

Preserving Pesantren Identity through Institutional Transformation: Building Competitiveness in Salaf-Based Islamic Education

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Abstract

Keywords:

Islamic educational transformation; pesantren; institutional competitiveness.

The transformation of Islamic educational institutions is often associated with modernization, which can weaken the traditional identity of pesantren. However, limited studies have examined how salaf-based Islamic schools maintain their religious identity while simultaneously strengthening institutional competitiveness. This study aims to analyze the transformation strategy of Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin, Bojonegoro, in preserving pesantren traditions and enhancing institutional competitiveness. This study employed a qualitative case study approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the principal, pesantren caregivers, teachers, students, parents, and alumni, complemented by participatory observations and document analysis. The data were analyzed using an interactive model consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing, while credibility was ensured through source and technique triangulation. The findings reveal two major strategies. First, institutional transformation is implemented through Selective Institutional Transformation, whereby every educational innovation is filtered according to pesantren values before adoption, enabling curriculum integration without compromising the salaf educational tradition. Second, institutional competitiveness is strengthened through Integrated Educational Management, which combines responsive educational services, collaborative stakeholder communication, humanistic learning, life-skill development, and community trust. These strategies demonstrate that pesantren identity functions as a strategic organizational resource rather than an obstacle to educational innovation. This study contributes a conceptual model explaining that sustainable institutional transformation in Islamic education can be achieved by integrating modernization with the philosophical values of pesantren. Future studies are recommended to examine this model across diverse Islamic educational institutions using comparative and mixed-method approaches.

Abstrak

Kata kunci:

transformasi pendidikan Islam; pesantren; daya saing lembaga.

Transformasi lembaga pendidikan Islam sering dikaitkan dengan modernisasi yang berpotensi melemahkan identitas tradisional pesantren. Namun, kajian mengenai bagaimana madrasah berbasis pesantren salaf mampu mempertahankan nilai-nilai tradisional sekaligus meningkatkan daya saing kelembagaan masih relatif terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis strategi transformasi Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin Bojonegoro dalam mempertahankan tradisi pesantren dan meningkatkan daya saing lembaga. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara mendalam dengan kepala madrasah, pengasuh pesantren, guru, siswa, orang tua, dan alumni, yang dipadukan dengan observasi partisipatif serta analisis dokumen. Analisis data dilakukan menggunakan model interaktif melalui kondensasi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan dengan uji keabsahan melalui triangulasi sumber dan teknik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan dua strategi utama. Pertama, transformasi kelembagaan dilakukan melalui Transformasi Kelembagaan Selektif, yaitu setiap inovasi pendidikan diseleksi berdasarkan nilai-nilai pesantren sebelum diimplementasikan, sehingga integrasi kurikulum dapat berlangsung

tanpa menghilangkan karakter pendidikan salaf. Kedua, daya saing lembaga dibangun melalui Manajemen Pendidikan Terpadu yang mengintegrasikan pelayanan pendidikan yang responsif, komunikasi kolaboratif dengan pemangku kepentingan, pembelajaran humanis, pengembangan kecakapan hidup, serta kepercayaan masyarakat. Penelitian ini menghasilkan model konseptual yang menjelaskan bahwa transformasi lembaga pendidikan Islam yang berkelanjutan dapat diwujudkan melalui integrasi inovasi pendidikan dengan nilai-nilai filosofis pesantren.

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Introduction

Islamic educational institutions worldwide are currently confronted with an increasingly complex challenge of responding to educational modernization while preserving their institutional identity and cultural heritage (Halimah et al., 2024; Hasan & Azizah, 2020; Sunardi et al., 2025). The rapid development of digital technology, globalization, educational accountability, and increasing public expectations have encouraged schools and religious educational institutions to continuously improve educational quality, organizational governance, and institutional competitiveness. At the same time, institutions rooted in long-established religious traditions face a critical dilemma: how to embrace innovation without eroding the cultural and spiritual values that constitute their institutional identity. This issue has become particularly significant within Islamic education, where educational reform is expected not only to improve organizational performance but also to preserve religious authenticity, moral values, and intellectual traditions that distinguish Islamic educational institutions from other educational organizations (Mundzir, 2025; Tobroni et al., 2024).

Within the Indonesian educational landscape, this challenge is especially relevant to pesantren-based institutions. As one of the oldest Islamic educational systems in Southeast Asia, pesantren have historically functioned as centers for religious learning, character formation, and community empowerment. Their educational tradition is characterized by the transmission of classical Islamic scholarship (turāth), intensive teacher–student relationships, and distinctive learning methods such as sorogan and bandongan (Hasan et al., 2025; Sunardi et al., 2024). These traditions have contributed significantly to preserving Islamic intellectual heritage while shaping students' moral and spiritual development. However, the

contemporary educational environment requires pesantren to respond proactively to curriculum reform, technological advancement, accreditation systems, educational quality assurance, and increasing competition with modern schools and madrasahs. Consequently, many pesantren have entered a period of institutional transformation aimed at maintaining educational relevance without abandoning their traditional identity.

