# Religious Leadership and Personal Branding of *'Kyai'* in Islamic Education Management: Pathways to Promoting Moderation and Preventing Radicalism

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**ABSTRACT.** Religious leaders are crucial in fostering moderate attitudes and behaviours, particularly among students of *Pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools). However, empirical studies examining the relationship between Kyai leadership and efforts to counter radicalism still need to be explored. This study investigates the impact of religious leadership and personal branding of the Kyai on religious moderation and the prevention of radicalism in *Pesantren*. A quantitative approach with a correlational survey design was employed, involving 340 respondents, including administrators, students, and alums from *Pesantren*. Data were collected via a five-point Likert scale questionnaire administered online and analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results indicate that religious leadership and personal branding of the Kyai positively influence religious moderation, which plays a vital role in countering radicalism. Additionally, religious moderation was found to mediate the relationship between Kyai leadership and personal branding with radicalism prevention. The restricted sample coverage due to the online survey format is a study limitation. The findings suggest that enhancing Kyai's religious leadership and personal branding can be a valuable strategy for scombating *Pesantren's* radicalism.

**Keywords**: *Leadership, Personal Branding, Moderation, Radicalism, Pesantren*

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## INTRODUCTION

Leadership, particularly within the context of Islamic education, plays a critical role in shaping religious moderation and preventing radicalism. In Indonesia, *Pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) serve as key institutions in religious education, where the *Kyai*, the spiritual and administrative leader, significantly influences the moral and ideological development of students. As a central figure in both educational and community life, the *Kyai* embodies religious leadership that extends beyond spiritual guidance to actively shaping the beliefs and behaviours of students (Reyhan Fachrizal Et Al., 2023; Wasehudin Et Al., 2023). Research has indicated that such

leadership can promote religious moderation by instilling values of tolerance and peace, helping to counteract the rise of radical ideologies (Rahayu Et Al., 2018; Rintoul & Normore, 2020; Zuhdi, 2018).

The concept of personal branding further enhances the *Kyai*'s role in preventing radicalism. Personal branding, through public persona and leadership style, allows the *Kyai* to effectively communicate religious values, positioning themselves as credible authorities on religious moderation. Charismatic leadership, an aspect often attributed to *Kyai*, plays a significant part in their influence over students and the broader community, fostering attitudes of compliance and acceptance of moderate interpretations of Islam (Hudaa Et Al., 2024; A. R. Karim, 2020; Mahsusi Et Al., 2024). Previous studies have explored how such branding and leadership dynamics affect student attitudes toward religious practices, with findings indicating that a positive personal image strengthens the promotion of non-violence and tolerance. (Afwadzi Et Al., 2024; Afwadzi & Miski, 2021; Arifin & Kartiko, 2022; Faisal Et Al., 2022; Watung Et Al., 2023, 2023; Wijaya Mulya & Aditomo, 2019).

Despite these positive contributions, challenges remain in fully implementing religious moderation in *Pesantren*. Factors such as resistance from traditional structures, cultural variations, and external socio-political pressures can hinder the effectiveness of *Kyai* leadership in spreading moderate values consistently. (CHOLIL, 2022; Syaifuddin ET AL., 2024). While existing literature has largely focused on qualitative insights into religious leadership in educational settings (Hifza Et Al., 2020; A. Karim Et Al., 2020; Ma'arif Et Al., 2020) Quantitative studies on the specific impact of religious leadership and personal branding on religious moderation are limited. This gap calls for a deeper exploration of how these variables interact within the context of *Pesantren*.

The objective of this study is to quantitatively examine how the religious leadership and personal branding of *Kyai* influence religious moderation and contribute to the prevention of radicalism in *Pesantren*. Specifically, this study will assess the relationship between *Kyai*'s leadership style, their public persona, and the development of moderate religious attitudes among students. By using structural equation modelling (SEM), the research will test the hypotheses that spiritual leadership and personal branding positively affect students' perceptions of religious moderation, thereby preventing radicalisation.

This research aims to contribute to the broader understanding of how Islamic educational leadership can foster religious moderation within *Pesantren* and curb radical ideologies. By employing a quantitative approach, the study will offer empirical evidence of the connections between leadership, branding, and radicalism prevention, filling an important gap in the existing literature on Islamic education management and religious moderation.

**METHOD**

This study adopted a causal research design with a quantitative approach, utilising survey research to examine the causal relationships among the key variables: Religious Leadership, *Kyai*'s Personal Branding, Religious Moderation, and Prevention of Radicalism. The causal design was selected to explore the cause-and-effect relationships between these variables. The quantitative approach enabled the collection of numerical data, which was analysed statistically to test the hypotheses and understand the impact of each variable. (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A survey method using questionnaires was employed to gather responses from participants, ensuring that the data were representative of a larger population. This methodology allowed for the examination of how *Kyai*'s leadership and personal branding contribute to promoting religious moderation and preventing radicalism within *Pesantren* environments.

