

# Character Formation in Islamic Boarding Schools: The Internalization of Spiritual Values

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## Keywords:

Internalization of Spiritual Values, Habituation Method, Religious Character

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## Abstract

The decline of morality and adolescent self-control in the digital era poses critical challenges for Islamic educational institutions internalizing religious character values. This study analyzes the strategies, supporting factors, and obstacles in internalizing spiritual values through habituation methods at MA AI-Urwatul Wutsqo Jombang. Using a qualitative case study approach, this three-month field research collected primary data through in-depth interviews with six key informants, including school leaders, two Islamic Education teachers, and a student representative, combined with observation and documentary study. Data were analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldana interactive model, with trustworthiness verified through triangulation. Findings show that spiritual value internalization is systematically driven by an integrated pesantren-based curriculum governing habituation of obligatory and sunnah prayers and Al-Qur'an literacy standards. Active teacher involvement as behavioral role models accelerates the transformation of moral knowing into moral action. Despite discipline obstacles, restorative religious and academic sanctions reduce students' resistance. The study concludes that the dialectic between strong institutional regulation and exemplary teacher behavior (*uswah hasanah*) transforms external control into self-control, offering an integrated character management model for formal educational institutions.

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## Abstrak

Penurunan moral dan krisis kontrol diri remaja di era digital menjadi tantangan krusial bagi institusi pendidikan Islam dalam menginternalisasikan nilai karakter keagamaan. Penelitian ini menganalisis strategi, faktor pendukung, dan hambatan dalam internalisasi nilai spiritual melalui metode pembiasaan di MA AI-Urwatul Wutsqo Jombang. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif studi kasus, riset lapangan selama tiga bulan ini mengumpulkan data primer melalui wawancara mendalam dengan enam informan kunci, meliputi pimpinan madrasah, dua Guru PAI, dan perwakilan siswa, dikombinasikan dengan observasi dan studi dokumentasi. Data dianalisis menggunakan model interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldana, dengan keabsahan diuji melalui triangulasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan internalisasi nilai spiritual digerakkan secara terstruktur melalui kurikulum terpadu berbasis pesantren yang memayungi pembiasaan ibadah wajib, salat sunah, dan standarisasi literasi Al-Qur'an. Keterlibatan aktif guru sebagai model perilaku mempercepat transformasi pengetahuan moral menjadi tindakan moral nyata. Meski dihadapkan hambatan kedisiplinan remaja, sanksi keagamaan restoratif dan sanksi akademik mampu mereduksi resistensi siswa. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa dialektika antara regulasi lembaga yang kokoh dan keteladanan guru (*uswah hasanah*) mentransformasikan kontrol eksternal menjadi kontrol internal, menawarkan model manajemen karakter terintegrasi bagi lembaga pendidikan formal.

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## Kata kunci:

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## INTRODUCTION

In the current era of digitalization, advancements in science and technology not only facilitate easy access to information but also precipitate significant social paradigm shifts. According to Faiza and Firda (2018), the unfiltered influx of information tends to steer the younger generation, particularly Generation Z and Millennials, as the dominant internet users toward pragmatic, materialistic, and hedonistic mindsets. This phenomenon erodes spiritual dimensions and self-control, leading to an escalation of moral degradation. Andrian *et al.* (2024) observe that empirical realities demonstrate a rise in behavioral deviations, such as student brawls, bullying, device addiction, and other forms of juvenile delinquency. Left unaddressed, this moral crisis will undermine the foundational character of the next generation, who ought to serve as the nation's backbone.

To confront these challenges, strengthening character education has become an urgent agenda within the realm of education. Human character is not formed overnight; rather, it is shaped by an interplay of internal factors (*fitrah* or innate nature) and external factors (environment). A robust character is rooted in the integration of intellect, competence, desire, and habituation aligned with universal principles of truth (Fuadhah, 2024). In this context, the spiritual dimension plays a pivotal role as the foundation of character building. Spiritual values are not merely about fulfilling formal religious rituals but involve the internalization of spiritual aspects that foster genuine piety, noble character, empathy, and social harmony (Putra *et al.*, 2025). Therefore, early strategic internalization of spiritual values is imperative to stem the negative impacts of modernization.

