



The Role of Motivation and Spiritual Meaning in Predicting Bullying Behavior among Islamic Boarding School Students

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Abstract

Islamic boarding schools, known as pesantren, offer a distinctive educational experience where learning is intertwined with religious growth and community life. This research aims to evaluate the impact of school well-being and social support on the tendency for bullying in Islamic boarding schools. Specifically, the study investigates how personal motives and the perceived religious importance inherent in the pedagogical practices of these campuses can predict bullying behavior within the unique social environment and disciplinary system of pesantren institutions. We conducted interviews with 300 students across various pesantren. The cross-sectional survey utilized structural equation modeling (SEM). The findings indicate that personal qualities significantly predict an individual's spiritual meaning ($\beta = 0.21$, $T = 3.18$, $p < 0.01$) but do not directly relate to motivation or interest experience. In the context of pesantren, spiritual meaning is positively associated with these factors ($\beta = 0.19$, $T = 2.87$, $p < 0.01$). Spiritual factors significantly enhance motivation ($\beta = 0.34$, $T = 5.62$, $p < 0.001$) and spiritual meaning ($\beta = 0.41$, $T = 6.48$, $p < 0.001$). Social support emerges as the most reliable predictor of motivation ($\beta = 0.38$, $T = 6.11$, $p < 0.001$), interest experience ($\beta = 0.29$, $T = 4.57$, $p < 0.001$), and spiritual meaning ($\beta = 0.26$, $T = 4.02$, $p < 0.001$). Notably, interest experience negatively predicts bullying behavior ($\beta = -0.31$, $T = 4.89$, $p < 0.001$). These results underscore the crucial role of community and spiritual support in enhancing students' well-being and reducing harmful activities in pesantren.

Keywords: Bullying, Inclusive Learning Environment, Peaceful, Quality Education, and Well-Being.

Abstrak

Pesantren, sebuah sekolah berasrama Islam, menawarkan pengalaman pendidikan yang khas di mana pembelajaran terjalin dengan pertumbuhan keagamaan dan kehidupan komunitas. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengevaluasi dampak kesejahteraan sekolah dan dukungan sosial terhadap kecenderungan perundungan di pesantren. Secara khusus, penelitian ini menyelidiki bagaimana motif pribadi dan pentingnya nilai keagamaan yang dirasakan dalam praktik pedagogis di sekolah-sekolah ini dapat memprediksi perilaku perundungan dalam lingkungan sosial dan sistem disiplin yang unik di lembaga pesantren. Kami melakukan wawancara dengan 300 siswa di berbagai pesantren. Survei lintas sektoral menggunakan pemodelan persamaan struktural (SEM). Temuan menunjukkan bahwa

kualitas pribadi secara signifikan memprediksi makna spiritual individu ($\beta = 0,21$, $T = 3,18$, $p < 0,01$) tetapi tidak secara langsung berhubungan dengan motivasi atau pengalaman minat. Dalam konteks pesantren, makna spiritual berhubungan positif dengan faktor-faktor ini ($\beta = 0,19$, $T = 2,87$, $p < 0,01$). Faktor spiritual secara signifikan meningkatkan motivasi ($\beta = 0,34$, $T = 5,62$, $p < 0,001$) dan makna spiritual ($\beta = 0,41$, $T = 6,48$, $p < 0,001$). Dukungan sosial muncul sebagai prediktor motivasi yang paling dapat diandalkan ($\beta = 0,38$, $T = 6,11$, $p < 0,001$), pengalaman minat ($\beta = 0,29$, $T = 4,57$, $p < 0,001$), dan makna spiritual ($\beta = 0,26$, $T = 4,02$, $p < 0,001$). Yang perlu diperhatikan, pengalaman minat secara negatif memprediksi perilaku perundungan ($\beta = -0,31$, $T = 4,89$, $p < 0,001$). Hasil ini menggarisbawahi peran penting komunitas dan dukungan spiritual dalam meningkatkan kesejahteraan siswa dan mengurangi aktivitas berbahaya di pesantren.