The research variables consist of exogenous, mediating, and endogenous latent variables. Religious Leadership, as an exogenous latent variable, refers to the ability of a spiritual leader to guide, motivate, and coordinate their followers in line with religious principles. This variable was assessed through eight key factors: communication skills, moral character, religious inclusiveness, and the capacity to mobilise followers. (Arar et al., 2022). *Kyai*'s Personal Branding, also an exogenous latent variable, involves how *Kyai* creates and maintains its image in the eyes of its students and the broader public. This variable was assessed through eight sub-variables: personality, social standing, communication skills, and influence within the community. (Ghifarie, 2016; Habsi, 2022; Hariyadi, 2020).

Religious Moderation, a latent mediating variable, is an approach to religion characterised by balance, tolerance, and inclusivity. This variable was evaluated based on eight indicators, including moderation education, inter-religious communication, and support from religious authorities. (Albert & Sesmiarni, 2022; Syahid, 2021; Wardani et al., 2022). Prevention of Radicalism, as an endogenous variable, is conceptualised as the effectiveness of *Pesantren* in discouraging radicalism through the education of moderation, tolerance, and inclusivity. It was measured by eight indicators, such as supportive education policies, community leader involvement, and supervision of extracurricular activities. (Hidayat & Sugiarto, 2020; Indra, 2015).

The target population for this study included *Pesantren* administrators, students, and alums. A simple random sampling technique was applied to ensure that every individual in the population had an equal probability of being selected, making the sample representative of the broader population. (Taherdoost, 2023). The study sample consisted of 340 respondents who met specific inclusion criteria: they were over 18 years old, involved in the management, were students or alums of the *Pesantren*, and were willing to complete the survey. Participants who refused to participate or provided incomplete responses were excluded from the study.

The primary data collection tool used in this study was a questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale designed to assess respondents' perceptions of religious leadership, *Kyai*'s branding, religious moderation, and the prevention of radicalism. The Likert scale was chosen because it allows for the measurement of attitudes and perceptions across a continuum, providing a clear understanding of the respondents' views. By using a 5-point scale, the study captures varying degrees of agreement or disagreement with each statement, offering a more nuanced analysis of the factors influencing religious leadership, *Kyai*'s branding, religious moderation, and radicalism prevention. This range of options is also effective in maintaining simplicity for respondents while still enabling sufficient variability in the responses. Data was collected through an online survey via the Google Forms platform, distributed randomly to the targeted population of *Pesantren* administrators, students, and alumni across Indonesia.

The data analysis in this study was performed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). PLS-SEM was selected due to its ability to handle multicollinearity issues and its suitability for analysing small sample sizes and non-normally distributed data (Hair et al., 2021). Additionally, PLS-SEM allows for simultaneous evaluation of measurement and structural models, making it a flexible tool for analysing models with multiple indicators and latent variables (Chin, 1998).

The analysis process involved two stages: first, the measurement model evaluation, and second, the structural model evaluation. The measurement model was assessed by examining the factor loadings, which indicate the contribution of each indicator to the latent variables, with a minimum acceptable value of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2021). Construct validity was evaluated using convergent validity, determined by comparing the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) to a threshold of 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Composite reliability was used to evaluate the reliability of the constructs, with a desired value above 0.7, and internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which should also exceed 0.7 (Hair et al., 2021).

For the structural model evaluation, R-squared ($R^2$) was calculated to assess the explanatory power of the independent variables on the dependent variables. An $R^2$ value of 0.26 was considered moderate, with values above 0.67 indicating substantial explanatory power (Cohen, 1988). The effect size was determined using the f-square, with categories of minor (0.02), moderate (0.15), and large (0.35) effects (Cohen, 1988). Model fit was assessed using the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), with an SRMR value below 0.08 indicating a good model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Finally, hypothesis testing was conducted by examining the significance of path coefficients, where a T-value greater than 1.96 and a P-value less than 0.05 indicated statistical significance at the 5% level (Hair et al., 2021).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Result

The first step in PLS-SEM analysis involves developing a path diagram that represents the relationship of the latent variables as proposed in the study's conceptual framework. This diagram includes latent variables such as Religious Leadership, *Kyai*'s Personal Branding, Religious Moderation, and Prevention of Radicalism, all measured using reflective indicators. A comprehensive understanding of the respondent characteristics is essential to contextualise the findings and enhance the interpretation of the models.

The study involved 340 respondents with diverse profiles. In terms of age, 35.3% were aged 18–25 years, 29.4% were 26–35 years old, and 35.3% were above 35 years. Gender distribution showed 58.8% male and 41.2% female respondents. Respondents held various roles within the *Pesantren*, with 17.6% being administrators, 58.8% current students, and 23.6% alums. Duration of association with the *Pesantren* varied, with 44.1% having been involved for less than 5 years, 32.4% for 5–10 years, and 23.5% for over 10 years. Regarding the *Pesantren*'s geographical location, 41.2% were situated in urban areas, while 58.8% were in rural settings. Educational background further highlighted diversity, with 67.6% having formal education and 32.4% non-formal education.