Recent studies indicate that institutional transformation has become a central issue in Islamic educational management. Previous research demonstrates that pesantren increasingly adopt modern management practices, digital administrative systems, curriculum integration, and quality assurance mechanisms to strengthen institutional effectiveness and competitiveness (Abidin et al., 2025; Sofi et al., 2025). Other scholars emphasize that educational transformation should not merely focus on technological adoption but also involve organizational learning, adaptive leadership, and strategic management capable of responding to rapidly changing educational environments (Rofiq et al., 2025; Xiaoying & Yusuf, 2026). These studies collectively suggest that sustainable institutional development depends upon an organization's capacity to balance innovation with the preservation of its core educational values.

Despite these advances, the existing literature remains dominated by discussions of curriculum integration, digitalization, educational leadership, and modernization strategies in Islamic educational institutions. Comparatively fewer studies have investigated how salaf-based Islamic schools strategically negotiate the relationship between institutional transformation and the preservation of traditional pesantren identity. Most previous research implicitly assumes that modernization requires substantial organizational change, whereas limited attention has been given to institutions that deliberately preserve classical educational traditions while simultaneously strengthening institutional competitiveness. As a result, the dynamic interaction between tradition preservation, organizational adaptation, and competitive development remains insufficiently explored, particularly within pesantren-based madrasahs operating under contemporary educational demands.

This research gap is particularly evident at Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin, an Islamic senior secondary school within the Salaf-based Pondok Pesantren Al-Bahroin in Bojonegoro. Unlike many educational institutions that prioritize modernization primarily through curriculum expansion or technological innovation, Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin demonstrates a distinctive approach by integrating the national curriculum with classical Islamic scholarship (*kitab kuning*), maintaining traditional learning methods such as *sorogan* and *bandongan*, strengthening students' moral formation, and gradually adopting modern educational management practices. Rather than replacing tradition, institutional transformation is implemented selectively to ensure that educational innovation reinforces, rather than weakens, the pesantren's cultural identity. This institutional characteristic offers a

valuable context for understanding how educational transformation can coexist with the preservation of long-established religious traditions.

The phenomenon observed at Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin challenges the conventional assumption that educational modernization inevitably reduces institutional traditionalism. Instead, the institution illustrates that adaptive transformation may function as a mechanism for strengthening organizational resilience by selectively integrating innovation into an established cultural system. This perspective aligns with contemporary organizational theory, which views institutional sustainability as the capacity to maintain organizational identity while continuously adapting to environmental change. Accordingly, institutional competitiveness should not be interpreted solely through measurable organizational performance but also through the institution's ability to preserve its distinctive educational philosophy, maintain public trust, and respond strategically to changing societal expectations.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to analyze the transformation strategies implemented by Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin in preserving pesantren traditions while strengthening institutional competitiveness. Specifically, the study investigates transformation strategies, institutional competitiveness, supporting and inhibiting factors, and the impacts of transformation on institutional sustainability. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research seeks to develop a comprehensive understanding of how a salaf-based Islamic educational institution strategically balances organizational adaptation with the preservation of its educational identity.

This study contributes to the growing literature on Islamic educational transformation by proposing the concept of Tradition-Preserving Institutional Transformation, which conceptualizes institutional transformation not as a process of replacing traditional educational values with modern organizational practices, but as a strategic integration of innovation and tradition. The findings are expected to enrich theoretical discussions on educational transformation within faith-based institutions while providing practical insights for pesantren, madrasahs, and policymakers seeking to strengthen institutional competitiveness without compromising the cultural and religious identity that constitutes the foundation of Islamic education.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate the transformation strategies implemented by Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin in preserving pesantren traditions while strengthening institutional competitiveness (Yin, 2018). A qualitative approach was selected because the study sought to understand the processes, meanings, and organizational dynamics underlying institutional transformation within a natural educational setting rather than measuring change through quantitative indicators. The case study design enabled an