The implementation of cultivating spiritual values requires an integrative framework, given the limited allocation of formal instructional hours in conventional schools. Islamic boarding school-based (*pesantren*) formal educational institutions offer a strategic solution through the integration of the national curriculum and *pesantren* values (Shiddiqi & Kibtiyah, 2025). Within the *pesantren* ecosystem, the internalization of spiritual values can be consistently and sustainably carried out through intracurricular, co-curricular, and daily religious habituation activities (Firza *et al.*, 2025). The *pesantren* environment provides a social conditioning that effectively transforms moral knowledge into concrete action (moral action), ensuring that students are not only intellectually competent but also spiritually mature (Romdoniyah *et al.*, 2024).

One institution that consistently implements this integrated educational model is MA Al-Urwatul Wutsqo Jombang. As a *pesantren*-based madrasah, this institution integrates formal education with the noble values of Islam to cultivate a dignified and humanistic generation. Although the challenges of digitalization also affect students in Jombang, MA Al-Urwatul Wutsqo possesses a unique approach to religious habituation and character enforcement among its students (*santri*). This study is essential for exploring in greater depth the mechanisms of spiritual value internalization within the institution and its subsequent impact on student character formation. Through this

approach, it is anticipated that new models or findings will emerge and be replicated by other educational institutions to overcome the moral crisis of the digital era.

## METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design (Creswell, 2013). This approach was selected because it is deemed capable of providing a profound, holistic, and contextual understanding of the mechanisms and strategies for internalizing spiritual values in student character building. The research site was determined purposively at MA Al-Urwatul Wutsqo Jombang, a formal educational institution that integrates the national curriculum with the pesantren (Islamic boarding school) value system, thereby providing environmental characteristics relevant to the focus of the study. This intensive field research was conducted over a three-month period, spanning from January to March 2026.

Data sources in this study were selected using a purposive sampling technique, in which informants were selected based on specific criteria and capacities deemed most knowledgeable and directly involved in the research's formal object. Primary data sources were obtained through in-depth interviews with six key informants representing policymakers, educators, and learners. The structure of these informants comprised the Headmaster (1), the Vice Principal of Curriculum (1), the Vice Principal of Student Affairs (1), Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers (2) responsible for *Akidah Akhlak* (Theology and Ethics) and *Al-Qur'an Hadis* (Quran and Hadith) respectively, and a student representative (1). Meanwhile, secondary data were gathered from official school documents, rules and regulations for santri (students), institutional profiles, and student behavior records portfolios at MA Al-Urwatul Wutsqo Jombang.

Field data collection was conducted directly by the researcher as the primary instrument (human instrument) using three complementary techniques: in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation (Sugiyono, 2017). Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with the six informants to explore the depth of concepts, habituation strategies, and challenges encountered in the process of value internalization. Passive participant observation involved directly observing the flow of religious activities, social interactions, and daily student behaviors within the madrasah environment without actively engaging in them. The documentation technique was used to compile written data, including the integrated curriculum document, student monitoring books (Buku Kendali), student violation record books, attitude assessment recapitulation sheets, photographs of spiritual activities, and relevant institutional archives.

The collected data were subsequently analyzed interactively and continuously, following the qualitative data analysis model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). This analytical process initiated with the data condensation phase, in which the researcher selected, simplified, and abstracted field notes and interview transcripts to focus on the research questions. The subsequent phase involved data display, presented narratively and systematically to facilitate a clearer understanding of the relational

patterns of phenomena in the field. Finally, conclusion drawing and verification were performed iteratively to ensure the accuracy of the meanings derived from the empirical reality at MA Al-Urwatul Wutsqo Jombang.