**Table 1:** Respondent Characteristics

| Characteristics | Category | Number of Respondents | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age | 18–25 years | 120 | 35.3% |
| | 26–35 years | 100 | 29.4% |
| | >35 years | 120 | 35.3% |
| Gender | Male | 200 | 58.8% |
| | Female | 140 | 41.2% |
| Role in *Pesantren* | Administrator | 60 | 17.6% |
| | Student | 200 | 58.8% |
| | Alumni | 80 | 23.6% |
| Duration of Association | <5 years | 150 | 44.1% |
| | 5–10 years | 110 | 32.4% |
| | >10 years | 80 | 23.5% |
| *Pesantren* Location | Urban | 140 | 41.2% |
| | Rural | 200 | 58.8% |
| Educational Background | Formal | 230 | 67.6% |
| | Non-formal | 110 | 32.4% |

These characteristics play a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of the latent variables. For instance, longer associations with *Pesantren* may lead to stronger insights into the leadership and personal branding of *Kyai*. At the same time, differences in urban and rural settings may influence the respondents' perspectives on religious moderation and radicalism prevention. The measurement model was subsequently evaluated to confirm the appropriateness of the indicators,

followed by an assessment of the structural model to examine the causal relationships among the latent variables. Both models were analysed using SmartPLS 4 software, and the results are depicted in a path diagram in Figure 1.
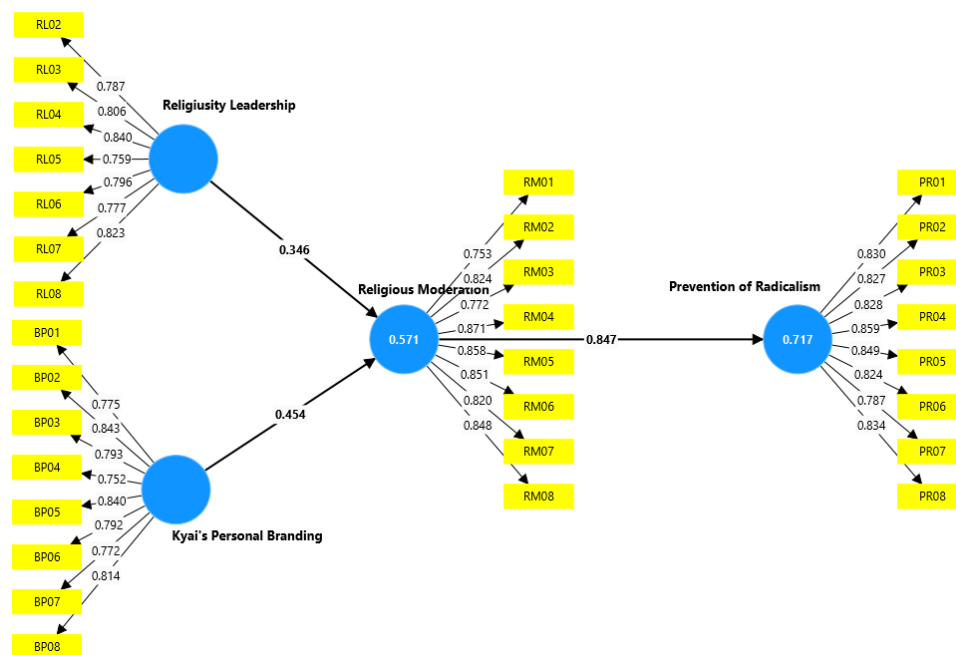


**Figure 1.** Path Diagram (Measurement Model and Structural Model)

The structural model describes the causal relationship between the latent variables based on the conceptual framework of the research and is supported by empirical findings represented in the path diagram developed using SmartPLS 4 software (Figure 1). The model posits that Religious Leadership and *Kyai*'s Personal Branding significantly impact Religious Moderation, which acts as a mediating variable influencing the Prevention of Radicalism. This assumption is confirmed by the results of hypothesis testing, as shown in Table 2. Specifically, Religious Leadership has a positive direct effect on Religious Moderation (coefficient = 0.346, T-value = 3.520, P-value < 0.001), and *Kyai*'s Personal Branding also positively impacts Religious Moderation (coefficient = 0.454, T-value = 4.711, P-value < 0.001). Furthermore, Religious Moderation demonstrates a strong positive effect on the Prevention of Radicalism (coefficient = 0.847, T-value = 28.609, P-value < 0.001).

The mediating role of Religious Moderation is further substantiated by significant indirect effects, as presented in Table 2. Religious Leadership indirectly influences the Prevention of Radicalism through Religious Moderation (coefficient = 0.293, T-value = 3.461, P-value = 0.001), while *Kyai*'s Personal Branding similarly impacts the Prevention of Radicalism via Religious Moderation (coefficient = 0.384, T-value = 4.552, P-value < 0.001). The explanatory power of the structural model is demonstrated by R² values, which reveal that Religious Leadership and *Kyai*'s Personal Branding explain 57.1% of the variance in Religious Moderation (R² = 0.571) and 71.7% of the variance in the Prevention of Radicalism (R² = 0.717), as shown in Table 3. These findings confirm the robustness of the structural relationships and highlight the pivotal role of Religious Moderation in mediating the effects of leadership and branding on radicalism prevention.

