

Social capital in Islamic community-based *pesantren*

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ABSTRACT

Pesantren is one of the oldest educational institutions in Indonesia. This study aims to analyze how social capital contributes to economic independence at Pesantren Aulia Cendekia in Palembang, Indonesia. This is due to limited funding sources and competition among educational institutions. Pesantren, as an institution with a unique educational program centered on religious teaching, uses social capital to maintain financial sustainability by utilizing business units within the institution. This study examines the assets of pesantren business units using Robert D. Putnam's social capital theory, which links social capital with economic independence. With a comprehensive and contextual approach, this study uses qualitative methodology and collects data through observation, interviews, and documentation. The results show that the economic success of pesantren depends not only on their tangible assets but also on the quality of connections, teamwork, and important figures such as ustadz. Using sustainable business units, such as managing productive waqf (Islamic endowment funds), establishing business incubators, and forming Micro Waqf Banks in collaboration with the government, Islamic boarding schools utilize their social capital, which includes alumni networks and trust. In addition to business units, the ustad also plays an important role in the sustainability of Islamic boarding schools in terms of their economic independence.

Keywords: Social Capital, Pesantren, Economic Independence, Community-based.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The main difference between Pesantren and Islamic schools (such as madrasahs or public Islamic schools) lies in the education system, curriculum, and lifestyle of the students. Historically and characteristically, Pesantren are the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, with their distinctive boarding school system and in-depth religious studies curriculum. Meanwhile, in Islamic schools, students generally return home after school. Pesantren is a modern institution that has sustained itself for decades with self-funding and possesses unique characteristics and local wisdom in Indonesia (Zaki et al., 2022). Pesantren maintains its emphasis on local wisdom in Indonesia amid the modernization of Indonesian education. It has a specific educational system that focuses on religious instruction (Alfurqan, 2020). Pesantren not only produces young generations as agents of change but also creates tangible changes in society. It should become the main framework for formal education, as education has the power to change children's way of thinking. The concept of entrepreneurship can be shaped by several models, including communal entrepreneurship. Communication management in an Islamic educational institution must have a master plan and strategy for the institution's development (Desmaniar et al., 2022). How the spiritual leadership of the ustad shapes the entrepreneurial spirit and independence of the santri. Ustadz not only function as teachers but also as mentors who help the community understand Islamic teachings properly and correctly (Siregar et al., 2025). The Ustad managerial role involves engaging with others to address challenges (Gherardi & Laasch, 2022; Karim et al., 2023), with organizational success largely driven by visionary leaders who identify opportunities and turn them into profitable ventures (Bellis et al., 2024).

Islamic boarding schools are the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia (Masrur & Arwani, 2022; Safiudin R & Supriyanto, 2021; Solihin, 2024). Historically, Islamic boarding schools have functioned as centers for learning religious knowledge and morals and have played an important role in spreading Islamic teachings in the archipelago. The distinctive features of traditional or salaf Islamic boarding schools are the presence of a ustad (religious teacher), santri (students), pondok (dormitory), and the study of classical Islamic texts as the main reference material. Islamic boarding schools have made significant contributions as centers of education, religious broadcasting, and religious social movements for the community. Over time, amid strong modernization, Islamic boarding schools began to reposition their roles. The existence of Islamic boarding schools is no longer limited to religious education alone; it has also expanded into the social and economic spheres. Islamic boarding schools have transformed into agents of development that play a role in empowering communities. This shift in role was driven by an awareness of the social problems faced by the community, such as poverty and unemployment.