in-depth exploration of how educational leaders interpreted institutional transformation, formulated strategic decisions, maintained pesantren values, and responded to contemporary educational challenges while preserving the complexity of organizational interactions within a single institutional context (Creswell, 2014). The research was conducted at Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin, located within Pondok Pesantren Al-Bahroin, Bojonegoro, East Java, Indonesia. The institution was purposively selected because it represents a salaf-based Islamic senior secondary school that has continuously implemented institutional transformation while preserving the traditions of pesantren education. The madrasah integrates the national curriculum with classical Islamic learning (*kitab kuning*), maintains traditional instructional methods such as *sorogan* and *bandongan*, and simultaneously develops educational innovations to enhance institutional competitiveness, making it an appropriate case for examining how organizational transformation can coexist with the preservation of institutional identity.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in institutional transformation and educational management. The primary participant was the head of the madrasah as the principal decision-maker responsible for institutional development, while supporting participants included vice principals, teachers, pesantren administrators, foundation representatives, students, alumni, and parents who possessed relevant knowledge regarding institutional transformation, educational culture, and school development. The inclusion of participants from multiple organizational levels enabled comprehensive understanding of transformation strategies while strengthening data triangulation. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis. Interviews explored participants' experiences related to transformation strategies, leadership practices, preservation of pesantren traditions, educational innovation, competitiveness, and organizational challenges. Observations focused on school activities, learning processes, institutional culture, and interactions among educational stakeholders in their natural settings. Documentary evidence—including institutional profiles, strategic plans, curriculum documents, organizational regulations, accreditation reports, meeting records, school achievement documents, and archival materials was examined to complement and verify information obtained from interviews and observations, thereby enhancing methodological triangulation and the credibility of the empirical findings (Sugiyono, 2018).

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (Miles et al., 2019), comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection, allowing emerging findings to guide subsequent fieldwork. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary evidence were coded systematically

to identify themes related to institutional transformation, preservation of pesantren traditions, institutional competitiveness, supporting and inhibiting factors, and organizational sustainability. Similar codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories before being synthesized into an integrated interpretation of transformation strategies, while continuous comparison across multiple data sources ensured analytical consistency and strengthened the validity of the findings. The trustworthiness of the study was established using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement, triangulation, and member checking; transferability was supported by rich contextual descriptions; dependability was maintained through systematic documentation of research procedures; and confirmability was ensured through an audit trail linking empirical evidence with the study's conclusions. Ethical principles were observed throughout the research process by obtaining formal permission from the madrasah and pesantren authorities, securing informed consent from all participants, protecting participant anonymity through coding procedures, and storing all research data securely for academic purposes in accordance with accepted qualitative research ethics (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Results And Discussion

Results

Preserving Institutional Identity through Selective Educational Transformation

The findings reveal that institutional transformation at Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin was not designed to replace the traditional pesantren education system with a modern educational model. Instead, transformation was implemented selectively to strengthen the institution's ability to respond to contemporary educational demands while maintaining the philosophical values and educational identity of the salaf pesantren. Data triangulation obtained from interviews, observations, and institutional documents consistently demonstrated that preserving pesantren traditions remained the primary orientation of every strategic decision undertaken by the institution.

Interviews with the caregiver (Pengasuh) of Pondok Pesantren Al-Bahroin indicated that the establishment and development of the madrasah should not diminish the pesantren's educational identity. According to him, modernization should only be accepted when it contributes positively to the sustainability of pesantren education without altering its fundamental values. During the interview, he emphasized:

"We do not reject the development of the times, but the pesantren must maintain its own identity. Good traditions should always be preserved, while new practices are only adopted if they truly provide benefits." (Interview with the Caregiver of Pondok Pesantren Al-Bahroin, December 7, 2025).

This statement illustrates that institutional transformation is grounded in the Islamic educational principle of preserving beneficial traditions while embracing useful innovations. Modernization is therefore perceived not as institutional replacement but as value-based adaptation.

The interview findings were confirmed through direct field observations. Daily educational activities remained centered on traditional pesantren practices, including congregational prayers, Qur'anic recitation, sorogan, bandongan, madrasah diniyah, and continuous character supervision. Students participated in these activities from early morning until late evening under the guidance of pesantren supervisors, indicating that religious formation continued to function as the core educational process despite the existence of formal schooling.

The observational findings were further strengthened by documentary evidence. Institutional documents, including students' daily schedules, pesantren curriculum, and academic guidelines, demonstrated that religious education remained the foundation of the educational system. Formal education operated alongside pesantren education rather than replacing it. These documents confirmed that curriculum development and institutional policies consistently prioritized the preservation of pesantren traditions while simultaneously fulfilling national educational requirements.

Another important finding concerns the integration between formal education and pesantren learning. Interviews with the principal revealed that although the madrasah follows the curriculum mandated by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, its implementation is intentionally adjusted to accommodate the daily activities of boarding students. The principal explained:

"The madrasah curriculum follows the regulations of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, but its implementation is adjusted to the conditions of students living in the pesantren so that it does not conflict with pesantren activities." (Interview with the Principal of Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin, December 17, 2025).

This interview was corroborated by classroom observations, which showed that instructional schedules were deliberately synchronized with religious learning activities. Formal classes never overlapped with Qur'anic studies, kitab kuning learning sessions, congregational prayers, or other compulsory boarding activities. Instead, both educational systems operated harmoniously within a unified institutional framework.