Kata Kunci: Perundungan, Lingkungan Belajar Inklusif, Damai, Pendidikan Berkualitas, dan Kesejahteraan

INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding school is a school which combines religious aspects of education with academic and character development; as such, it is a full-time residential school (Ahwan & Karfida, 2025; Arif, Aziz, & Abdurakhmonovich, 2024; Pusvitasari & Zarkasyi, 2024; Utama & Salim, 2024). Under this unique socio-religious context, students are not only confronted with academic school but also engaged with intensive spiritual instruction and communal living as well, leading to various interpersonal interactions which can influence prosocial and antisocial behaviors (F. K. Fitriyah, Hidayah, Muslihati, Hambali, & Ibad, 2021). As a result, gaining insight into the determinants that contribute to students' motivation, spiritual significance, and behavioral disposition is crucial not only in promoting education, but also to protecting students' psychological well-being. (Pusvitasari & Zarkasyi, 2024; Shobihah, 2025; Solehuddin, Budimansyah, & Dahliyana, 2024; Yuliana, Prasojo, Akalili, & Firdaus, 2025)

The relationship between motivation and meaning has both an influence and intertwining factor in Islamic boarding school in that motivational structure has shaped the student's learning and community activities ((Febriandika, Ihsan, Inayati, & Ramadhan, 2024); (Romdloni, Fitriyah, Djazilan, & Taufiq, 2024)). For pesantren, spiritual meaning is highly correlated with religious values and practices and influences the moral decisions by students and the behavior patterns within the communal setting (Chailani et al., 2023). When successfully internalized, spiritual significance could reinforce people's resilience in responding to difficult circumstances, motivation to learn, and decrease the likelihood of aggression like bullying behaviors (Baihaqi, Amaliyah, Awaliyah, Khoerunnisa, & Laksono, 2023; Putri & Ghozali, 2025; Umam & Hasan, 2025; Yusoff, Yusoff, Yahya, Azizan, & Saefudin, 2026). On the other hand, the absence of spiritual integration or maladaptive coping habits in the challenging setting of a boarding school environment may predispose students to psychological vulnerabilities which eventually impact their academic motivation and increase their vulnerability to bullying behavior (Mudzkiyyah, Wahib, & Bulut, 2022). In fact, such institutions have educators cope with the negative impact of verbal bullying on students' psychological well-being and physical health, resulting in research-backed prevention strategies being needed (Afridah, Fitriyah, Lestari, Amin, & Wikurendra, 2025; Rahmawati, Setiyowati, & Eva, 2023).

Even with the strong moral and religious foundation of Islamic boarding schools, research reports an alarming increase in bullying incidents in schools, including Islamic boarding schools (Muhlis, Wardi, Baiquni, Septiadi, & Mansurnoor, 2025; Syaifuddin & Ahwan, 2024;

Us'an, Suyadi, & Siraj, 2023). In these schools, bullying behaviors appear subtly but persistently due to hierarchical senior and junior relationships and prolonged communal living; these factors pose serious threats to students' physical, emotional, and spiritual development (Irsyadhah, Syahrullah, Atmowidjoyo, & Khasanah, 2024). Such incidents not only erode the well-being of students but also damage the overall moral credibility and educational mission of Islamic boarding schools as institutions for character building (Fajri, Ardianto, & Sholihah, 2025; Febrianti, Arifudin, & al-Islam, 2025; Ma`arif et al., 2025).

Previous studies have focused on bullying prevention in Islamic boarding schools using different methods, such as personalized approaches, education on noble character, and habitual reinforcement through religious programs (Rabiatul, Yuniarti, & Mamlu'ah, 2025). Nonetheless, they often fail to focus on the psychological and socio-cultural factors driving these behaviors, so an examination of the complex interplay between individual dispositions and the unique communal dynamics within these institutions is warranted (Aprilianti, 2024).

In particular, the synergy between motivation, spirituality, and their impact on bullying behavior among students, particularly in Islamic boarding schools, has rarely been subjected to empirical consideration. This is why this study strives to help students better understand how intrinsic motivation and the cultivation of spiritual meaning act as protective factors against bullying, thereby enabling a more nuanced understanding of student well-being in specific educational environments. Utilizing these relationships, this study aims to provide evidence-based recommendations for how to create interventions which help improve the environment within Islamic boarding schools by providing more nurturing and resilient environments and integrating the religion and community aspects to prevent bullying (F. K. Fitriyah, Almaziyah, Asmara, Rihlah, & Putri, 2025).

