

Negotiating Religious Practices and Islamic Values: Experiences of *Pesantren* Alumni in Higher Education

*Nur Alita Damayanti¹, Anisa Dwi Makrufi²

^{1,2}Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: alitadamayanti12@gmail.com

Abstract

The transition from a structured *pesantren* environment to university life requires students to manage their religious commitments under less direct institutional regulation. Previous research has often treated ritual regularity, spirituality, and value internalization as interchangeable, leaving insufficient explanation of how *pesantren* alumni interpret continuity and change in their religious lives. This study examines reported changes in spiritual and religious experience, the continuation and reinterpretation of Islamic educational values, and the internal and external conditions associated with these processes. A qualitative descriptive design was employed with seven sixth-semester students in an Islamic Religious Education program who had attended a *pesantren* for at least three years. Data were collected through one semi-structured interview lasting 20–40 minutes with each participant and analyzed using data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The findings show varied rather than uniform trajectories. Five participants reported reduced consistency in one or more practices, including punctual prayer, *tahajjud*, Qur'anic recitation, memorization, and *muraja'ah*. These adjustments did not necessarily coincide with the abandonment of Islamic values. Participants described continuing to apply sincerity, discipline, responsibility, moral conduct, consistency, independence, and self-control in academic and social life. Some also reported more reflective interpretations of religious teachings, while others maintained earlier understandings. Personal awareness, self-regulation, peers, family support, campus culture, living arrangements, and academic demands shaped these reported experiences. By distinguishing ritual consistency, value continuity, and reflective religious meaning, the study offers a contextually bounded account of how *pesantren* alumni negotiate religious commitments in higher education. The findings represent retrospective self-reports and do not establish longitudinal or causal changes in spirituality.

Keywords: *Religious Practices; Islamic Values; Pesantren Alumni; Self-Regulation; Higher Education*

A. Introduction

Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) provide a structured educational environment in which religious knowledge, moral values, and everyday practices are cultivated simultaneously. Through formal instruction, habituation, role modeling, institutional rules, and communal routines, students are introduced to values such as discipline, sincerity, responsibility, independence,

and proper conduct (*adab*). These values are expected to extend beyond the period of formal study and guide graduates in different social and educational environments (Ranam, Muslim, and Priyono 2021; Muizzuddin, Fatikhah, and Zainuddin 2023). Nevertheless, the transition from a *pesantren* to a university changes the conditions under which these values are practiced. Religious schedules are no longer institutionally enforced, supervision becomes less direct, and students encounter greater academic demands, broader social networks, and more individual freedom. Consequently, practices previously maintained through collective regulation increasingly depend on personal commitment and self-regulation.

This transition requires a distinction between spirituality, religiosity, religious practice, and the internalization of religious values. Spirituality generally concerns an individual's relationship with the sacred, the search for meaning, and the ways in which religious commitments are experienced in everyday life. Religiosity more commonly refers to religious identification, beliefs, institutional affiliation, and participation in prescribed practices (Hill and Pargament 2008; Zinnbauer et al. 1997). Although these dimensions overlap, changes in the frequency of ritual practices do not necessarily indicate the disappearance of spiritual meaning or religious values. A student may, for example, become less consistent in performing additional religious practices while continuing to regard sincerity, responsibility, or self-discipline as important personal principles. From the perspective of lived religion, religious commitments are not merely reproduced through formal rules but are interpreted and negotiated within everyday circumstances (Ammerman 2014). Internalization therefore refers here to the process through which values introduced in the *pesantren* are accepted, interpreted, and used as personal guides after direct institutional supervision has diminished (Siahaan, Ahkas, and Pulungan 2022).

Previous studies have identified several patterns in the post-*pesantren* religious experiences of university students. Rizqo and Mudzakkir (2023) found that alumni adjusted their religious behavior after moving from the regulated environment of a *pesantren* to university life. Maulida (2024) similarly showed that the religious discipline of former *pesantren* students could decline when institutional supervision and structured routines were no longer present. Evidence from a *pesantren*-specific alumni study also indicates that religious knowledge and practices may continue after graduation, although this pattern was examined within a single institutional context (Sari and Faza 2024). Other research, however, indicates that *pesantren*-based practices may remain influential after graduation. Munir, Hanafiah, and Fatkhullah (2026), for example, described how particular forms of spiritual training could continue to inform the ethical orientations of *pesantren* alumni. These findings indicate that

leaving a *pesantren* does not produce a uniform outcome. Some students maintain established practices, some experience declining ritual regularity, and others reinterpret earlier religious learning in response to new circumstances.