To ensure the trustworthiness (credibility) and validity of the presented data, the researcher applied data trustworthiness techniques through triangulation. Two types of triangulation utilized in this research were source triangulation and technique triangulation. Source triangulation was executed by comparing and cross-checking the consistency of information obtained from different informants, such as juxtaposing student statements with explanations from PAI teachers, the Vice Principal of Student Affairs, the Vice Principal of Curriculum, and the Headmaster. Meanwhile, triangulation of techniques was implemented by verifying the consistency of the same data across different collection methods, namely by matching interview results with direct field observation findings and authentic documentary evidence. Additionally, the findings were confirmed with several informants (member checking) to ensure alignment between the researcher's interpretation and the actual field conditions.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Findings

#### **Internalization of Spiritual Values through Habituation Methods at MA Al-Urwatul Wutsqo Jombang**

Based on field data, the process of internalizing spiritual values among students at MA Al-Urwatul Wutsqo Jombang is implemented structurally through daily and weekly habituation (*pembiasaan*) methods. Routine religious activities include congregational Dhuhr prayers, the performance of Rawatib Sunnah prayers, Quranic recitation (*tilawah*) prior to teaching and learning activities, and socio-religious rituals such as *Istighasah* and *Tahlil*. The Headmaster of MA Al-Urwatul Wutsqo Jombang explained that this entire sequence of religious activities is deliberately designed to integrate with the formal school schedule to consistently shape students' character (*akhlak*):

"Fundamentally, all activities carried out through the habituation method in this madrasah aim to cultivate Islamic character within the children. We blend the school and *pesantren* systems so that these religious values become deeply ingrained as their daily habits, rather than merely a formality." (Interview with the Headmaster, March 12, 2026).

The Headmaster's statement is supported by the madrasah's structural policies regarding curriculum integration. The Vice Principal of Curriculum at MA Al-Urwatul Wutsqo explained how this habituation method possesses a strong legal framework within the institution's curricular structure:

"In the curriculum division, we design these spiritual habituations to be incorporated into the madrasah's integrated program structure. These out-of-class religious activities are formally recognized and allocated specific time slots, making participation mandatory for all students before and after formal teaching

and learning activities begin." (Interview with the Vice Principal of Curriculum, March 12, 2026).

This curriculum policy was validated by the researcher's observations within the madrasah environment. Whenever the *Dhuhr* adhan resounds, all classroom teaching and learning activities cease simultaneously. Teachers and student council (*OSIS*) officers immediately direct all students to perform ablution (*wudu*) and walk orderly toward the institutional mosque. Based on the student handbook and code of conduct documents, participation in congregational prayers and daily *tilawah* is not merely an advisory recommendation, but a mandatory point recorded in the student's non-academic report card (*raport*) evaluation at the end of each semester.

Beyond enforcing obligatory prayers, the internalization of spiritual values is expanded through the habituation of voluntary (*sunnah*) prayers and programs aimed at strengthening Quranic literacy. This strategy is designed to ensure that students possess a robust foundation of core religious competencies. The first Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teacher (handling *Aqidah Akhlak/* Theology and Ethics) outlined the implementation mechanism of this direct worship practice as follows:

"Usually, I directly encourage and guide the children to perform sunnah prayers before Dhuhr (*qabliyah*). This is our way of internalizing spiritual values through direct practice, rather than just theory inside the classroom." (Interview with PAI Teacher 1, March 15, 2026).

This step is reinforced by the second PAI teacher (handling *Al-Qur'an Hadis/* Quran and Hadith), who focuses on standardizing the students' holy scripture literacy skills:

"For students whose initial assessment results indicate they are not yet fluent in reading the Quran, we require them to attend additional *tajwid* (elocution) coaching on the veranda after formal school hours conclude. We hold the responsibility to ensure they can read their holy book correctly before graduating." (Interview with PAI Teacher 2, March 15, 2026).

The testimonies from these PAI teachers are supported by documentary evidence obtained by the researcher, namely the "Daily Discipline Monitoring Book" (*Buku Kendali Harian Kedisiplinan*) and religious duty attendance logs. These documents indicate specific mapping and grouping based on the students' reading proficiency levels. Through a combination of Quranic literacy habituation and communal rituals like *Istighasah*, students at MA Al-Urwatul Wutsqo Jombang are guided to develop two dimensions of piety simultaneously: individual (vertical) piety through their relationship with God, and social (horizontal) piety through refined etiquette (*adab*), politeness, and respect toward teachers and fellow students (*santri*).