This study focuses on the existing social capital at Aulia Cendekia. It examines the role of the institution in surviving amid modern times and the changes that have occurred in the current era. This study examines the strategies employed to achieve economic independence through the social capital already present within the school. This article aims to present concepts and a case study of the Aulia Cendekia Pesantren and its economic potential. This study seeks to identify social capital that can serve as a basis for sustainable economic potential. The methodology uses Putnam's social capital theory, linking social capital with the existing conditions that contribute to economic independence. The final section provides an analysis of the theory and its implementation, considering the previous research. The economic conditions of Islamic boarding schools in Palembang are developing rapidly and have a diverse number of students. The Aulia Cendekia Pesantren in Palembang is an example of the development of economic independence in Islamic boarding schools in the city of Palembang. The Aulia Cendekia Pesantren was selected based on initial observations that the social capital in that location is related to the economic independence of the Islamic boarding school. Robert D. Putnam's theory explains that social capital can be used as a backdrop for an Pesantren to achieve economic independence.

Although much research has discussed the economic independence and social capital of educational institutions in general, few studies have specifically examined pesantren in this context, especially in Palembang, Indonesia. Previous research has tended to be general or focused on other areas. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by contextually analyzing the role of social capital in pesantren economic independence. This study focuses on social capital, emphasizing its importance as a strategy for

enhancing economic independence. Islamic educational institutions utilize community-based social capital to develop their local communities economically through collaboration and synergy with the surrounding society. In Indonesia, Islamic boarding schools have successfully developed economic independence through various innovative and organized business units (Misjaya et al., 2019). This success is supported not only by conventional economic factors but also by non-material elements known as social capital. Social capital, which includes trust, networks, and collective norms, is the common thread that connects the success of economic initiatives (Rofiaty, 2019). The main problem identified is the challenge of maintaining economic sustainability despite the presence of social capital. These issues include limited funding sources, economic fluctuations, and competition with other educational institutions. Social capital can serve as a strategic asset to overcome these challenges and achieve economic independence.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Social Capital

According to Robert D. Putnam (2000), as cited in Hasbullah (2006), proposed that a community with high social virtues but living in social isolation would be viewed as having a low level of social capital. Bourdieu's perspective differs slightly from Putnam's. While Bourdieu emphasizes the role of individuals and organized social ties in predicting individual advancement and collective actions, Putnam further develops his ideas on associations and civil society activities as the basis for creating social integration and welfare (Hasbullah, 2006).

Social capital is linked to the effort of managing, enhancing, and utilizing social relationships as resources to be invested in for economic gain or social benefits. The existence of social capital can only be recognized and identified. Alfitri (2023) simply defines social capital as the benefits derived from "being social." Social capital emphasizes the importance of social relationships and networks and manifests as a valuable asset. Socializing and collaborating are seen as processes to obtain important relationships and networks, given that social capital is a resource with productive benefits, including solidarity and goodwill among people and groups (Alfitri, 2023).

Social capital can be defined as non-material resources embedded in social relationships that can be used to achieve specific goals. Its main components are trust, networks, and collective norms (Masrur & Arwani, 2022). Trust is the belief in the integrity and competence of individuals or groups. Networks refer to the structure of social relationships that connect individuals or groups, and norms are unwritten rules that govern behavior within a community. In an economic context, social capital is important because it facilitates collaboration, reduces transaction costs, and accelerates the flow of information. High trust among community members, for example, enables informal agreements and more efficient cooperation compared to environments that require formal contracts and strict supervision.

2.2 Pesantren

An Islamic Educational Institution is a formal or non-formal institution that focuses on education based on Islamic values, with the goal of producing individuals who are faithful, pious, and have noble character. These institutions cover various educational levels, such as madrasahs, pesantren, and Islamic universities, which integrate religious and general education into their curriculum. According to Sa'adah, Islamic education does not only focus on the cognitive aspect but also includes the affective aspect (character formation) and the psychomotor aspect (the application of Islamic values in real actions) (Sa'adah & Rahman, 2024). The educational process in these institutions is based on the Qur'an and Hadith as the primary sources of teaching, supported by the development of modern knowledge in line with the needs of the times. This concept emphasizes the important role of Islamic educational institutions in educating a quality Muslim generation while serving as a socio-economic driver for the community. An Islamic educational institution is defined as one that aims to convey knowledge based on the principles of Islamic law, with the orientation of forming an Islamic character in daily life. According to Mu'tadin, Islamic educational institutions play a strategic role in building a society based on spiritual and moral

values and encouraging the sustainability of Islamic culture in various aspects of life (Mu'tadin, 2022).