Educational and social environments also shape the continuation of religious values. Institutional climate, peer relationships, teaching practices, and opportunities for religious participation can support or constrain the expression of spirituality and religious behavior (Mangestuti and Aziz 2023). Haryanto (2022) further demonstrates that higher-education institutions can contribute to the internalization of Islamic values through their organizational culture and educational practices. Such studies establish the importance of institutional context, but they primarily examine how educational environments transmit or reinforce values. They provide less explanation of how former *pesantren* students themselves understand the transition from collective regulation to greater personal autonomy, particularly when students come from different *pesantren* backgrounds but study within the same university program.

Existing scholarship therefore leaves two related issues insufficiently examined. First, ritual consistency, spiritual experience, and the internalization of values are often treated as interchangeable indicators, although they may develop differently after students leave a *pesantren*. Second, limited attention has been paid to how *pesantren* alumni interpret both continuity and change in their religious lives while negotiating academic demands, peer relationships, family expectations, and the relative freedom of university life. Examining these dimensions together is important because a decrease in a particular religious routine cannot automatically be interpreted as the complete loss of *pesantren* values. Conversely, continued religious identification does not by itself demonstrate that all previously established practices remain unchanged. Against this background, this study examines the experiences of seven *pesantren* alumni enrolled in an Islamic Religious Education program. It has three objectives: first, to identify the spiritual and religious changes that participants reported after entering university; second, to examine how the Islamic educational values acquired in *pesantren* were maintained, adjusted, or reinterpreted in university life; and third, to analyze the internal and external factors that participants associated with these processes.

B. Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to examine how *pesantren* alumni experienced and interpreted their religious lives after entering university (Neuman 2013). The study was conducted in the Islamic Religious Education Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta in June 2026. Seven active students were selected through purposive sampling. Eligible participants had attended a *pesantren* for at least three years and had completed

at least four semesters of university study, allowing them to reflect on their adjustment to higher education. The final group consisted of three men and four women, all in their sixth semester, with different *pesantren* backgrounds and residential arrangements during university. These differences were treated as contextual variations rather than as variables for establishing causal relationships.

Table 1.
Participant Characteristics

Code	Gender	Semester	<i>Pesantren</i> background	Years in <i>pesantren</i>	Years since leaving	Residence during university
MRS	Male	6	Modern <i>pesantren</i>	4	3	Boarding house
AF	Male	6	Modern and Qur'an-memorization <i>pesantren</i>	7	3	Boarding house
SF	Female	6	Qur'an-memorization <i>pesantren</i>	12	3	<i>Pesantren</i>
HFJ	Female	6	Modern <i>pesantren</i>	6	3	Boarding house
DGA	Male	6	Islamic education-based <i>pesantren</i>	6	3	Boarding house
RN	Female	6	Modern and Qur'an-memorization <i>pesantren</i>	5	3	Boarding house
HYD	Female	6	Modern <i>pesantren</i>	7	3	Boarding house

Source: Compiled by the authors from the interview data.

Data were collected through one semi-structured interview with each participant. Each interview lasted approximately 20–40 minutes and explored changes in religious practices, sources of religious motivation, interpretations of Islamic values, and conditions that supported or hindered the continuation of *pesantren*-based values in university life. The interviews elicited retrospective accounts of participants' experiences before and after entering university. Therefore, the data represent changes as remembered and interpreted by participants at the time of the interviews, rather than longitudinal measurements of their religious development. The interviews were transcribed in full. The excerpts presented in this article were translated from Indonesian into English while preserving their intended meanings. Before each interview, participants

received information about the study's purpose, procedures, and use of the data. All participants provided informed consent, and identifying information was replaced with participant codes.

The data were analyzed using the interactive model of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). Analysis began with repeated readings of the transcripts, followed by coding statements concerning religious practices, sources of motivation, self-regulation, interpretations of religious values, social relationships, and adaptation to university life. Related codes were organized into themes corresponding to the study's three objectives: reported changes in spiritual and religious experience, the continuation and reinterpretation of Islamic educational values, and the internal and external conditions associated with these processes. Patterns and variations were compared across participants. Credibility was supported by checking the coding against the transcripts, comparing accounts across participants, and maintaining correspondence between interpretations and the quoted evidence (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Because the study relied on seven retrospective interviews from one academic program, the analysis was intended to develop a contextually bounded interpretation rather than claim statistical representation or theoretical saturation.