The model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how *Kyai*'s leadership and personal branding strategies can foster religious moderation and effectively counter radicalism within *Pesantren*. All conclusions are grounded in the data presented in Tables 2 and 3, as well as

the visual representation of the relationships in Figure 1, ensuring a strong empirical basis for the analysis.

This research analyses the influence of religious leadership and *Kyai's* branding on religious moderation and its impact on combating radicalism in *Pesantren*. The first-order model with a reflective indicator type in PLS-SEM was used; several specific indicators measured the latent variables in this study. *Kyai's* Personal Branding (BP), a latent variable, was measured using eight indicators, i.e., BP01-BP08. The latent variable Prevention of Radicalism (PR) was measured using eight indicators, i.e., PR01-PR08. In addition, the latent variable Religious Leadership (RL) was measured using eight indicators, i.e., RL01 to RL08. Lastly, the latent variable Religious Moderation (RM) was also measured using eight indicators, i.e., RM01-RM08.

### Outer Model (Measurement Model) Evaluation

In assessing the measurement model in PLS-SEM in this research, the main criteria include loading factor values, convergent validity test using Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and construct reliability test using Composite Reliability. The PLS-SEM analysis carried out with the help of SmartPLS 4 software indicates that the outer loadings of most of the indicators are more significant than 0.7, and the T-statistics are greater than 1.96. This means these indicators play an important role in accounting for the measured latent variables, as shown below. The loading factor values are from 0.752 to 0.871, and the T-statistics are between 13.192 to 45.463, meaning that these indicators significantly contribute to the latent variables. However, the loading factor value of Religious Leadership (RL01) is 0.687, and the T-statistics are 0.686, which is still below the recommended threshold. This indicator is not strong enough to define the latent variable. Therefore, it has to be removed from the model to improve the accuracy and validity of the measurement.

Subsequently, RL01 was dropped from the model and re-estimated to ensure that all the remaining indicators met the criteria of significant contribution to the latent variable—the process established construct validity using Average Variance Extracted (AVE). In contrast, construct reliability was measured using the omega coefficient (ω), and internal consistency was measured using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient (α).

**Table 2.** Construct reliability and validity

| Latent Variable | α | ω | AVE |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Kyai's* Branding | 0.92 | 0.92 | 0.64 |
| Prevention of Radicalism | 0.94 | 0.94 | 0.69 |
| Religious Moderation | 0.93 | 0.94 | 0.68 |
| Religious Leadership | 0.91 | 0.91 | 0.64 |

The reliability coefficient and construct validity for each latent variable assessed in this study are presented in Table 1. The α and ω coefficients are used to measure construct reliability, while the AVE is used to measure construct validity. It is also important to note that all the latent variables have α and ω values greater than 0.7, which shows that the constructs have excellent reliability. The α values are from 0.91 to 0.94, while the ω values range from 0.91 to 0.94. This means there is high internal consistency, and their respective indicators accurately measure the latent variables. Furthermore, all the AVE values are above 0.5, ranging from 0.64 to 0.69. This means that more than 50% of the variance in each indicator can be accounted for by its corresponding latent variables, thus meeting the criteria for construct validity.

***Inner Model (Structural Model) Evaluation***
***Assessing the PLS-SEM Model Fit***

In this study, an assessment of the inner model or structural model is conducted to determine the relationship between the latent variables. Several leading indicators are used in this analysis to evaluate the quality of the model, such as the R-square, which measures the predictive power of the independent variable over the dependent variable. Also, the f-square effect is applied to determine the relative proportion of the impact of the independent variable on the dependent variable. Other fit indices like SRMR, d_ULS, and d_G are also calculated to determine how much the estimated model fits the collected data.

The R-square value for the Prevention of Radicalism variable is 0.717, and for Religious Moderation, 0.571. Cohen (1988) argues that an R-square value of 0.26 is moderate, and any value above 0.67 is considered substantial. Thus, the R-square value of 0.717 for the Prevention of Radicalism shows that this model has reasonable predictive power, and the R-square value of 0.571 for Religious Moderation shows moderate predictive power. The adjusted R-square value, which is almost similar to the R-square value, also indicates that this model is not overfitting, and the model's prediction does not rely on particular data.

The f-square value measures the effect size of the independent variable on the dependent variable. Generally, an f-square value of 0.02 is considered small, 0.15 is moderate, and 0.35 is considered significant (Cohen 1988). In this model, the f-square for *Kyai's* Personal Branding on Religious Moderation is 0.186, and Religious Leadership on Religious Moderation is 0.108, both of which are in the moderate effect category. However, the f-square value 2.536 for Religious Moderation on Prevention of Radicalism indicates a huge effect beyond the 0.35 threshold. This shows that Religious Moderation has a powerful and significant impact on preventing Radicalism.

The estimated model's SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual) value is 0.071, which is still below the 0.08 threshold. (Hu & Bentler, 1999). This means that the model fits the data well since the difference between the observed and expected correlation matrices is small. The d_ULS and d_G values also represent reasonable values, where lower values indicate the model's conformity with the data. The standard threshold for d_ULS and d_G is as close to zero as possible, and the reported values are close to this number, suggesting a good model fit.