Islamic educational institutions aim to create a generation that is not only intellectually superior but also possesses Islamic ethics and morals. A study by Hakim et al. (2022) highlights that Islamic educational institutions also act as centers for the socio-economic empowerment of the community, especially in rural areas that are less accessible to other formal educational facilities. Through the integration of entrepreneurship and knowledge management, pesantren can create innovations and enhance their competitiveness. This innovation is not limited to products or businesses but also extends to educational models (Rofiaty, 2019). Thus, pesantren can produce graduates who are not only excellent in religious knowledge but also possess economic independence, ultimately contributing to reducing unemployment rates.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative research method to provide an in-depth exploration and contextual understanding based on holistic phenomena at the specific location of the Aulia Cendekia Islamic Boarding School. The qualitative method is used to explain, explore, and interpret local groups, social capital, and pesantren concerning economic independence.

This study used qualitative research with a case study approach. This approach was chosen to examine the activities of a group of individuals. The aim is to gain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon that occurs naturally. Data was collected from primary and secondary sources, with primary data obtained directly from the field through interviews and observations. The main sources included boarding school leaders, foundation administrators, business unit managers, students, and the community around the boarding school. Secondary data sources included supporting data from various documents, such as financial reports, publications, books, articles, theses, and relevant scientific journals (Miles et al., 2014).

The data collection procedures commonly used include three main techniques, namely, in-depth interviews. This technique is used to obtain information verbally through a direct question-and-answer process with the source. Then there is observation, where the researcher directly observes the object of research. Some studies use non-participatory observation, where the researcher observes behavior and phenomena that occur without being actively involved. Documentation studies involve collecting data from records, reports, Pesantren profiles, and other relevant documents. Data analysis is conducted inductively, building patterns, categories, and themes from the collected data. Using the Miles and Huberman data analysis model (Miles et al., 2014), we followed three stages: (1) Data Reduction: Simplifying and abstracting raw data; (2) Data Presentation: Describing data in narrative or visual form; and (3) Drawing Conclusions and Verification: Formulating conclusions and verifying them.

This study used triangulation techniques to ensure the validity and credibility of the findings. Triangulation is carried out by comparing and rechecking information from various data sources (e.g., interviews, observations, and documentation) to ensure the consistency of findings. Data from interviews, observations, and documentation were analyzed and cross-verified. Interviews with informants were confirmed by observational data or existing reports.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

As an Islamic educational institution, pesantren has a distinct teaching system. This difference is evident in the teaching methods, curriculum, and educational focus. Traditional teaching methods are still emphasized, such as the study of *kitab kuning* (classical Islamic texts), *halaqah* (study circles), *tadarus* (reciting the Qur'an), and direct mentoring of students. Differences are also observed in the educational structure where students live in dormitories. This boarding system has a high level of discipline, with scheduled prayers, studies of religious texts, and Qur'anic recitations. Similar to madrasahs and Islamic higher education institutions, pesantren are recognized educational establishments under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. In contrast, pesantren have far more intricate features. Pesantren serve as hubs for transforming Islamic values and molding people to be in accordance with them, in addition to serving as venues for the dissemination of knowledge.

This feature sets it apart from general educational institutions, as it focuses on the full development of character, morals, and competence. At first, Pesantren was referred to as a place for "disseminating Islamic teachings" and "forging Islamic values." They are not only educational institutions but also institutions of struggle, social development, economics, spirituality, and *da'wah* (proselytizing) due to their demonstrated ability to be a dynamic force in all struggles and nation-building processes.