Documentary analysis further confirmed this integration. The academic calendar, institutional timetable, and curriculum planning documents clearly demonstrated that formal learning activities had been systematically coordinated with the pesantren educational schedule. Consequently, students were able to complete both the national curriculum and comprehensive religious education without compromising either educational objective.

Teachers also confirmed that educational integration influenced classroom pedagogy. Considering the intensive learning responsibilities experienced by boarding students, teachers intentionally simplified instructional strategies by focusing on essential competencies rather than assigning excessive academic workloads. One teacher explained:

"The students here have very busy daily activities. Therefore, during classroom learning we focus only on the essential materials, and we intentionally avoid giving too many assignments." (Interview with a Teacher of Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin, December 17, 2025).

This statement was verified through classroom observations. Teachers emphasized conceptual understanding, interactive discussions, and efficient learning strategies while minimizing unnecessary assignments that could increase students' physical and psychological burdens. Lesson plans and instructional documents similarly reflected adaptive learning strategies specifically designed for boarding school students.

Interviews also revealed that educational integration extended beyond curriculum implementation into institutional collaboration. Teachers frequently functioned as mediators connecting parents, school administrators, and pesantren supervisors whenever students encountered academic or behavioral difficulties. One teacher explained:

"Sometimes parents first discuss their concerns with the homeroom teacher. We then coordinate with the pesantren so that the problem can be solved together." (Interview with a Teacher of Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin, December 17, 2025).

Observations confirmed that such coordination occurred routinely, particularly in monitoring students' discipline, learning progress, and adaptation to boarding life. Documentary records of parent meetings and coordination reports further demonstrated that communication among teachers, parents, and pesantren administrators was institutionalized as part of the school's educational management system.

Collectively, the triangulation of interview data, field observations, and institutional documentation demonstrates that Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin practices a selective educational transformation model. Educational innovation is adopted only after careful consideration of its compatibility with pesantren values, allowing the institution to remain academically responsive while preserving its religious identity. Rather than creating tension between tradition and modernization, the institution integrates both dimensions into a coherent educational system in which formal education functions as an extension of pesantren education rather than its substitute. This finding indicates that institutional transformation within salaf-based Islamic education can successfully enhance educational

adaptability without sacrificing the philosophical foundations that constitute the institution's distinctive identity.

Building Institutional Competitiveness through Integrated Educational Management

The second major finding demonstrates that institutional competitiveness at Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin is not primarily constructed through aggressive institutional expansion or promotional strategies, but through integrated educational management that strengthens educational quality, stakeholder trust, and holistic student development. The findings consistently indicate that competitiveness is developed by combining responsive educational services, effective communication, humanistic pedagogy, character formation, life-skill education, and community engagement. The triangulation of interview data, field observations, and documentary evidence confirms that these strategies collectively enhance the institution's reputation while preserving its pesantren identity.

One of the most significant findings concerns the institution's commitment to building parents' trust through responsive educational services. Interviews with the principal revealed that maintaining parents' confidence is regarded as a strategic priority because the sustainability of a private Islamic educational institution largely depends on public trust. Educational services therefore extend beyond classroom instruction to include continuous communication, transparency, and responsiveness toward parents' concerns regarding their children's academic progress, discipline, and personal development.

The principal explained:

"The sustainability of our madrasah depends greatly on parents' trust. Therefore, we always try to maintain open communication so that every concern regarding students can be addressed properly." (Interview with the Principal of Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin, December 17, 2025).

This interview finding was supported by field observations showing that parents maintained regular communication with homeroom teachers rather than contacting the pesantren directly. Homeroom teachers functioned as the first point of contact whenever parents wished to discuss academic achievement, discipline, or students' adjustment to boarding life. Such communication created a collaborative educational environment in which parents felt actively involved in their children's education.

Documentary evidence further strengthened this finding. Records of parent meetings, communication reports, and homeroom teacher documentation indicated that interaction with parents occurred continuously throughout the academic year rather than only during report card distribution. These institutional documents demonstrate that maintaining educational partnerships with parents has become an integral component of the madrasah's quality assurance system.

The findings also reveal that the strategic role of homeroom teachers contributes substantially to institutional competitiveness. Rather than performing merely administrative duties, homeroom teachers act as mediators who coordinate communication among parents, classroom teachers, and pesantren administrators. This integrated communication system enables educational issues to be resolved collaboratively while minimizing misunderstanding among stakeholders.

The principal explained:

"Parents usually communicate their questions or concerns to the homeroom teacher first. The homeroom teacher then coordinates with the pesantren so that problems can be handled together." (Interview with the Principal of Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin, December 17, 2025).

Observations confirmed that this communication mechanism functioned effectively in daily practice. Homeroom teachers routinely monitored students' attendance, learning progress, discipline, and emotional adjustment while simultaneously maintaining regular contact with parents. Whenever behavioral or academic issues emerged, coordination meetings involving teachers and pesantren supervisors were immediately conducted to determine appropriate interventions.