***Hypothesis Testing of Direct and Indirect Effects***

Hypothesis testing determines the significance of the direct and indirect effects between the latent variables. The assessment is performed using the parameter coefficients to assess the magnitude and direction of the impact. In contrast, the T and P values are used to determine the statistical significance of the effects. To be significant, the T value has to be greater than 1.95 at a 5% significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$), and the P value should be less than 0.05. This analysis helps in eliminating any relationship that is not statistically significant in the model hence enhancing the validity of the research findings.

**Table 3.** Hypothesis Testing

| Effects | Latent Variables | | Parameters | T | P-Value | Hypothesis |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Direct Effect | Religious Leadership Religious Moderation | -> | 0.346 | 3.520 | 0.000 | H1: Accepted |
| | *Kyai's* Personal Branding Religious Moderation | -> | 0.454 | 4.711 | 0.000 | H2: Accepted |
| | Religious Moderation Prevention of Radicalism | -> | 0.847 | 28.609 | 0.000 | H3: Accepted |
| Indirect Effect | Religious Leadership Religious Moderation Prevention of Radicalism | -> -> | 0.293 | 3.461 | 0.001 | H4: Accepted |
| | *Kyai's* Personal Branding Religious Moderation Prevention of Radicalism | -> -> | 0.384 | 4.552 | 0.000 | H5: Accepted |

The hypothesis testing results provide strong empirical evidence supporting the proposed relationships in this study. The analysis reveals that both Religious Leadership and *Kyai*'s Personal Branding significantly enhance Religious Moderation, as indicated by their positive coefficients (0.346 and 0.454, respectively) and statistically significant T-values (3.520 and 4.711). This suggests that improvements in leadership qualities and personal branding efforts of *Kyai*s are critical to fostering a culture of moderation within *Pesantren*.

Religious Moderation also demonstrates a robust effect on the Prevention of Radicalism, with the highest coefficient (0.847) and a T-value of 28.609. This underscores the centrality of religious moderation as a mechanism for countering radical ideologies effectively.

The significant indirect effects further validate the mediating role of Religious Moderation. Religious Leadership indirectly contributes to the Prevention of Radicalism through Religious Moderation (coefficient = 0.293, T-value = 3.461), demonstrating that leadership efforts enhance moderation, which in turn mitigates radicalism. Similarly, *Kyai*'s Personal Branding shows a substantial indirect effect on radicalism prevention via Religious Moderation (coefficient = 0.384, T-value = 4.552), highlighting the importance of branding in influencing broader societal attitudes.

These results collectively emphasise that strengthening both Religious Leadership and *Kyai*'s Personal Branding is essential to cultivating moderation and preventing radicalism in *Pesantren*. The findings advocate for focused development programs targeting these areas to address the risks of radicalisation effectively. By leveraging leadership and branding strategies, *Pesantren* can serve as a robust platform for promoting tolerance and inclusivity..

## Discussion

This study delves into the interplay between religious leadership, *Kyai*'s branding, religious moderation, and the prevention of radicalism within the framework of *Pesantren* and its broader implications for Islamic education management. By situating the *Kyai* at the centre of both educational and managerial roles, the research highlights the strategic importance of leadership and branding in shaping *Pesantren* as institutions that nurture inclusivity, moderation, and social cohesion.

Islamic education management, as a field, extends beyond the operational oversight of educational institutions to encompass the integration of spiritual, pedagogical, and administrative dimensions. In *Pesantren*, the *Kyai* embodies this synthesis by serving as both spiritual guides and institutional managers. Leadership theory underpins this dual role, emphasising attributes such as communication, ethical standards, and vision, which are critical in aligning institutional goals with Islamic values. **(Lafrarchi, 2020)**. Personal branding theory complements this by framing *Kyai*'s influence within the dynamics of public image and interpersonal trust. **(Ghifarie, 2016)**.

### Impact of Religious Leadership on Islamic Education Management

Religious leadership in *Pesantren* shapes the foundational culture and operational ethos of the institution. The ability of *Kyai* to inspire adherence to Islamic principles, promote unity and harmony, and lead by example fosters an educational ethos aligned with the principles of moderation. Effective communication by *Kyai* strengthens trust among students, staff, and the wider community, which is vital for cohesive educational governance (Arar et al., 2022). Religious moderation plays a pivotal role as a mediating variable, explaining 57.1% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.571$) in the relationship between leadership, personal branding, and radicalism prevention. The structural model also highlights the strong influence of religious moderation on preventing radicalism, with a coefficient of 0.847. This demonstrates that religious moderation is not merely a byproduct of leadership but serves as a transformative mechanism amplifying the impact of leadership and branding efforts on counter-radicalization. The novelty of this finding lies in its theoretical framing of moderation as a balancing force that bridges abstract leadership values with practical outcomes.

This mediating role is particularly significant given the diverse characteristics of the respondents. In terms of age, younger respondents, predominantly students aged 18–25 years (35.3%), are directly exposed to *Kyai*'s teachings and leadership in the *Pesantren* environment, where religious moderation shapes their daily learning experiences. Older respondents, such as administrators and alumni (aged above 35 years, 35.3%), reflect how leadership and moderation translate into long-term values that influence governance and community engagement. Gender diversity, with 58.8% male and 41.2% female respondents, ensures that the mediating role of moderation resonates across genders, as tolerance and inclusivity appeal universally.