Pesantren serves a variety of purposes as an Islamic educational institution. These functions are divided into four categories: a ritual institution, a moral development institution, a *da'wah* institution, and an Islamic educational institution. Furthermore, it is also outlined that pesantren consistently carry out three main functions: (1) as a center for cadre of religious thinkers (Center of Excellence), (2) as an institution that produces human resources (Human Resource), and (3) as an institution with the power to empower the community (Agent of Development).

4.1 Social Capital: The Most Strategic Intangible Asset

Social capital emerges when pesantren actively engage with the community. In the pesantren context, social capital can be seen through bonding social capital, bridging social capital, trust, norms, and reputation. There is a deep-seated involvement between the community and pesantren, particularly through social engagement in various religious events. The social capital built through pesantren involvement aligns with Robert D. Putnam's conceptual framework, which distinguishes various aspects of social capital. In bonding social capital, homogeneous relationship networks strengthen solidarity within small groups through high trust among members with similar characteristics. At Pesantren Aulia Cendekia, the relationship between santri and parents creates a strong internal bond and loyalty. The use of etiquette (*adab*), traditions, and classical Islamic texts in daily pesantren life can also become capital for pesantren activities.

Social capital is defined as a resource derived from social relationships that are invested in to gain economic benefits or social advantages. Unlike financial, physical (infrastructure), and human (individual skills) capital, social capital is an intangible asset that focuses on the potential of groups and the patterns of relationships between individuals within a network. It is one of the most strategic assets that can be leveraged to achieve pesantren economic independence. Essentially, a pesantren's economic success does not solely depend on its physical capital but also on the strength of its relationships, collaboration, and trust within the community. The power of social capital lies in how group members can cooperate to accomplish shared objectives. This cooperation is defined by mutually beneficial and reciprocal relationships based on trust and reinforced by networks and norms. This introduces a new paradigm in pesantren economics. Pesantren seek alternative assets, such as social capital, because of the lack of external funding sources. Pesantren can increase their economic resilience by utilizing strong social capital, including donor relationships, alumni networks, and community trust. This strategy shows how economic hardships can spur creativity and adaptation, forcing pesantren to rely on their combined strengths.

This shift has given Islamic boarding schools a new role as drivers of the local economy. This role makes Islamic boarding schools entities that not only preserve Islamic teachings but also proactively engage in solving the problems of poverty and underdevelopment in society (Safiudin R & Supriyanto, 2021; Solihin, 2024). Pondok Pesantren Aulia Cendekia builds its economic independence through a methodical and creative approach. It uses strong social capital in addition to conventional revenue streams, mostly due to its visionary leadership. This pesantren's economic endeavors demonstrate a high degree of flexibility and transformative potential. The primary initiatives noted are as follows: (1) Management of Productive Waqf: For long-term economic activity, the pesantren actively manages waqf assets, including land and other resources. This strategy seeks to strengthen both the local community and the pesantren's internal economy; (2) Creation of a Business Incubator: This project aims to support the growth of micro and small businesses in the pesantren setting. The pesantren demonstrates its dedication to hands-on learning and community empowerment by providing entrepreneurship training and mentoring to students and the community through a business incubator. (3) Micro Waqf Bank: The pesantren established a Micro Waqf Bank in cooperation with the Financial Services Authority (OJK). The goal of this step is to increase financial inclusion and economic independence among students and the local community by

providing microbusinesses access to sharia-compliant financing.

The fact that Pondok Pesantren Aulia Cendekia has been able to secure official cooperation from outside organizations like the Financial Services Authority (OJK) indicates that its leadership has both high credibility (*Amanah*) and strategic intelligence (*Fathonah*). These principles provide a solid basis for networking and trust building, both of which are critical for long-term sustainable economic growth. To further diversify its revenue streams and fortify its economic ecosystem, this pesantren also oversees several other business units, including a gas agent, laundry services, Eureka Mart and Fashion, refillable water, and a canteen.