C. Results and Discussion

The interviews revealed neither a uniform decline nor a uniform improvement in participants' religious lives after leaving the structured *pesantren* environment. Instead, the accounts showed three interconnected processes: changes in the sources of religious motivation and the consistency of particular practices, continuation or reinterpretation of Islamic educational values, and negotiation of those values within the social and academic conditions of university life. These processes were shaped by participants' self-regulation as well as by peers, family members, campus culture, living arrangements, and academic demands.

1. From Institutional Regulation to Personal Self-Regulation

Participants consistently contrasted the regulated routines of *pesantren* life with the greater personal discretion they encountered at university. In a *pesantren*, religious practices were supported by schedules, rules, collective routines, and a community with a shared religious orientation. This type of institutional habituation is also identified in studies of character formation and value cultivation in *pesantren* settings (Ranam, Muslim, and Priyono 2021; Witasari and Subur 2022; Sun'iyah 2022). After leaving that environment, participants had to decide independently when and how to maintain practices that had previously been collectively organized.

AF described this change as a shift in the basis of religious responsibility: "At the *pesantren*, I was accustomed to praying on time because there were schedules and rules. After entering university, I began to understand that maintaining worship was not only about following rules but also about my own awareness." (AF)

DGA made a similar distinction:

"There are no longer binding rules, so I undertake every aspect of my spiritual life on my own, without anyone telling me to do it." (DGA)

These accounts indicate a reported shift in the source of motivation, from practices reinforced primarily through institutional regulation toward practices that increasingly depended on personal awareness. This pattern is consistent with Robbika's (2024) finding that *pesantren* alumni may experience changes in religious commitment when they enter less regulated university environments. The present data, however, do not establish that institutional regulation was completely replaced by autonomous motivation. Family reminders, peer relationships, and campus facilities continued to provide external support. The transition is therefore better understood as a change in the relative balance between external reinforcement and individual self-regulation.

The most visible adjustments concerned ritual regularity. AF, HFJ, RN, SF, and HYD reported that punctual prayer, *tahajjud*, Qur'anic recitation, memorization, or *muraja'ah* had become less consistent than during their time in a *pesantren*. Participants associated these changes with academic workloads, fatigue, independent living, and the absence of collective schedules. RN and HFJ explained:

"Additional practices such as *tahajjud* have declined substantially, and maintaining *muraja'ah* has also become more difficult." (RN)

"My religious practices have become less structured because university is tiring and I have many responsibilities that I must manage on my own." (HFJ)

These statements provide evidence of reduced regularity in specific practices, but they do not independently demonstrate a general decline in spirituality. Spirituality involves meaning, orientation toward the sacred, and the ways religious commitments are experienced, whereas ritual frequency represents only one aspect of religious life (Hill and Pargament 2008; Zinnbauer et al. 1997). The participants' accounts consequently point to different patterns: RN and HFJ emphasized difficulty maintaining particular practices, MRS and DGA reported greater continuity, and SF described changes in how she interpreted religious teachings.

Some participants also reported becoming more reflective in their religious understanding. SF stated:

"I am now more critical when understanding Qur'anic verses and try to understand their intended meaning rather than relying only on a word-for-word translation." (SF)

MRS similarly reported:

"I now study books of hadith and Qur'anic interpretation more often than I did at the *pesantren*." (MRS)

For these participants, university life provided opportunities to engage with religious knowledge through interpretation and reflection. This pattern should not be generalized to all seven participants, because HFJ explicitly reported no substantial change in her religious understanding. It nevertheless demonstrates that less consistent ritual routines and greater reflection could coexist within the same transition. Ammerman's (2014) account of lived religion helps explain this distinction: religious life is expressed not only through formal practices but also through interpretation, moral decisions, and everyday meaning-making.