Furthermore, very few studies have utilized structural equation modeling to better understand the complex relationships between these psychological constructs and observable bullying acts among this population, thus indicating a great methodological gap that this study aims to fill. This quantitative method will provide a robust analysis of direct and indirect links to better understand the impact of motivation and spiritual meaning on pesantren-based bullying patterns (Arfah & Wantini, 2023). The inclusion of SEM enables investigation of latent variables and provides deep insight into the underlying process from which motivation, spiritual meaning and bullying result (Abdul Halim et al., 2023).

In this regard, this study aimed to explore the direct and indirect relationships between motivation, spiritual meaning, and bullying behaviors in the Islamic boarding school students. Interestingly, this study is different as it considers the synergistic influence of psychological constructs in the unique aspect of Islamic boarding schools within the sociocultural framework, a paradigm that has been neglected in previous studies (Febriandika et al., 2024). It expands upon qualitative evidence on anti-bullying policies and resilience by applying a quantitative framework to analyse complex interdependencies (Rofiki, Baharun, & Badriyati, 2025).

The implications of this study are diverse and broad-based, making a theoretical contribution to knowledge and practically, towards promoting safer educational environments within Islamic boarding schools which is in line with the wider objective of ensuring well-being and encouraging responsibility for both well-being and online behavior (Arifin et al., 2025). In addition, this study presents an insight into Islamic boarding schools' students' psychological

well-being, an understudied subgroup that struggles differently ((Hafnidar, Zahara, Wahyuni, & Maulina, 2022; Hamdanah, Mardia, & Rusydi, 2025; Hermawan, 2025); (Mudzkiyyah et al., 2022)). The integration of spiritual aspects into educational psychology provides theoretical insights on the development of resilience that enrich and advance and informs the modern school system (Aprilianti, 2024).

METHOD

Research Design

The research design in the current study was planned to incorporate structural equation modelling as their quantitative research design of this kind. This approach is good for analysing the intricate relationship between latent variables like motivation, spiritual meaning, and bullying behaviors; and its direct and indirect effects. The application of the model will provide a thorough scrutiny of the relationships between these constructs within Islamic boarding schools' peculiar sociocultural context and allow for insight into mechanisms that might have been invisible to easier-to-understand statistical methods.

Population and Sampling Strategy

The population of this study were students of Islamic boarding schools throughout Indonesia. Three hundred persons were taken from the pool via a stratified random sampling method for the representation. In this way, more diverse demographic characteristics, like sex, age, duration of attendance at the boarding school were proportionally reported upon in the sample, increasing the generalization of results to the population of Indonesian students. In particular, the stratified sampling method included grouping boarding schools by region and size and randomly selecting pupils from these strata to obtain an inclusive representation of the boarding school landscape in a stratified manner. The approach was used to capture differences among educational orientation, organizational structure, and culture of individual regions. Data was drawn from 13 to 19 years age, balanced in terms of male and female students. Duration of the residence in the boarding school ranged from 1 to 6 years, therefore significant heterogeneity was possible between 1 to 6 years and a wide range of institutional exposure was covered. This method also took into account the variable curricula and social support structures, as well as curricula that vary by boarding school and may have a high level of different environments, and which can also affect the well-being and stress for students and academic performance, to an extreme extent, that influence on well-being and academic pressures on the students.

Instrument Development and Measurement

Instrument Design

The data was collected from a structured self-administered, Likert-scale questionnaire (ranging from 1 to 5, Strongly Disagree and Strongly Agree). Using adapted forms of standard instruments, all constructs were assessed to ensure theoretical rigor and relevance to the pesantren setting. We translated and adapted all instruments according to expert judgment, including of Islamic education scholars and educational psychologists, to ensure content validity and cultural appropriateness. The modifications were aimed at preserving the original construct meaning, while matching item wording to pesantren vocabulary and norms.

Independent Variables

Features of a Santri Personal Characteristics. Operationalized as personality attributes reflective of self-discipline and emotional control, assessed by the modified items of the Big Five Inventory (Oliver, 1999). Items were adapted linguistically and contextually to fit adolescent santri and educational settings.