Economic independence is defined as a state in which an institution or individual can stand on its own and meet its financial needs without relying on other parties. In the context of Islamic boarding schools, independence is measured by the school's ability to finance its operations and development without relying predominantly on student fees or external assistance. Economic empowerment, on the other hand, is the process of building community capacity and encouraging, motivating, and raising awareness of their potential. This aims to improve the dignity and status of communities, especially those living in poverty, so that they can escape backwardness. Economic empowerment in Islamic boarding schools creates a “mutual symbiosis” relationship in which Islamic boarding schools and the community need and benefit from one another. An important aspect of this initiative is its foundation in Islamic ethics. Entrepreneurship in Islamic boarding schools is governed by Islamic principles such as honesty (*shidiq*), trustworthiness (*amanah*), communicativeness (*tabligh*), and intelligence (*fathonah*). These principles are not only moral guidelines but also part of the operational strategy that builds trust and credibility in the boarding school's business model. Pondok Pesantren Aulia Cendekia, established in 2007 by KH. Hendra Zainuddin Al-Qodiri, is to create knowledgeable Islamic scholars and Qur'anic memorization experts while also fusing Islamic education with modern technology. With 1,161 pupils enrolled in the senior, junior, and elementary madrasah levels, this pesantren employs a more methodical and creative strategy to foster economic independence.

This pesantren exemplifies how visionary leadership can develop into a powerful source of social capital. The economic projects that have been implemented, such as the Management of Productive Waqf, the creation of a Business Incubator, and a Micro Waqf Bank in partnership with the Financial Services Authority (OJK), demonstrate a high degree of flexibility and transformational potential. The creation of the business incubator and *waqf* bank indicates that pesantren leadership possesses strategic intelligence (*Fathonah*) and credibility (*Amanah*) that attract formal collaborations from external parties, creating networks based not only on kinship but also on a professional vision. Other business units include a Gas Agent, Laundry Services, Eureka Mart and Fashion, Refillable Water, and a Canteen.

Table 1. Overview of the Aulia Cendekia Islamic boarding school

No	Number of students	Business
1.	Madrasah Ibtidaiyah : 166 Madrasah Tsanawiyah : 478 Madrasah Ibtidaiyah : 517	1. Gas Agency 2. Laundry Services 3. Eureka Mart and Fashion 4. Refillable Water 5. Waqaf Bank 6. School Canteen

Source: Processed from primary data (2025)

Modern pesantren have characteristics that go far beyond their traditional images. Currently, they are vibrant, multipurpose organizations that can change with time. Their primary attribute is their capacity to maximize social capital, their most valuable intangible asset, to attain economic independence. Because of this function, they serve as hubs for education and Islamic teachings, as well as development agents that directly support local economic growth and community empowerment. Spiritual leadership involves efforts to

connect individuals' religious values to organizational citizenship behavior, while significant spiritual practice at work encourages and enhances teachers' performance. Thus, spirituality contributes to the school process and staff and students' growth (Arar et al., 2022).

It is critical to start making strategic investments in the development of social capital rather than solely depending on outside funding sources, such as grants or government assistance, to attain economic independence. To do this, the following suggestions can be put into practice: (1) Building Networks: Actively create and preserve connections with local residents, parents of students, and alumni; (2) Strengthening Spiritual Principles: Integrate and apply Islamic principles (Siddiq, or honesty and truthfulness; Amanah, or reliability) in all business dealings. Credibility and trust are important factors that draw in outside cooperation, and this will increase both (3) Adaptation and Innovation: To garner widespread community support and involvement, employ innovative and adaptable tactics that are in line with the institution's goals and scale, such as creating applied curricula or making use of digital platforms.