The varied roles of respondents—students (58.8%), alumni (23.6%), and administrators (17.6%)—demonstrate the breadth of moderation's impact. Students benefit directly from educational programs emphasizing tolerance and interfaith dialogue, while administrators focus on translating leadership principles into institutional policies. Alumni reflect the long-term effects of moderation in guiding their behaviors and perspectives. Furthermore, the duration of association with *Pesantren*, ranging from less than 5 years (44.1%) to over 10 years (23.5%), highlights how moderation mediates leadership effects over both short-term and long-term engagements.

The location of *Pesantren* also shapes how religious moderation functions. Respondents from rural settings (58.8%) emphasize the role of moderation in fostering resilience and unity amidst socio-economic challenges, whereas urban respondents (41.2%) underscore its importance in addressing the complexities of pluralistic societies. Educational backgrounds also influence the perception of moderation; respondents with formal education (67.6%) engage more critically with its theoretical underpinnings, while those with non-formal education (32.4%) focus on its practical applications as demonstrated by *Kyai*'s actions.

Religious moderation acts as a critical mediating variable that bridges leadership and personal branding with radicalism prevention. Its ability to mediate effectively across diverse demographic groups highlights its adaptability and universal relevance. This study's findings emphasize the need for *Pesantren* to embed moderation into their leadership training, policies, and curricula to sustain its transformative role. By doing so, *Pesantren* can strengthen their position as hubs for fostering societal resilience, inclusivity, and tolerance. This theoretical and practical integration positions religious moderation as a key construct in counter-radicalization efforts.

## Influence of *Kyai*'s Branding on Management Practices

*Kyai*'s branding amplifies their capacity to lead effectively and align the institution's image with its values. A *Kyai*'s social reputation, built on attributes such as integrity, social engagement, and communication skills, determines the ability of *Pesantren* to secure community support and attract diverse groups of students. Trustworthiness and a strong reputation for piety contribute to building public trust and institutional credibility (Habsi, 2022). For instance, well-branded *Kyai* can attract philanthropic investments and forge partnerships with educational organizations, further strengthening *Pesantren*'s operational capacity. This aligns with the structural model, where personal branding shows a strong direct effect on religious moderation, demonstrating its importance in influencing institutional outcomes.

Branding also plays a critical role in internal management. The *Kyai*'s ability to address community issues and act as a role model unifies staff and students around shared goals, such as fostering religious moderation and preventing radicalism (Ali et al., 2021; Djamaluddin et al., 2024). This shared vision enables the implementation of policies that emphasize inclusivity, tolerance, and pluralism. The alignment with religious moderation principles, such as advocating for mutual respect and encouraging interfaith dialogue, demonstrates how branding enhances both spiritual and academic growth within *Pesantren* (Ifendi, 2020).

Religious moderation acts as a crucial mediating variable in translating the influence of *Kyai*'s branding into effective management practices and radicalism prevention. The study found that religious moderation explains 57.1% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.571$) in the relationship between branding and radicalism prevention. By rejecting radical interpretations of religion and promoting critical thinking in education, moderation fosters resilience against extremist ideologies. The high coefficient between religious moderation and radicalism prevention further emphasizes its transformative role. Branding efforts that balance traditional and modern approaches and maintain respect from diverse groups align with moderation strategies, demonstrating how *Kyai*'s public image directly impacts institutional and societal outcomes.

The effectiveness of *Kyai*'s branding varies across respondent demographics, providing insights into its broader impact. Among students, branding initiatives resonate through direct interactions, such as sermons, community outreach, and educational activities. Alumni reflect on the long-term influence of branding in shaping their values and behaviors post-education, while administrators view branding through the lens of its impact on governance and policy implementation.

Gender distribution, with a balance of male and female respondents, highlights the universal appeal of branding rooted in inclusivity and trust. Younger respondents are likely drawn to the modern communication strategies of *Kyai*, while older respondents may focus on the *Kyai*'s ability to address complex societal challenges. These generational differences underline the adaptability of branding efforts to diverse needs and expectations.

*Pesantren* location also shapes the perception of branding. In rural *Pesantren*, the *Kyai*'s personal brand is critical for community engagement and grassroots support, emphasizing traditional values. In urban contexts, branding reflects a balance of modern and traditional approaches, catering to more diverse and multicultural audiences. Respondents with formal education may engage critically with branding as a strategic tool, while those with non-formal education focus on its tangible manifestations in community leadership and inclusivity.

The theoretical novelty of this study lies in identifying religious moderation as a mediating variable that bridges branding with radicalism prevention. Unlike previous studies that treat branding as an isolated construct, this research integrates it with leadership and moderation, highlighting its systemic impact. Branding efforts that emphasize public trust, balanced approaches, and community leadership align with moderation strategies to amplify institutional resilience and counter-extremism.