Pesantren Conditions. Consist of students' perceptions of the institutional environment (spiritual climate, peer interaction, disciplinary structure). Items were adapted from the School Climate Scale (Zullig, Huebner, & Patton, 2011), with additional indicators reflecting Islamic boarding school characteristics.

Spiritual Factors. Operationalized as the frequency and depth of daily spiritual experiences (prayer, remembrance of God, and spiritual reflection). This construct was assessed through an adapted version of the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (Underwood & Teresi, 2002) adapted for Islamic use.

Social Support. Described as the perception that one receives emotional and instrumental support from peers, teachers (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988).

Relating to Dependent Variables

Santri Motivation. It is operationalized as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for learning and religious activities, which was measured as Academic Motivation Scale (Vallerand et al., 1992), adapted to the pesantren context.

Interest Experience. Definition: cognitive and emotional engagement, as in engagement in learning activities, as measured across an adapted version of the Student Engagement Instrument (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006).

Spiritual Meaning. Operationalized as a sense of purpose and meaning in life based on religious and spiritual experiences, assessed in modified items from the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger, 2013).

Bullying Behavior. Defined as the degree of involvement in bullying, i.e., perpetrator or victim, measured by the use of selected items from the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (Olweus, 1996), adapted to pesantren social dynamics.

Table 1. The List of Research Instruments

Variable	Construct Definition	Source Instrument	Indicators (Examples)	Scale
Santri Personal Characteristics	Individual traits reflecting self-discipline, emotional control, and behavioral regulation among santri	Big Five Inventory , adapted	Self-control, emotional regulation, responsibility	Likert 1–5
Pesantren Conditions	Students’ perceptions of the institutional environment, including discipline, peer relations, and spiritual climate	School Climate Scale (Zullig et al., 2011), adapted	Spiritual atmosphere, peer interaction, institutional discipline	Likert 1–5
Spiritual Factors	Frequency and depth of daily spiritual experiences in Islamic practices	Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (Underwood & Teresi, 2002), adapted	Prayer, remembrance of God, spiritual reflection	Likert 1–5

Social Support	Perceived emotional and instrumental support from peers, teachers, and family	MSPSS (Zimet et al., 1988), adapted	Peer support, teacher support, family support	Likert 1–5
Santri Motivation	Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation toward learning and religious activities	Academic Motivation Scale (Vallerand et al., 1992), adapted	Learning enthusiasm, persistence, goal orientation	Likert 1–5
Interest Experience	Cognitive and emotional engagement in learning activities within pesantren	Student Engagement Instrument (Appleton et al., 2006), adapted	Attention, enjoyment, engagement	Likert 1–5
Spiritual Meaning	Perceived sense of purpose and meaning in life derived from spiritual and religious experiences	Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2013), adapted	Life purpose, spiritual fulfillment	Likert 1–5
Bullying Behavior	Involvement in bullying behavior as perpetrator or victim in pesantren context	Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (Olweus, 1996), adapted	Verbal bullying, social exclusion, victimization	Likert 1–5
Control Variables	Demographic and background factors potentially influencing outcomes	Self-reported	Age, gender, years in pesantren	Nominal / Ratio

Ethical Consideration

This study adhered to ethical research standards. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants and guardians where applicable. Respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and no identifying information was collected.

Data Analysis

This work used Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (Hair et al., 2021) for data analysis. All hypotheses were run through bootstrapping techniques, and statistical significance was judged by T-values > 1.96 and p-values < 0.05.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

This comprehensive analytical approach allowed for the simultaneous assessment of multiple direct and indirect relationships within the proposed theoretical model, thereby enhancing the robustness of the findings (Rosadi, Mahmud, Arifin, & Nursobah, 2025). Results reveal that spirituality has a significant influence on students' academic engagement through the development of achievement motivation and resilience (Imron, Mawardi, & Şen, 2023). Table 2 shows the hypothesis testing results.