The economic independence of pesantren cannot be separated from the strength of social capital, which, in the context of Islamic education, is strengthened and purified by deep spiritual values. According to Putnam, bridging social capital is a network that connects different groups and expands access to information, resources, and opportunities. This involves human resource development for economic independence planning by establishing a multicultural system through entrepreneurship and engaging human resources and other available resources in the pesantren's surroundings (Irfan et al., 2024). Bridging social capital is formed between different or heterogeneous groups with networks among individuals from diverse social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds. In contrast, bonding social capital is formed within homogeneous groups such as families. At Pesantren Aulia Cendekia, this approach is used to strengthen bonds.

The most basic component of social capital is trust, and in the context of Pesantren, this trust is based on the ustadz. Ustad leadership, which is frequently charismatic, plays a crucial and pressing role. Students, administrators, and the community at large primarily rely on the ustad's charm and honesty as sources of trust. Even in the absence of rigorous formal guarantees, this trust allows the ustad to mobilise financial and human resources. This trust builds strong customer loyalty and lowers the community investment risk. In addition to being a spiritual leader, the ustad now serves as an economic leader and source of inspiration. In addition to offering counsel and ideas, the ustad also controls the business units and provides start-up capital. Every member of the pesantren internalizes the trust that the ustad has established, enabling everyone to support the pesantren's economy, from teachers and administrators to students. This trust enables the transfer of trust from individuals (ustadz) to institutions (pesantren). Economic activity in Islamic boarding schools is driven by the ethical and moral frameworks provided by Islamic norms and values. In Islamic boarding schools, economic activity is not only focused on monetary gain but also has spiritual undertones. This promotes an Islamic work ethic that values integrity, accountability and tenacity. A work ethic founded on these principles prevents unethical business practices and fosters a productive and moral workplace. Islamic norms and values are therefore among the most distinctive types of social capital, able to convert personal drive into group action for both spiritual and financial goals.

By empirically illustrating how trust derived from charismatic figures (ustadz) and Islamic values functions as a spiritual and economic resource within pesantren-based communities, this study broadens Robert D. Putnam's concept of social capital. In addition to relying on social capital in the broad sense of "bonding" and "bridging," pesantren also highlights the role of religion as a special catalyst that promotes economic solidarity and internal cohesion. This demonstrates that religious moral and ethical frameworks, which in this context serve as effective mechanisms for monitoring and enforcing norms, have a significant influence on social capital and that it is not a value-neutral concept. Practically, this model provides Islamic boarding schools with a scalable approach to attaining economic independence by incorporating internal markets, fostering Islamic work ethics, and integrating trust-based leadership. This model illustrates how the use of structured networks and internal social cohesion can provide a strong basis for long-term value-based economic growth.

5. CONCLUSION

According to the study's findings, social capital is a crucial and strategic intangible asset for pesantren, such as Aulia Cendekia Pesantren, to be financially independent. The school's success stems from its capacity to harness and manage its social networks, especially through bridging social capital (connections with diverse external organizations, such as the Financial Services Authority) and bonding social capital (fortifying internal solidarity among students, parents, and leaders). Credibility and strategic intelligence are hallmarks of pesantren's visionary leadership, which has been essential in creating the networks and trust required to draw official partnerships and to diversify revenue streams. By shifting their focus from external funding to strategic investment in social capital, pesantren have implemented adaptive and innovative economic initiatives, including managing productive waqf, establishing business incubators, and creating micro waqf banks. With this strategy, pesantren are transformed from conventional educational facilities into vibrant "agent of development" that directly support local economic growth and community empowerment. Ultimately, pesantren's economic independence is closely linked to its spiritual principles and the quality of its social ties, and it goes beyond simple financial success. By demonstrating that group strength can be a potent tool for overcoming obstacles and attaining sustainable growth, this model offers a fresh perspective on pesantren economics.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was not required for this study.

Informed consent statement

This study did not require informed consent.

Authors' contributions

NT and KAS contributed equally to both the research and analysis of the original draft preparation. AZA contributed to the data curation and the second stage of thematic analysis. Thus, the SWF contributed substantially to this study. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of this manuscript.

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