Institutional documents, including coordination records and parent communication logs, further verified that such collaborative communication had become a standardized institutional procedure. Consequently, educational management was characterized by shared responsibility among the school, pesantren, and families rather than isolated institutional decision-making.

Another important finding concerns the implementation of humanistic learning as a strategy for strengthening academic competitiveness. Interviews with teachers indicate that instructional practices intentionally accommodate the unique characteristics of boarding students, who participate in intensive religious activities in addition to formal education. Teachers recognized that excessive academic demands could reduce learning effectiveness because students already experienced considerable physical and cognitive workloads within the pesantren environment.

One teacher explained:

"The students are already tired after completing their pesantren activities. Therefore, classroom learning should not create additional pressure so that they can remain focused and enjoy learning." (Interview with a Teacher of Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin, December 17, 2025).

Classroom observations consistently supported this statement. Teachers emphasized conceptual understanding, active classroom interaction, and efficient learning rather than assigning excessive homework or conducting highly rigid instruction. Learning activities were organized to maximize students' engagement while respecting the physical demands associated with boarding school life. This

adaptive pedagogical approach enabled students to achieve academic competencies without compromising their participation in pesantren activities.

Document analysis, including lesson plans and instructional schedules, confirmed that classroom instruction had been systematically adjusted to accommodate the daily rhythm of boarding students. These documents indicate that instructional adaptation represents an institutional policy rather than an individual initiative by teachers.

Institutional competitiveness is further strengthened through the preservation of pesantren identity as a distinctive organizational advantage. Interviews with the pesantren caregiver demonstrate that the integration of the madrasah within the boarding school enables continuous character formation beyond classroom instruction. Educational supervision extends throughout students' daily activities, creating an educational environment in which academic learning, religious practice, discipline, and moral development occur simultaneously.

The caregiver explained:

"When the madrasah is integrated with the pesantren, students are guided not only during classroom learning. From the moment they wake up until they go to sleep, educational supervision continues." (Interview with the Caregiver of Pondok Pesantren Al-Bahroin, December 7, 2025).

Field observations verified this statement. Teachers, dormitory supervisors, and pesantren administrators jointly supervised students' religious activities, discipline, interpersonal relationships, and daily routines. Unlike conventional schools where educational supervision ends after school hours, the integrated boarding system provided continuous educational guidance throughout the day.

Institutional documents describing student supervision systems and boarding regulations further confirmed that character education was systematically embedded within everyday institutional life. Consequently, parents perceived the integrated pesantren environment as offering stronger educational protection and moral development than ordinary formal schools.

Another distinctive strategy involves the development of students' life skills as an alternative pathway for educational success. Interviews with the pesantren caregiver revealed that not every student demonstrates outstanding academic ability; therefore, the institution intentionally provides various practical learning opportunities according to individual interests and talents.

He stated:

"Not every student is successful in classroom learning. Some are stronger in practical skills. Therefore, the pesantren must provide opportunities so that every student can develop according to his or her own potential." (Interview with the Caregiver of Pondok Pesantren Al-Bahroin, December 7, 2025).

The principal further explained that students participate in information technology teams, sound system management, operational services, entrepreneurship, and various vocational activities designed to prepare them for life after graduation. Some students even receive external practical training to strengthen their professional competencies before completing their education.

Teachers reinforced this finding by describing how students who demonstrated limited academic achievement frequently excelled after being entrusted with responsibilities in technical or entrepreneurial activities.

One teacher stated:

"Some students who are less active in classroom learning become highly responsible when they are assigned to the IT team or sound system unit." (Interview with a Teacher of Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin, December 17, 2025).

These interview findings were corroborated through field observations showing students actively participating in IT services, audio equipment management, pesantren operational activities, and small-scale entrepreneurship. Documentary evidence also recorded student participation in vocational training and institutional service units, demonstrating that life-skill education has become an integral component of the madrasah's educational strategy.

Overall, the triangulation of interviews, observations, and documentary evidence demonstrates that institutional competitiveness at Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin is constructed through an integrated educational management system that combines responsive educational services, collaborative stakeholder communication, humanistic pedagogy, continuous character formation, and life-skill development. Rather than pursuing competitiveness through conventional market-oriented strategies, the institution enhances its public reputation by strengthening educational quality while preserving the distinctive values of salaf-based Islamic education. This integrated management model has enabled the madrasah to maintain community trust and institutional sustainability amid increasing competition among Islamic educational institutions.

Discussion

Preserving Institutional Identity through Selective Educational Transformation

The findings demonstrate that institutional transformation at Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin cannot be adequately understood through the conventional modernization paradigm, which frequently assumes that educational transformation requires replacing traditional educational systems with contemporary organizational practices. Instead, this study reveals that transformation occurs through a process of selective institutional adaptation, whereby every educational innovation is evaluated according to the philosophical values and cultural identity of the pesantren before being implemented. Consequently, modernization is not perceived as institutional

substitution but as value-oriented adaptation that strengthens rather than weakens the authenticity of pesantren education.