Table 2. Hypothesis Testing Results

Variables	T-statistic	P-value	Significance
Santri Characteristics → Motivation	0.110	0.456	Not Significant
Santri Characteristics → Interest Experience	1.526	0.064	Not Significant
Santri Characteristics → Spiritual Meaning	1.837	0.033	Significant
Pesantren Conditions → Motivation	0.306	0.070	Not Significant
Pesantren Conditions → Interest Experience	0.506	0.307	Not Significant

Pesantren Conditions → Spiritual Meaning	1.970	0.031	Significant
Spiritual Factors → Motivation	3.270	0.001	Significant
Spiritual Factors → Interest Experience	1.589	0.056	Not Significant
Spiritual Factors → Spiritual Meaning	3.515	0.000	Significant
Social Support → Motivation	4.103	0.000	Significant
Social Support → Interest Experience	2.132	0.017	Significant
Social Support → Spiritual Meaning	2.312	0.011	Significant
Motivation → Interest Experience	0.647	0.259	Not Significant
Motivation → Spiritual Meaning	5.742	0.000	Significant
Motivation → Bullying	0.642	0.322	Not Significant
Interest Experience → Bullying	3.908	0.000	Significant
Spiritual Meaning → interest Experience	1.317	0.094	Not Significant
Spiritual Meaning → Bullying	0.207	0.418	Not Significant

Santri Characteristics and Their Impact

The analysis found that santri characteristics, such as personal traits and backgrounds, did not significantly affect either motivation (T-stat = 0.110, $p = 0.456$) or interest experience (T-stat = 1.526, $p = 0.064$). This suggests that while these individual attributes are unique, they do not play a strong role in shaping the students' drive or engagement in learning activities. However, a significant relationship was found between santri characteristics and spiritual meaning (T-stat = 1.837, $p = 0.033$), implying that personal traits do contribute to the depth of spiritual growth. This indicates that the individual uniqueness of each santri has a meaningful impact on their spiritual development.

Influence of Pesantren Conditions

The environment of Islamic boarding schools, or pesantren, is a unique educational and religious setting where students (santri) learn while receiving their education. The results of this study show that the conditions in pesantren were not significantly related to student motivation (T-stat = 0.306, $p = 0.07$) or interest experience (T-stat = 0.506, $p = 0.307$). It is clear that although a boarding school culture is crucial for the academic success of students, it doesn't necessarily ignite interest in academics or learning experiences.

Nevertheless, the conditions in pesantren contributed positively to spiritual meaning (T-stat = 1.970, $p = 0.031$) and are a crucial factor in the spiritual development and teaching purposes found in students within this environment. This impact is due to several important aspects of life in pesantren. The pesantren students maintain a religious-oriented routine throughout the day with regular congregational prayer, Quranic recitation, and spiritual reflection (muhasabah), as well as tausiyah (spiritual talks led by religious teachers). By providing students with structured activities as an accompaniment, they are imbued with discipline while regularly receiving spiritual nourishment.

Secondly, the community life in pesantren reinforces Islamic ideas and communal worship, so that the santri members become very attached and strongly feel a sense of identity (Zaini & Hamidah, 2023). Not only do students learn religious values academically, but they also live them in daily life. Moreover, the charismatic and spiritually respected examples of leaders in their communities (e.g., ustaz, kyai, senior santri) act as role models for students who seek moral guidance and demonstrate practical approaches to the practice of spirituality. These

figures serve as mentors and guides, influencing students' spiritual pathways. The pesantren community has a top-down hierarchical structure, and its role in helping to regulate discipline and obedience ((Botchway & Boahen-Boaten, 2022); (Luhuringbudi, Liza, Yani, & Utami, 2024); (García-Vázquez, Durón-Ramos, Pérez-Rios, & Pérez-Ibarra, 2022)) furthers the normalization of bullying as they view behaviors based on seniority as part of their "custom" and not a legal or moral problem. Spiritual programs that are provided include dzikir sessions, majelis ilmu, and night prayers ((Alwi, Syukran, & Sari, 2024);(Borualogo & Casas, 2021); (Borualogo, González-Carrasco, & Casas, 2024)).

Overall, while pesantren does not generally play a role in academic motivation or engagement, it contributes significantly to the inner spiritual education, which is very important for the well-being of the santri as well, when this spiritual atmosphere is conducive. These results indicate that school administrators and teachers in pesantren are best advised to focus on the development of spiritual contexts, as the creation of spiritual habitats is critically important to an individual's sense of meaning, resilience, and moral clarity.