### **Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in the Implementation of the Habituation Method**

The implementation of the habituation method at MA Al-Urwatul Wutsqo Jombang is fully supported by institutional commitment that integrates the *pesantren* ecosystem into the formal madrasah. The applied integrated curriculum provides an

extensive practical space for students, thereby overcoming the constraints of limited theoretical instructional hours in the classroom. The first PAI teacher confirmed the importance of this integrated system support during an interview session:

"If we only rely on classroom practice hours, the time will definitely never be sufficient because it is consumed by theoretical material. The existence of this out-of-class habituation program from the *pesantren*-based madrasah serves as a practical solution so that the children can immediately apply the moral knowledge they have learned." (Interview with PAI Teacher 1, March 15, 2026).

The researcher's observations revealed concrete forms of this institutional support, ranging from the provision of representative worship facilities to the active presence of the headmaster, *kiai* (Islamic scholars), and the teaching staff in the front rows (*shaf awal*) as role models (*uswah hasanah*) for the students.

Despite being backed by a robust institutional system, the implementation of the habituation method on the ground still faces real challenges stemming from issues of discipline and teenage behavioral consistency. The Vice Principal of Student Affairs at MA Al-Urwatul Wutsqo Jombang identified these operational constraints as follows:

"The main obstacle is the children's consistency. There are still many students who tend to procrastinate, chat, or laze around when directed to the mosque. Furthermore, the tardiness of several students arriving at school in the morning automatically causes them to miss out on the congregational Quranic recitation routine." (Interview with the Vice Principal of Student Affairs, March 13, 2026).

This phenomenon of negligence was also acknowledged by one of the students at MA Al-Urwatul Wutsqo through a separate interview:

"Yes, Sir. Sometimes, if we are not strictly supervised by the duty teachers, some friends deliberately hide in the classroom or postpone going to the mosque because they are lazy or caught up in chatting." (Interview with a Student, March 16, 2026).

To overcome these disciplinary hurdles, the madrasah implements multi-layered control mechanisms that are both firm and educational. Based on observations, students who arrive late are not permitted to enter the classroom directly; instead, they are gathered by the duty teacher on the madrasah veranda to fulfill their obligations of reading the Quran and performing the *Duha* prayer. The Vice Principal of Student Affairs explained the applicable academic sanctions:

"Late students must still make up for their habituation obligations on the veranda under supervision. If any student is proven to have deliberately skipped religious activities without a valid reason, we apply academic consequences in the form of deducting their affective scores in the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) subject cluster on their report cards." (Interview with the Vice Principal of Student Affairs, March 13, 2026).

The effective operation of this control function was evidenced by the researcher through documentation, namely the Student Violation Record Book and attitude assessment recapitulation sheets. Through the consistent application of sanctions, the

madrasah has successfully minimized the rate of violations and fostered positive behavioral changes in students, particularly in improving worship discipline and proficiency in reading the Quran independently.

## **Discussion**

### **Internalizing Spiritual Values Through an Integrated Habituation Method**

Based on the presentation of research findings, the mechanism of internalizing spiritual values at MA Al-Urwatul Wutsqo Jombang confirms that the formation of students' religious character cannot rely solely on a textual-cognitive approach. The success of value transformation in this institution is articulated through an integrated curriculum policy that provides a constant legal framework for habituation methods, encompassing obligatory prayers, Rawatib sunnah prayers, and the standardization of Quranic literacy. Viewed through Thomas Lickona's theory of moral development (Andriani & Nugraha, 2025), the integrative pattern initiated by the madrasah management and PAI teachers effectively bridges the psychological gap between moral knowing and moral action. Aligned with the perspective of Shorfana et al. (2025), environmental conditioning that necessitates the repetition of daily religious behaviors is fundamentally a process of reconstructing a new habitus, referencing Pierre Bourdieu's sociological thesis. Through this habitus, Islamic spiritual values – which are initially external-coercive are gradually assimilated into internalized mental structures (structured structures) within the students, thereby stimulating autonomous obedience that no longer depends on structural institutional repression.