Table 2.
Patterns in Participants' Reported Religious Experiences after Entering University

Participant	Reported experience	Analytical pattern	Form of adjustment or interpretation
MRS	The intensity of some practices changed, but attention to religion remained	Deepening religious understanding	Maintaining selective relationships and studying hadith and Qur'anic interpretation
AF	Some religious habits changed after entering university	Continuation of religious values	Maintaining discipline and responsibility learned in the <i>pesantren</i>
SF	Religious practices changed, while understanding of religious teachings became more reflective	Reinterpretation of religious teachings	Considering the meanings and contexts of religious texts more critically
HFJ	Some practices became less regular under the demands of university life	Adaptation to a less structured environment	Attempting to rebuild Qur'anic reading habits and maintain supportive relationships
DGA	Religious practices were generally maintained, with adjustments to some activities	Continuity through personal awareness	Understanding worship as a personal need and maintaining religious principles

RN	<i>Tahajjud</i> , memorization, and <i>muraja'ah</i> became less regular	Reduced consistency in some practices	Negotiating priorities alongside academic and daily demands
HYD	Memorization and Qur'anic recitation changed in frequency	Adaptation while retaining religious values	Maintaining <i>istiqamah</i> and selecting a supportive social environment

Source: Compiled by the authors from the interview data.

The matrix demonstrates variation rather than a single trajectory. It also prevents reduced ritual consistency from being interpreted automatically as the disappearance of Islamic values. At the same time, reflective interpretation should not be treated as proof that a participant experienced a comprehensive increase in spirituality. Each claim remains limited to the particular practice, value, or interpretation described in the interview.

2. Continuation and Reinterpretation of Islamic Educational Values

Participants identified sincerity, discipline, responsibility, moral conduct, consistency, independence, self-control, and orientation toward God as values they had acquired or strengthened in their *pesantren* education. Their accounts suggest that the continuation of these values was not always expressed by reproducing the *pesantren* routine in its original form. Instead, some values were applied to academic responsibilities, time management, social relationships, and personal decision-making.

MRS referred to the *pesantren's Panca Jiwa* as an enduring moral reference: "The *pesantren* taught five principles: sincerity, simplicity, independence, Islamic solidarity, and freedom. The value I have maintained most strongly is sincerity." (MRS)

AF emphasized the application of discipline beyond ritual routines:

"The value I have maintained most strongly is discipline. Although university life is less regulated, I still try to manage my time in a disciplined way." (AF)

These statements illustrate continuity at the level of personal orientation. MRS connected sincerity to accepting experiences and living independently, whereas AF connected discipline with time management, class attendance, and completing assignments. DGA associated Islamic values with consistency, responsibility, and life goals. RN and HYD described religious practice as an increasingly personal responsibility rather than merely an institutional requirement.

This pattern corresponds with the understanding of internalization as a process through which values become guides for thought, judgment, and action rather than remaining externally imposed rules (Muhaimin 2006). Studies conducted in *pesantren*, school, and family settings similarly show that

habituation and role modeling can support the movement from learning religious values to applying them in everyday behavior (Aulia and Nafiisah 2023; Gunawan, Ihsan, and Jaya 2021; Sukriyah, Sapri, and Syukri 2024). The current findings extend this discussion cautiously by examining what participants reported after the original institutional structure had receded. The interviews suggest that a value could remain meaningful even when the practice through which it had initially been learned became less regular.

The relationship between internalization and practice was nevertheless uneven. Remembering a *pesantren* value or identifying with it does not necessarily prove that it consistently guided behavior. The evidence is strongest where participants provided concrete applications, such as managing time, completing academic responsibilities, selecting social relationships, or attempting to restore Qur'anic reading. Hasanah, Basalamah, and Farida (2022) similarly emphasize that religious maturity involves the enactment of religious commitments, not merely knowledge of religious norms. Accordingly, this study treats participants' statements as reported examples of value continuation rather than as comprehensive assessments of their character.

Participants also differed in whether they reinterpreted earlier religious learning. SF described becoming more contextual in considering questions of Islamic jurisprudence:

"After entering university, my thinking became broader and more critical. Analyzing matters of Islamic jurisprudence is not limited to a single position; the context must also be considered." (SF)

By contrast, HFJ reported continuity rather than reinterpretation:

"There is no difference in meaning. My way of thinking at the *pesantren* and at university remains the same." (HFJ)

The contrast between SF and HFJ is analytically important. A new educational environment did not produce the same form of religious change for every participant. For one participant, continuity involved reconsidering how religious knowledge applied to different contexts; for another, it involved maintaining an established understanding despite environmental change. Research on university students similarly indicates that religious identity and interpretations do not develop uniformly because they are mediated by prior education, social experience, and individual responses to diversity (Ardiansyah, Mukarom, and Nugraha 2024; Yusuf and Winastuti 2025).