The Role of Spiritual Factors

Spiritual factors were found to have a strong influence on motivation (T-stat = 3.270, $p = 0.001$) and spiritual meaning (T-stat = 3.515, $p = 0.000$). This suggests that spirituality deeply enhances both the drive to learn and the depth of spiritual understanding among santri. However, no significant relationship was observed between spiritual factors and interest experience (T-stat = 1.589, $p = 0.056$), indicating that spirituality, while important, does not necessarily spark greater interest in academic activities.

Social Support and Its Effects

Social support had a significant positive influence on both motivation (T-stat = 4.103, $p = 0.000$) and interest experience (T-stat = 2.132, $p = 0.017$). This finding underscores the crucial role of a supportive community in fostering motivation and engagement among students. Moreover, social support significantly influenced spiritual meaning (T-stat = 2.312, $p = 0.011$), further emphasizing the role of community in nurturing spiritual growth. These results point to the importance of creating a strong, supportive network in the pesantren setting

Relationships Between Key Variables

While motivation was found to significantly affect spiritual meaning (T-stat = 5.742, $p = 0.000$), it did not significantly influence interest experience (T-stat = 0.647, $p = 0.259$) or bullying behavior (T-stat = 0.462, $p = 0.322$). This suggests that motivation plays a more critical role in shaping spiritual growth than in enhancing interest or preventing bullying. Interestingly, interest experience had a significant negative relationship with bullying (T-stat = 3.908, $p = 0.000$), indicating that students who are more engaged and interested in their studies are less likely to engage in bullying behavior. However, no significant relationship was found between spiritual meaning and bullying (T-stat = 0.207, $p = 0.418$), showing that deeper spiritual understanding does not necessarily deter bullying.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine the role of motivation and spiritual meaning in predicting bullying behavior among santri in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). The findings highlight complex interdependencies among individual, spiritual, and social factors, suggesting that the pathways through which motivation and spiritual meaning influence bullying behavior are neither linear nor direct.

Motivation and Its Indirect Role in Bullying Behavior

Whereas motivation has been theorized as a core determinant of engagement and appropriate behaviors according to conventional learning models (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020), this study established that motivation did not produce significant direct effects on interest experience. Self-Determination Theory states that by satisfying students' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985) motivation increases engagement. But the lack of a direct effect in this study indicates motivation alone may be insufficient for sustaining interest or regulation, such as bullying.

This result suggests that the role of motivation on bullying is likely that it operates in an indirect way, mediated through other psychological or situational processes. Instructional processes, curricular alignment and pedagogical methods might mediate how motivation manifests in daily activities and social behavior (Reeve, 2006). In rigid or controlling learning environments, motivated pupils may find it difficult to keep engagement so the protective function of their motivation against maladaptive behavior remains weak. Additionally, social views on learning and behavior emphasize their context in social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). Indeed, also highly motivated santri may be affected by peer dynamics that either affirm or contradict prosocial behavior. Indeed, it was argued that unsupportive peer climates may counteract positive behavioral consequences of motivation ((Ryan & Deci, 2000); (Wentzel, 1998)), which serves to explain why motivation did not directly predict interest experience or bullying behavior as in the present study.

Spiritual Meaning and Bullying Behavior

Spiritual aspects appear to play a major role in the development motivation and spiritual growth of santri students, which corroborates previous research pointing to a significance of spirituality in pesantren education ((Supratno et al., 2020); (F. K. Fitriyah, Saputra, Dellarosa, & Afridah, 2020); (L. Fitriyah & Wahyuni, 2020); (Galugu et al., 2025)). Yet, spiritual meaning was not positively related to bullying behavior, suggesting that spiritual development does not always manifest itself in prosocial social behaviors. Based on present findings, internal spiritual understanding is more likely to have an implication on the student's internal well-being than peer behavior. The absence of the explicit instruction of ethical reflection, empathy, and social responsibility practices within spiritual instruction will guarantee the development of spiritual meaning as a personal, rather than a behaviorally led, matter ((Hidayah, 2023); (Leicht-Scholten & Steuer-Dankert, 2020)). In pesantren environments, it emphasizes the importance of creating a connection between spiritual instruction and social actions in such a way that spiritual development is able to enhance positive peer interactions.