Practically, *Pesantren* should invest in developing *Kyai*'s branding through training programs focused on communication skills, public engagement, and modern outreach methods. These efforts should align with institutional goals, emphasizing inclusivity and moderation. Programs that connect branding to moderation, such as interfaith dialogue workshops and tolerance education, can further enhance the *Kyai*'s impact. By positioning branding as a cornerstone of management practices, *Pesantren* can strengthen their role as platforms for societal resilience, inclusivity, and sustainable governance.

**Religious Moderation as a Mediating Variable in Education Management**

Religious moderation plays a pivotal role as a mediating variable in connecting the impacts of leadership and personal branding with the prevention of radicalism. As both a value and practice, moderation facilitates the transformation of abstract leadership principles and branding strategies into actionable educational outcomes. By embedding moderation into the curriculum, *Pesantren* leaders create a learning environment where students critically engage with religious texts and contexts, fostering a rejection of extremist interpretations (Ma`arif et al., 2025; Rozaq et al., 2022; Wardani et al., 2022). This curricular integration aligns with the principles of Islamic education

management, ensuring that moderation is not just a theoretical concept but a practical approach to nurturing balanced attitudes and behaviours.

The mediating role of religious moderation is supported by the structural model, where moderation explains 57.1% of the variance (R² = 0.571) in its relationship with leadership, branding, and radicalism prevention. Indicators of moderation, such as advocating for tolerance, rejecting extreme ideologies, and promoting critical thinking, demonstrate its transformative impact. The strong coefficient of 0.847 between religious moderation and radicalism prevention highlights its centrality as a mechanism that amplifies leadership and branding efforts. This demonstrates that moderation does not function in isolation but as a dynamic mediator that bridges institutional values with societal needs.

Moderation-driven education policies, such as workshops on interfaith dialogue and tolerance, empower students to act as ambassadors of peace beyond the *Pesantren* (Idris et al., 2024; Ma`arif et al., 2024; Salim et al., 2024). These initiatives equip students with the skills and values to navigate diverse sociocultural landscapes, fostering an inclusive perspective that counteracts radical ideologies. Policies emphasizing compassion, peace, and interfaith understanding reduce the institution's vulnerability to radical influences while reinforcing its role as a hub of balanced Islamic education (Liriwati et al., 2024).

The effectiveness of religious moderation as a mediating variable is reflected in the diverse demographic characteristics of respondents. Younger students, who constitute 35.3% of the sample, directly benefit from moderation-oriented curricula that prioritize critical engagement with religious teachings. Alumni and administrators, who together form 41.2% of the sample, reflect how moderation shapes long-term attitudes and informs institutional policies aimed at fostering inclusivity and tolerance.

Gender diversity among respondents (58.8% male, 41.2% female) demonstrates that moderation resonates universally across both genders, addressing broad concerns about extremism and societal cohesion. The location of *Pesantren* also influences the perception of moderation; in rural settings (58.8%), it serves as a critical tool for fostering resilience and unity, while in urban contexts (41.2%), it addresses the complexities of pluralistic environments. Educational background further underscores the adaptability of moderation, with respondents from formal education engaging critically with its theoretical aspects, and those from non-formal education relating more to its practical applications.

The theoretical novelty of this study lies in framing religious moderation as the central mediator that bridges leadership, branding, and radicalism prevention. Unlike previous research that treats moderation as an isolated outcome, this study positions it as a transformative variable that connects institutional practices with societal impact. By integrating moderation into education management, *Pesantren* leaders ensure that it functions as a dynamic force for fostering tolerance, inclusivity, and critical thinking.

These findings suggest that *Pesantren* should embed moderation into every aspect of their educational framework. This includes developing curricula that emphasize interfaith dialogue, tolerance workshops, and critical engagement with religious texts. Leadership training programs that align with moderation strategies can further enhance the effectiveness of *Kyai*'s leadership and branding efforts. By leveraging moderation as the key mediator, *Pesantren* can strengthen their role as agents of societal resilience, ensuring sustainable contributions to peace and inclusivity..

**Preventing Radicalism Through Strategic Management**

The prevention of radicalism within *Pesantren* relies on strategic management practices that prioritize inclusivity, collaboration, and adaptability. These practices are not only operational but also deeply rooted in the values of Islamic education. Inclusive hiring practices, for instance, ensure diverse perspectives within the teaching staff, fostering a culture of mutual respect and critical

thinking among students and educators (Hidayat & Sugiarto, 2020). Additionally, partnerships with community organizations expand *Pesantren*'s outreach efforts, enabling them to address broader societal challenges and effectively counter extremist narratives. These collaborative approaches reinforce *Pesantren*'s role as both educational institutions and agents of social change.

Theories of leadership and personal branding underline the importance of strategic management in preventing radicalism. Leadership theory emphasizes the significance of vision and ethical standards in creating sustainable management frameworks (Adeoye et al., 2025; Baso & Alwy, 2023). By embodying these principles, *Pesantren* leaders can implement policies that reflect moderation, inclusivity, and fairness (Hasan et al., 2024; Umar et al., 2024; W et al., 2024). Personal branding theory complements this by highlighting the role of public trust and community engagement in institutional success. A well-branded *Kyai*, for example, can leverage their public image to attract resources, support partnerships, and inspire confidence in *Pesantren*'s role as a hub of tolerance and peace (Ma`arif et al., 2025; Muid et al., 2024; Sutisna & Khori, 2024). The integration of these theories into management practices ensures that efforts to prevent radicalism are both grounded in institutional values and strategically oriented towards long-term impact.