The findings therefore do not support a simple progression from habituation to complete personal internalization. They point instead to varying degrees of continuation, reinterpretation, and difficulty in enactment. Some values were retained as personal principles, some were adapted to university responsibilities, and some religious routines became less consistent. Internalization in this context is best understood as an ongoing process whose

expression depends on both previously learned values and present circumstances.

3. Negotiating Values in University Social Life

University social life exposed participants to relationships and practices that were less institutionally regulated than those in a *pesantren*. MRS described maintaining boundaries in interactions, RN reported difficulty regulating closeness with members of the opposite sex, and SF encountered peers with diverse backgrounds and habits. Participants responded by selecting close friends, limiting certain forms of interaction, monitoring their speech, and attempting to maintain principles they considered religiously appropriate.

SF explained her approach to social selection:

“I remain friendly with everyone, but I do not give everyone close access to my life. We need to decide who should be allowed to influence us.” (SF)

This account indicates that the continuation of *pesantren* values extended beyond private ritual practices into the management of social relationships. Berger and Luckmann’s (2011) discussion of social reality is useful here because previously learned values are maintained and interpreted through continuing interaction with new social environments. Nevertheless, the campus should not be treated as the direct cause of either weakened or strengthened religiosity. The interviews show that it functioned as a context in which participants made choices among competing demands, relationships, and expectations.

Sutarto (2022) and Ardiansyah, Mukarom, and Nugraha (2024) demonstrate that university settings can become spaces in which students encounter and negotiate varied religious perspectives. The present study adds that *pesantren* alumni may respond differently to this diversity. SF described greater contextual reflection, MRS emphasized boundaries in speech and relationships, and HFJ largely maintained her previous understanding while struggling with ritual consistency. Thus, social adaptation did not require abandoning earlier values, but neither did it ensure their consistent application.

Participants’ different *pesantren* backgrounds may have shaped their initial experiences, but the evidence does not permit comparisons attributing particular outcomes to a specific type or duration of *pesantren* education. For example, the participant who had remained in a *pesantren* during university could not be treated as representative of all students in that residential arrangement. The background characteristics in Table 1 therefore provide context for interpreting individual accounts, not a basis for causal classification.

4. Internal and External Conditions Associated with Value Continuity

Participants associated the continuation of Islamic values with interacting internal and external conditions. Internal conditions included personal awareness, motivation, self-control, commitment to principles, and a sense of

purpose. External conditions included peer relationships, family reminders, campus religious activities, worship facilities, social norms, living arrangements, and academic workloads. These conditions did not operate independently: a supportive environment could reinforce a participant's commitment, but maintaining a practice still required time management and personal initiative.

RN and DGA emphasized the importance of personal commitment:

"Although external conditions have an influence, internal commitment is more important. Whatever the social environment is like, we can still maintain our values if we remain firm." (RN)

"I have a clear purpose. Therefore, the main strength for maintaining these values comes from within myself." (DGA)

Their accounts suggest that self-regulation became particularly important when the collective routines of *pesantren* life were no longer continuously present. Utami, Mingtio, and Muhid (2022) found an association between spiritual intelligence, religious faith, and self-regulation. The present interviews support the relevance of self-regulation, but they also reveal an important qualification: participants who valued self-control did not necessarily maintain every religious practice with the same regularity. Personal commitment may support value continuity without eliminating fatigue, scheduling conflicts, or other constraints.

External relationships could reinforce this process. MRS reported that supportive peers increased his motivation to participate in religious activities, while AF and RN continued to receive reminders from family members:

"When I am in a positive environment and have good friends, I become more motivated to maintain my worship and attend religious study sessions." (MRS)