Interest Experience as a Protective Factor Against Bullying

Here, one of the significant results from this study is the negative correlation between interest experience and bullying behavior. Santri who reported higher levels of interest and engagement were less likely to engage in bullying (e.g., Alé-Silva & Muñoz, 2025; Wu et al., 2024). These results indicate that interest experience may serve as an important mediating mechanism through which motivation indirectly affects bullying behavior. Students who are engaged are more likely to experience self-regulation, emotional investments and prosocial proclivities, which can effectively prevent aggressive tendencies. Hence, motivation is not, by itself, a reliable predictor of bullying behavior, but can have its impact when it is combined with an inculcation of interest in knowledge and spiritual activity.

Contextual and Environmental Considerations

Strangely, santri characteristics and pesantren conditions have not significantly affected motivation or interest experience. This is in contrast to past research which highlighted the importance of learning environments in student motivation (Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009). An interpretable possible reason for this could be seen as the presence of intangible aspects like spiritual bonding and social support, being more important than the structural or demographic factors in pesantren circumstances. There is also a critical role in curriculum relevance. Expectancy-value theory suggests that sustained engagement involves knowledge that relates to students' values and perceived relevance (Eccles & Wigfield, 2023). Curricula that do not meaningfully integrate spiritual values with students' lived experiences, however, in pesantren, could disrupt the motivational pathway toward engagement and thus weaken its protective effect against bullying ((Kusuma Nugroho & Hartini, 2022); (Nasution & Muchtar, 2024)).

Implications and Future Directions

Together, these results highlight the complex and sometimes indirect role that motivation and spiritual meaning play in bullying behavior. Although both constructs are essential elements in the development of santri, their effect on bullying appears to be mediated by students' interest experience and shaped by social and instructional contexts. Future studies should use mixed-methods and longitudinal designs to investigate mediating and moderating effects, including interest experience, peer norms, and ethical-spiritual instruction. Moreover, further investigation into how different forms of spiritual understanding relate to empathy, self-regulation, and mental health may ultimately lead to a more detailed understanding of how spirituality might facilitate reducing bullying behavior in pesantren ((F. K. Fitriyah et al., 2021); (Rozikan & Adisti, 2024); (Izzati et al., 2026); (Setiyowati, Pali, Wiyono, & Triyono, 2019)).

Recommendation: A New Theoretical Model

Based on these findings, we propose a new theoretical framework to explain bullying behavior among students in Islamic boarding schools: the MSI-B Integrative Model. Figure 1 illustrates that this model emphasizes that (1) motivation and spiritual meaning do not directly reduce bullying, but (2) their protective impact depends on whether they generate sustained experiences

of interest and translate into ethical-social practices, influenced by peer norms and the learning climate.