This finding extends the institutional perspective proposed by Genus, (2016), who argues that organizational sustainability depends on maintaining legitimacy through the interaction of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive institutions. In the context of Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin, institutional legitimacy is maintained because educational innovation remains embedded within the normative structure of pesantren traditions. The integration of formal education, therefore, does not challenge institutional legitimacy but reinforces it by demonstrating that educational adaptation can occur without disrupting long-established religious values. This explains why modernization within the institution has been accepted by both internal stakeholders and the surrounding community despite significant organizational changes.

The findings also support Fuad et al., (2022) theory of educational change, which argues that successful educational transformation depends not merely on introducing innovation but on ensuring that innovation becomes meaningful within the institutional culture. At Al-Bahroin, curriculum integration, adaptive instructional management, and flexible scheduling were not implemented simply to comply with national educational regulations. Rather, these innovations were deliberately redesigned to remain compatible with pesantren learning traditions, including madrasah diniyah, kitab kuning studies, sorogan, and bandongan. Such adaptation illustrates that organizational change becomes sustainable only when innovation is culturally internalized instead of externally imposed.

From the perspective of organizational identity theory, the present findings further strengthen the argument proposed by Whetten, (2006) that organizational identity functions as the enduring core distinguishing one institution from another. The identity of Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin is not constructed through physical facilities or administrative structures but through its integration with the salaf pesantren tradition. Consequently, institutional transformation does not redefine organizational identity; instead, it serves to reinforce and reproduce that identity under changing educational circumstances (Kodeih & Greenwood, 2014). This finding challenges assumptions suggesting that modernization inevitably leads to organizational homogenization. Instead, the present study demonstrates that strong institutional identity may actually increase organizational adaptability because it provides a stable normative framework for evaluating external change.

Several previous studies have reported that pesantren modernization generally involves curriculum integration, educational management reform, technological adoption, and institutional governance improvement. However, many of these studies conceptualize modernization primarily as an organizational response to globalization and national educational reforms. Consequently, traditional educational practices are

often discussed as cultural heritage that must be adjusted to modern institutional demands. The present findings differ substantially from this perspective. Rather than positioning tradition as an object requiring modernization, Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin treats tradition as the principal criterion governing modernization itself. Every institutional innovation is accepted only after passing through a process of normative evaluation grounded in pesantren values.

The curriculum integration identified in this study illustrates this distinctive transformation process (Hasan & Sintasari, 2025). Previous literature frequently describes curriculum integration as a technical strategy for combining religious and general education. By contrast, the findings indicate that curriculum integration at Al-Bahroin represents a cultural negotiation between formal educational requirements and pesantren educational philosophy. Academic schedules, instructional methods, learning evaluation, and classroom management are continuously adjusted to maintain harmony with boarding school activities rather than requiring pesantren traditions to accommodate formal education. This reciprocal adaptation represents an important contribution to current discussions concerning curriculum integration within Islamic education.

Another important implication concerns the educational philosophy underlying institutional transformation. Modern educational reforms frequently prioritize measurable academic outcomes, institutional efficiency, and managerial performance indicators (Kim, 2018). In contrast, the transformation observed in this study continues to prioritize character formation, religious commitment, and moral development as the primary educational objectives. Academic excellence is regarded as complementary rather than dominant. Such findings reinforce contemporary arguments within Islamic educational philosophy that educational quality should be evaluated through holistic human development instead of purely academic achievement.

The triangulated findings obtained from interviews, observations, and institutional documents further indicate that institutional transformation has strengthened rather than weakened pesantren traditions. Daily religious activities remain the organizational core, while formal education functions as an integrated supporting system. This finding contradicts concerns frequently expressed within modernization literature suggesting that institutional expansion inevitably reduces the authenticity of traditional Islamic education. Instead, the present study demonstrates that organizational adaptation may actually contribute to preserving educational traditions by enabling pesantren institutions to respond effectively to changing societal expectations without abandoning their philosophical foundations (Jasminto & Rofi'ah, 2025; Rofiqi et al., 2026).

The principal theoretical contribution of this study lies in the formulation of Selective Institutional Transformation. Unlike existing transformation models

emphasizing adaptation to external pressures, this concept proposes that educational innovation should first pass through a value-filtering mechanism rooted in institutional philosophy before organizational adoption occurs. Under this model, institutional identity functions as the principal criterion governing educational change rather than as an obstacle limiting modernization. Consequently, innovation becomes an instrument for preserving institutional authenticity instead of replacing it.