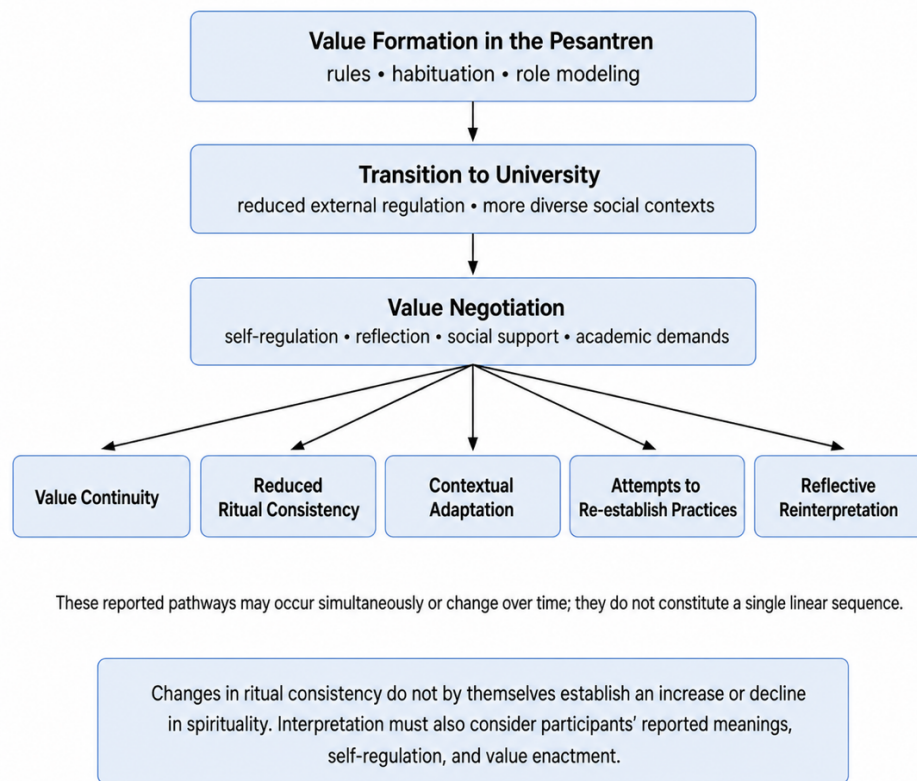
"My parents still often remind me to continue *muraja'ah* and not neglect my prayers." (AF)

These accounts are consistent with research showing that habituation, institutional culture, and social reinforcement can support religious character formation (Khoirunissa and Jinan 2025; Ramedlon et al. 2023). Family-based value formation can also continue to provide guidance beyond formal educational institutions (Sukriyah, Sapri, and Syukri 2024). However, most of those studies concern school or family settings in which religious practices are actively structured. The present findings indicate that support remained relevant at university but did not uniformly prevent reduced Qur'anic recitation, *tahajjud*, memorization, or *muraja'ah*.

Overall, the findings suggest a negotiated transition rather than a linear movement from religious dependence to complete autonomy. The *pesantren* supplied an initial structure of knowledge, habits, and values, while university life required participants to manage those resources under different academic

and social conditions. Figure 1 summarizes this relationship among institutional habituation, changing university conditions, personal self-regulation, ritual adjustment, and value continuity.

Figure 1.
Model of the Spiritual Experiences of PAI Students Who Are Pesantren Alumni



Source: Developed by the authors from the interview data.

The model should not be interpreted as a causal or developmental sequence applicable to all *pesantren* alumni. It represents the relationships identified in these seven participants' accounts. Within this bounded group, ritual consistency, value continuity, and reflective religious understanding did not always move in the same direction. This distinction constitutes the study's principal contribution: the continuation of Islamic educational values after leaving a *pesantren* cannot be assessed solely by whether every institutional routine remains unchanged.

D. Conclusion

This study found that the seven participants reported varied religious and spiritual experiences after moving from *pesantren* education into university life. Several participants described reduced consistency in punctual prayer, *tahajjud*, Qur'anic recitation, memorization, or *muraja'ah*, while others emphasized continuing religious values or developing more reflective interpretations of religious teachings. These patterns show that changes in ritual regularity,

personal meaning, and value continuity should be analyzed as related but distinct dimensions. Based on the participants' retrospective accounts, the transition involved a changing balance between institutional regulation and personal self-regulation rather than a uniform improvement or decline in spirituality.

The continuation of Islamic educational values was reflected in participants' reported efforts to maintain sincerity, discipline, responsibility, moral conduct, consistency, independence, and self-control in their academic and social lives. Personal awareness, motivation, principles, and life goals supported these efforts, while peers, family members, campus culture, worship facilities, living arrangements, and academic demands could function as either support or constraint. For Islamic Religious Education programs, the findings indicate the value of providing opportunities for religious reflection, supportive peer engagement, and the development of self-regulation. *Pesantren* may likewise prepare graduating students to manage time, social relationships, and religious responsibilities in less structured educational environments.

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