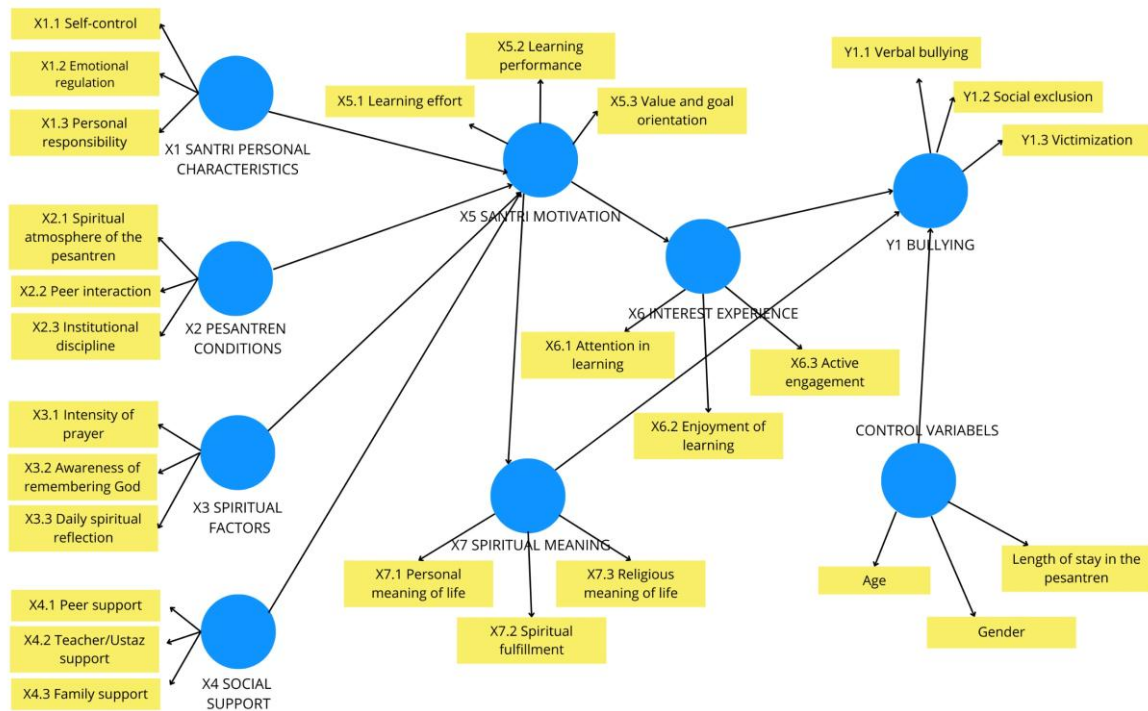


Figure 1. The Motivation–Spiritual Meaning–Interest Experience–Bullying (MSI-B) Integrative Model

Core propositions of the MSI-B model:

Motivation → Interest Experience (Indirect/Conditional Pathway)
 Motivation supports engagement only when autonomy-supportive pedagogy, meaningful learning, and peer reinforcement are present ((Deci & Ryan, 1985);(Ryan & Deci, 2000); (Reeve, 2006); (Skinner et al., 2009)).

Spiritual Meaning → Ethical-Social Translation (Moderated Pathway)
 Spiritual meaning predicts prosocial behavior only when spiritual learning includes explicit ethical reflection, empathy training, and social responsibility practice, reducing moral disengagement tendencies ((Bandura, 1999); (Park, 2010); (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Knafo-Noam, 2015); (Hidayah, 2023)).

Interest Experience → Lower Bullying Behavior (Direct Protective Pathway)
 Interest experience strengthens self-regulation, positive affect, and school connectedness, functioning as a protective factor against bullying ((Hidi & Renninger, 2006); (Swearer & Hymel, 2015); (Wang, Ge, & Gao, 2024)).

Peer Norms and Pesantren Climate as Key Moderators
 Bullying is highly dependent on group processes, bystander reinforcement, and social status dynamics; thus peer norms can strengthen or weaken the protective effects of motivation and spirituality ((Salmivalli, 2010); (Swearer & Espelage, 2004)).

Curriculum Relevance as a Mechanism of Value Internalization

When values are perceived as relevant and meaningful, students internalize them more strongly, supporting engagement and prosocial enactment ((Eccles & Wigfield, 2023); (Frankl, 1963)).

The MSI-B model integrates motivational theory (SDT), meaning-making theory, interest development, and bullying socio-ecological perspectives into a single pathway model specific to *pesantren*. Unlike traditional frameworks that assume spirituality and motivation directly improve behavior, MSI-B predicts that their effects are mediated by interest experience and moderated by ethical-spiritual translation and peer norms.

CONCLUSION

Finally, this study is to deepen the existing knowledge on the association between motivation and spiritual meaning in relation to bullying behavior among santri in *pesantren*. The results suggest that although spiritual and social factors are significant in promoting motivation and spiritual development, neither motivation nor spiritual meaning acts as direct predictors of bullying behavior. Thus, the mechanisms through which these effects manifest in bullying are indirect and more nuanced than might have been considered. Results show that student engagement, manifested by interest experience, appears to have a more immediate effect on the reduction of bullying behavior, thus motivation or spirituality could bring positive social effects provided they are translated into engaging learning experiences. It follows that initiatives to reduce bullying among learners in *pesantren* cannot solely depend upon strengthening motivation or spiritual understanding, but rather must be informed by active engagement and supportive peer interactions. Although this study has a cross-sectional design to assess potential causes, it is limited in making causal inferences, and it relied on self-reported data, which may be prone to response bias. Longitudinal and/or mixed-method studies can help to elucidate causal relationships and contextual dynamics that underlie the indirect effects of motivation and spiritual meaning on bullying behavior. Moreover, studying the impact of teaching strategies, curriculum design, and peer dynamics will yield important information on the construction of more effective interventions to improve engagement and reduce bullying in *pesantren* settings.

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