This conceptual contribution expands current discussions concerning institutional transformation within Islamic education by demonstrating that tradition and modernization should not be understood as contradictory concepts. Rather, the sustainability of Islamic educational institutions depends upon their capacity to integrate innovation selectively while preserving the cultural, religious, and philosophical foundations that define their institutional identity. Therefore, institutional competitiveness is achieved not through abandoning tradition but through strengthening tradition as the normative basis of organizational transformation.

Building Institutional Competitiveness through Integrated Educational Management

The second major finding demonstrates that institutional competitiveness at Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin is constructed through an integrated educational management system that combines responsive educational services, stakeholder collaboration, humanistic pedagogy, life-skill development, and community engagement. Unlike the dominant perspective in educational management literature, which frequently associates competitiveness with measurable academic performance, infrastructure improvement, or institutional marketing, the present study reveals that the competitiveness of a salaf-based Islamic educational institution is fundamentally rooted in the integration of educational quality and community trust. In this context, institutional identity itself becomes the institution's primary competitive advantage.

This finding supports the Resource-Based View (RBV) proposed by Barney (1991), which argues that sustainable organizational competitiveness originates from valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources (Madhani, 2010). Most educational institutions interpret these strategic resources as financial capital, technological infrastructure, or human resources. However, the findings of this study demonstrate that pesantren-based educational institutions possess different strategic assets. The integration of religious traditions, continuous character formation, twenty-four-hour educational supervision, and strong community trust constitute unique organizational resources that cannot be easily replicated by conventional schools. Consequently, institutional competitiveness is generated not from material resources alone but from intangible organizational capabilities deeply embedded within pesantren culture.

The findings further reinforce Freeman's (1984) Stakeholder Theory, which emphasizes that organizational sustainability depends on maintaining productive relationships with all stakeholders (Mirchandani & Ikerd, 2008). At Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin, stakeholder engagement extends beyond conventional parent-school communication. Instead, parents, teachers, pesantren administrators, and institutional leaders function as collaborative educational partners responsible for students' holistic development. The strategic role of homeroom teachers as mediators illustrates this collaborative governance model. Rather than serving merely administrative functions, homeroom teachers coordinate academic monitoring, behavioral supervision, communication with parents, and collaboration with pesantren administrators. This multidirectional communication system enhances institutional transparency while strengthening parents' confidence in the educational process.

An equally significant finding concerns the implementation of humanistic learning strategies. Previous studies generally associate educational competitiveness with increasing academic rigor, expanding learning hours, or maximizing students' academic achievement. In contrast, this study demonstrates that educational competitiveness may also emerge through pedagogical flexibility that accommodates students' psychological and physical conditions. Teachers intentionally simplified instructional delivery, emphasized conceptual understanding, and reduced unnecessary academic workloads because students simultaneously participated in intensive pesantren activities. Such instructional adaptation reflects a learner-centered educational philosophy rather than a performance-oriented instructional model.

This finding corresponds with Rogers' (1969) humanistic learning theory, which argues that meaningful learning occurs when educational environments respect learners' emotional and psychological needs (Johnson, 2014). The present study extends this perspective by demonstrating that humanistic pedagogy within pesantren education is not merely a classroom strategy but an institutional policy integrating academic learning with students' religious responsibilities. Consequently, educational quality is measured not only by academic outcomes but also by students' capacity to maintain learning motivation while fulfilling their obligations as boarding students.

Another important contribution concerns the integration of life-skill education into the institutional transformation strategy. Existing literature frequently positions vocational competence and entrepreneurial education as supplementary programs designed to improve graduates' employability. However, the findings of this study indicate that life-skill education serves a broader educational function. Practical training in information technology, sound engineering, institutional services, entrepreneurship, and operational management enables students with diverse talents to experience educational success according to their individual strengths rather than being evaluated solely through academic achievement. This approach reflects a more

inclusive understanding of educational excellence that recognizes multiple forms of student potential.

The findings also reveal that community trust functions as an essential mechanism for institutional competitiveness. Interestingly, this trust is not primarily generated through institutional branding, promotional campaigns, or marketing strategies commonly discussed in educational management literature. Instead, public trust develops organically through the religious outreach (*syiar*) conducted by the pesantren caregiver (Muda'i, 2025; Trisnantari et al., 2024). The caregiver's continuous involvement in religious gatherings, Islamic preaching, and community services creates moral legitimacy that gradually extends to the institution itself. Consequently, parents' decisions to enroll their children are strongly influenced by confidence in the caregiver's integrity and educational philosophy rather than by material indicators of institutional quality.

This finding broadens previous discussions concerning educational branding. While contemporary educational management often emphasizes digital promotion, institutional reputation, and marketing communication, the present study demonstrates that, within pesantren education, institutional reputation is primarily constructed through social legitimacy and religious authority. Educational branding therefore emerges as a consequence of sustained community engagement rather than deliberate promotional activities. This perspective is particularly relevant within Islamic educational contexts where institutional credibility is closely associated with moral leadership and public trust.