The active involvement of the headmaster and religious teachers in the front rows (shaf awal) of congregational worship acts as a multiplicative medium for social learning (Sunardi et al., 2025). Within this pesantren-based madrasah ecosystem, students directly engage in behavioral observation and imitation (modelling) of religious authority figures who actualize *uswah hasanah* (excellent role models). This massive and repetitive process of social imitation reconstructs the students' religious orientation (Sunardi et al., 2026). The students' religious character experiences an escalation from conventional moral reasoning (Budianti, 2024) which tends to obey merely for environmental conformity or out of motivation to avoid sanctions (Awaliyah & Nastiti, 2024) toward post-conventional stages (Lado et al., 2019). In this autonomous phase, spiritual values such as honesty, discipline (Syahfitri et al., 2025), and reverence toward educators are no longer viewed as regulatory burdens; instead, they are internalized as independent belief systems that serve as internal filters to mitigate the impacts of moral degradation in the digital era (Hasan et al., 2025).

Operationally, the temporal and spatial management applied by the Vice Principal of Curriculum in embedding spiritual activities amidst formal academic schedules provides an epistemological confirmation that spirituality is the core foundation of education, rather than a mere curricular supplement. This integrated curriculum structure realizes a process of educational de-secularization, wherein the formal-scientific dimension and the pesantren-sufistic dimension seamlessly merge. The

habituation of reading the Quran at the beginning of teaching and learning activities psychologically functions as a conditioning stimulus that stabilizes students' brainwaves, thereby optimizing psychological readiness to receive knowledge transfer. When religious rituals are conditioned as the prelude and postlude to intellectual activities, spiritual values are sublimated into academic consciousness, which in turn fosters a holistic, comprehensive, and non-dichotomous mindset.

The applied habituation dimension also encompasses an inclusive and equitable approach to religious literacy through a program aimed at eradicating Quranic illiteracy, overseen by PAI teachers. The strategies of differentiation and student grouping based on reading competence demonstrate that the madrasah understands that value internalization cannot be applied uniformly (one-size-fits-all). Students experiencing literacy delays receive special attention (remedial treatment) so that cognitive barriers to understanding holy texts do not hinder the absorption of affective values. Through mastery of tajwid and accelerated reading fluency, students are encouraged to build a more intimate emotional connection with the holy scripture. This literacy proximity is an absolute prerequisite for the emergence of rational spiritual conviction, preventing students from falling into dogmatic and blindly conformist (*taqlid*) religious patterns.

Ultimately, the dialectical integration between individual rituals (such as *Rawatib sunnah* prayers) and communal rituals (such as *Istighasah* and *Tahlil*) successfully engenders a balanced duality of piety. Through the *Rawatib* prayers persuasively encouraged by the *Aqidah Akhlak* teacher, students' inner piety is personally forged, while simultaneously training honest transcendental interaction in silence. Conversely, through *Istighasah* activities, students' individual egos are dissolved into a collective consciousness that fosters empathy, social solidarity, and a sense of togetherness as an *ummah* (community). This symbiosis between the internal-vertical and external-horizontal dimensions proves that the habituation method at MA Al-Urwatul Wutsqo Jombang does not merely produce spiritually self-centered individuals, but rather cultivates religious-humanistic personalities who are personally pious and socially functional.

### **The Dialectic of Structure and Agency: Institutional Commitment versus Adolescent Self-Control Crisis**

An analysis of conditional factors indicates that the effectiveness of instilling spiritual values at MA Al-Urwatul Wutsqo Jombang heavily relies on environmental cohesiveness (*nurture*) structured through integrated curriculum management. The synergy between the formal school curriculum structure and the pesantren ecosystem functions as a moral laboratory that successfully eliminates the constraints of limited time allocation for religious subjects in the classroom. This finding aligns with Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, specifically at the microsystem level, which posits that the coordinated interactions among actors within stable educational institutions accelerate moral value assimilation during adolescent development (Fauziyah & Ningsih, 2025). Structural support in the form of curriculum regulations

and the provision of representative worship facilities provides a stable environmental stimulus, thereby shifting value internalization from purely theoretical spaces into applicable daily praxis.

