibliometric approach capable of mapping the development of scientific publications, collaboration networks, research theme trends, and the evolution of character education studies in a more systematic and quantitative manner. The novelty of this research lies in the use of Scopus- and VOSviewer-based bibliometric analysis to identify the direction of research development on character education in pesantren over the last decade. This study also demonstrates that research on character education in pesantren is beginning to move toward the integration of educational technology, the strengthening of digital literacy, and multidisciplinary approaches that were previously still very limited in Islamic education research.

However, this study has several limitations. First, the research only used the Scopus database, meaning that relevant publications from other databases may not have been included. Second, this study was limited to English-language articles and publications from the 2016–2025 period, and therefore does not fully represent the historical and global development of research on character education in pesantren. Third, the bibliometric approach employed in this study primarily emphasizes quantitative analysis of publication metadata and does not deeply explore the substantive content of each article through qualitative approaches or systematic literature reviews. In addition, emerging themes such as artificial intelligence in Islamic education, students' mental health, inclusive education, and the digital transformation of pesantren remain very limited within the identified research networks. Therefore, further studies are needed using broader data sources, mixed-methods

approaches, and cross-country as well as cross-disciplinary studies in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the development of character education in pesantren. With broader and more in-depth research findings, character-based Islamic education policies in the digital era can be formulated in a more adaptive, innovative, and sustainable manner.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to assist with language editing, improving academic writing style, refining grammar and sentence structure, and enhancing the clarity and coherence of the manuscript. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

Author 4: Formal analysis; Methodology; Writing - original draft.

Author 5: Supervision; Validation.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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