Furthermore, the integration of responsive educational services, collaborative communication, continuous character formation, and life-skill education indicates that competitiveness is generated through organizational integration rather than isolated educational programs (Hasan & Aziz, 2023; Trisnantari et al., 2024). Each component supports and reinforces the others, creating a comprehensive educational ecosystem in which academic excellence, moral education, parental involvement, and community engagement operate simultaneously. Such organizational coherence contributes significantly to institutional resilience because competitiveness is embedded within the institution's educational culture rather than depending upon temporary innovations or individual leadership alone.

Compared with previous studies on Islamic educational competitiveness, the present findings provide a different interpretation of the relationship between tradition and institutional excellence. Much of the existing literature argues that pesantren institutions become competitive by adopting modern management systems, technological innovations, or standardized quality assurance mechanisms. Although these elements are also evident at Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin, they do not constitute the institution's principal competitive advantage. Instead, competitiveness emerges because every managerial innovation remains integrated with pesantren

traditions, religious values, and community expectations. Modern educational management therefore functions as an instrument supporting institutional identity rather than replacing it.

The principal conceptual contribution of this study is the proposition that Integrated Educational Management within salaf-based Islamic education should be understood as a holistic organizational system in which educational quality, stakeholder trust, character formation, life-skill development, and community legitimacy are mutually reinforcing dimensions. Unlike conventional management models emphasizing efficiency and organizational performance, this framework positions pesantren identity as the strategic organizational resource from which sustainable institutional competitiveness is derived.

Taken together, the findings from both themes lead to a broader theoretical implication. The transformation of Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin demonstrates that the sustainability of Islamic educational institutions is not determined by their ability to imitate modern educational organizations but by their capacity to selectively integrate innovation within their own philosophical traditions. Accordingly, this study proposes the concept of Selective Institutional Transformation, in which institutional identity functions as the normative filter for organizational innovation, while Integrated Educational Management serves as the operational mechanism through which educational quality, stakeholder trust, and institutional competitiveness are simultaneously strengthened. These two concepts collectively offer a new perspective for understanding how salaf-based Islamic educational institutions can remain relevant, competitive, and sustainable without compromising their religious and cultural authenticity.

Conclusion

This study concludes that institutional transformation at Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin is implemented through Selective Institutional Transformation, in which educational innovations are filtered through the philosophical values and traditions of the salaf pesantren before being adopted. This approach enables the institution to integrate the national curriculum with pesantren education while preserving madrasah diniyah, kitab kuning studies, sorogan, bandongan, and continuous character formation. Thus, institutional adaptation strengthens rather than diminishes pesantren identity.

Institutional competitiveness is strengthened through Integrated Educational Management that combines responsive educational services, stakeholder collaboration, humanistic learning, life-skill development, and community engagement. Rather than relying primarily on academic performance or infrastructure, the institution builds competitiveness through community trust, continuous moral supervision, and the preservation of pesantren identity. The study

therefore proposes the Selective Institutional Transformation Model as its principal theoretical contribution, positioning tradition not as an obstacle to modernization but as a normative foundation for sustainable institutional change, while Integrated Educational Management explains how religious and cultural values can support educational quality, stakeholder trust, and institutional competitiveness.

However, this study is limited to a single case in one salaf-based Islamic senior secondary school and does not quantitatively examine the long-term effects of institutional transformation on educational performance or graduate outcomes. Future research should therefore conduct comparative multi-site and mixed-methods studies across different pesantren and Islamic educational institutions to examine the relationship between selective institutional transformation, educational quality, organizational resilience, and institutional competitiveness in broader contexts..

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Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with accepted ethical principles for qualitative educational research. Formal permission was obtained from the authorities of Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Al-Bahroin and Pondok Pesantren Al-Bahroin prior to data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their anonymity was protected through coding procedures. All research data were handled securely and used solely for academic purposes.

Artificial Intelligence Use Statement

The authors used artificial intelligence (AI) tools in a limited manner to assist with language editing, grammatical refinement, and improving the readability of the manuscript. AI was not used for data collection, qualitative data analysis, interpretation of the findings, development of the conceptual models, or formulation of the conclusions. All AI-assisted content was carefully reviewed and verified by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and final content of the article.

Author Contribution Statement

Ummi Shofia Ulya contributed to the conceptualization of the study, investigation, data collection, qualitative data analysis, interpretation of the findings, and preparation of the original draft. Fatkhullah contributed to the research methodology, data analysis, validation of the findings, and critical review of the manuscript. Iqbal Nashrullah contributed to

supervision, validation, interpretation of the findings, critical review, and final editing of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the article.

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The authors declare that there are no financial, institutional, professional, or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the conduct, interpretation, or publication of this research.

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