Nevertheless, the emergence of challenges such as time-discipline hurdles, procrastination in worship, and a tendency to evade supervision reflects students' resistance to institutional structural pressures on their free agency. This phenomenon of behavioral dualism (*split personality*), where students only obey within the reach of supervision, is a logical consequence of the adolescent self-control crisis (*low self-control theory*), which is escalated by the hegemony of digital technology outside the madrasah environment (Ya'cub et al., 2025). The influx of digitalization acts as a counter-ecosystem that offers values of convenience, pragmatism, and hedonism that diametrically clash with the asceticism of pesantren spiritual values (Iswadi, 2026). When students find themselves in loose supervisory gaps, immature moral consciousness tends to become decentralized. This condition confirms that the internalization of spiritual values is not a linear, mechanical process, but rather a dynamic dialectic between discipline enforced by institutional regulations (*structural control*) and the dynamics of subjective moral consciousness possessed by students (*individual agency*).

To bridge this clash, the madrasah's decision, through the coordination of the Vice Principal of Student Affairs and duty teachers, to apply sanctions such as isolating religious activities on the veranda and deducting academic scores in the PAI subject cluster constitutes a strategic disciplinary step. Theoretically, this combination of controls adopts the principle of reinforcement in B.F. Skinner's behaviorist theory, wherein the provision of firm and consistent stimuli is required to modify and redirect deviant adolescent behavior back toward expected normative patterns (Budianti, 2024). The academic sanctions applied in this institution do not focus solely on punishment; rather, they are restorative, fostering a deterrent effect while simultaneously elevating students' normative awareness. The success of this method in triggering tangible behavioral changes, particularly in the proficiency of independent Quranic literacy, demonstrates that the dialectic between consistent madrasah supervisory management and the escalation of students' subjective consciousness can simultaneously shape a mature and spiritually robust student personality.

At a macro-analytical level, the pattern of structure-agency dialectics at MA Al-Urwatul Wutsqo Jombang provides a comprehensive illustration that character building in the modern era requires an institutional authority that is both adaptive and firm. Institutional regulations must not loosen in the face of modernization currents, yet they must not be so rigid as to negate the growth space of students' subjective consciousness. The madrasah's success in blending firm academic sanctions with the exemplary behavior of educators proves that externally managed systemic control will gradually transform into internal control (*self-control*). As students begin to internalize the academic benefits and psychological stability of these habituations, their agency resistance will diminish, replaced by voluntary acceptance, which marks the pinnacle of

success for the entire process of spiritual value internalization in Islamic educational institutions

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the internalization of spiritual values at MA Al-Urwatul Wutsqo Jombang is successfully actualized through an integrated curriculum mechanism that provides a framework for constant and repetitive habituation (*pembiasaan*) methods. The integration of the *pesantren* ecosystem and the formal madrasah effectively bridges the psychological gap between moral knowing and moral action through obligatory worship, *Rawatib* sunnah prayers, and a program aimed at eradicating Quranic illiteracy. Furthermore, the active presence of religious authority figures as behavioral models (*modelling*) has proven effective in escalating students' moral reasoning toward post-conventional levels. Although confronted by disciplinary hurdles and adolescent self-control crises as forms of free agency resistance, the implementation of multi-layered control mechanisms—comprising restorative religious sanctions and academic penalties has successfully modified student behavior toward the expected normative-religious patterns.

Theoretically, this research contributes significantly to the sociology of Islamic education literature, specifically by reinforcing Pierre Bourdieu's thesis on religious *habitus* formation and Thomas Lickona's moral development theory within the locus of *pesantren*-based institutions. Practically, this study offers an integrated curriculum management model and a multi-layered control system that can be adopted by other madrasahs or conventional public schools to optimize the cultivation of spiritual character in the digital era. The success of MA Al-Urwatul Wutsqo Jombang demonstrates that collaboration between firm yet adaptive institutional regulations (*structural control*) and exemplary educator behavior (*uswah hasanah*) serves as a strategic formula to transform external control into internal control (*self-control*) within students' personalities.

Nevertheless, this study possesses inherent limitations within its methodological scope. As a qualitative study utilizing a single-case design focused exclusively on MA Al-Urwatul Wutsqo Jombang, the findings have limited empirical generalizability to other educational institutions with different cultural characteristics or ecosystem backgrounds. Additionally, the three-month data collection period was insufficient to longitudinally observe whether students' autonomous obedience remains consistent after graduation, once they are entirely removed from the madrasah's strict supervision. Therefore, future research is highly encouraged to employ longitudinal approaches or multi-case comparative designs to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of spiritual value internalization across adolescent development phases.

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