Religious moderation acts as the critical mediator that bridges strategic management practices with radicalism prevention. This study found that religious moderation explains 57.1% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.571$) in the relationship between leadership, branding, and radicalism prevention. Moderation-driven management strategies, such as fostering interfaith dialogue, promoting tolerance workshops, and embedding critical thinking into curricula, align seamlessly with institutional efforts to counter radical influences. The strong coefficient between religious moderation and radicalism prevention underscores the importance of embedding moderation into every facet of *Pesantren*'s operations.

The demographic diversity of respondents provides insights into how strategic management practices resonate across different groups. Among students, who make up 58.8% of respondents, inclusive teaching practices and critical-thinking-based curricula directly shape their perspectives and resilience against radicalism. Alumni and administrators, together constituting 41.2%, reflect on the effectiveness of long-term strategies such as partnerships and community engagement in reinforcing moderation and countering extremism.

Gender and age also influence how strategic management is perceived. Male respondents (58.8%) and younger individuals (aged 18–25, 35.3%) might focus on immediate impacts such as educational policies and extracurricular initiatives, while female respondents (41.2%) and older individuals (above 35 years, 35.3%) may emphasize the broader societal implications of these practices. Similarly, the rural-urban divide in *Pesantren* location shapes strategic priorities, with rural *Pesantren* focusing on grassroots resilience and urban *Pesantren* addressing multicultural and pluralistic challenges.

This study contributes to the theoretical discourse by integrating strategic management with leadership, branding, and moderation as interconnected variables in Islamic education management. It highlights that preventing radicalism requires not only visionary leadership and effective branding but also moderation-driven management strategies that align with the institution's core values. The mediating role of religious moderation bridges these constructs, transforming strategic practices into tangible outcomes.

These findings suggest that *Pesantren* should develop comprehensive management frameworks that incorporate modern strategies while upholding Islamic values. Leadership training programs should focus on ethical decision-making, visionary leadership, and collaborative approaches to problem-solving. Additionally, institutional branding should highlight *Pesantren*'s commitment to moderation and inclusivity to attract diverse stakeholders and enhance societal impact. Finally, further research could explore the long-term effects of these strategies on areas such as student outcomes, community engagement, and institutional growth.

By leveraging the interconnectedness of religious leadership, personal branding, and strategic management, *Pesantren* can position themselves as beacons of moderate and inclusive Islamic education. These practices not only strengthen the institution but also contribute to societal peace, resilience, and the prevention of radicalism. This integrated approach ensures that *Pesantren* continue to serve as vital platforms for fostering tolerance, critical thinking, and societal harmony.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the transformative role of religious leadership and *Kyai*'s personal branding in shaping Islamic education management. These elements go beyond fostering religious moderation and preventing radicalism; they cultivate environments centered on inclusivity, tolerance, and critical engagement with spiritual values. This positions *Pesantren* not only as centers of learning but also as strategic institutions that counter radicalism while promoting balanced Islamic teachings. Religious moderation emerges as the pivotal mediating variable that connects leadership and branding efforts to broader educational and societal outcomes, underscoring its centrality in achieving institutional resilience and fostering societal harmony.

This research makes significant contributions to both theoretical and practical domains. Theoretically, it integrates leadership and branding frameworks within the context of Islamic education, illustrating their relevance in enhancing governance and institutional adaptability. The mediating role of religious moderation adds novelty to the theoretical discourse, providing a robust framework for understanding how abstract leadership values and branding strategies are operationalized through moderation. Practically, the findings offer actionable insights for developing programs that equip *Kyai* with leadership and branding skills tailored to evolving educational landscapes. Such programs could include training modules that emphasize ethical leadership, communication skills, and branding strategies aligned with the values of moderation and inclusivity, thereby strengthening *Pesantren*'s role as beacons of balanced and moderate Islamic education. Embedding moderation into curricula, institutional policies, and community engagement practices offers a replicable model for other educational institutions aiming to foster resilience against radical influences.

While this research contributes substantially to the field, it also has limitations that warrant further exploration. The reliance on an online survey method may have excluded participants from remote or technologically underserved *Pesantren*, potentially limiting the diversity of perspectives. Additionally, the self-reported nature of the data introduces the possibility of response biases, which could influence the results. Future research could address these limitations by employing mixed-method approaches, such as interviews, focus groups, or ethnographic studies, to provide a more nuanced understanding of leadership and branding dynamics in *Pesantren*. Moreover, exploring the long-term impacts of *Kyai*'s leadership and branding on community development and interfaith engagement could enhance our understanding of their broader societal contributions. Such research would pave the way for comprehensive policies and interventions that further strengthen the role of *Pesantren* in promoting peace, inclusivity, and resilience in diverse contexts.

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