

Transformation Towards Excellence: Narrative of Experiences and Coping Strategies Based on Nonformal Educational Values of Islamic Bording School Students with KIP Scholarships

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Abstract

Background — Pesantren is a nonformal educational setting where santri continuously practice social-spiritual values such as khidmah, tawadhu, sincerity, patience, and riyadhoh. In this study, mahasiswa santri are university students who currently live in pesantren while pursuing formal higher education with KIP-Kuliah support.

Research Urgency — Limited evidence explains how KIP-Kuliah mahasiswa santri negotiate the simultaneous demands of pesantren life and university education. Understanding this dual setting is important for developing appropriate scholarship and student support.

Research Objectives — This study explores the lived experiences of KIP-Kuliah mahasiswa santri and examines how continuously practiced pesantren values are reinterpreted as coping resources for university demands.

Research Method — This study employed a phenomenological-narrative qualitative approach involving 10 purposively selected Guidance and Counseling students who were KIP-Kuliah recipients and were residing in pesantren during the study. The analytic process was also informed by reflexive thematic analysis, particularly its emphasis on conceptual coherence, researcher interpretation, and transparent theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022).

Data from interviews, observations, personal documents, and academic records were analyzed through transcription, horizontalization, thematic grouping, textural description, restorying, and meaning interpretation.

Research Findings — KIP-Kuliah recipients enrolled in the Guidance and Counseling study program negotiated established pesantren values with university demands related to academic participation, critical thinking, innovation, and digital literacy. They reinterpreted khidmah as academic responsibility, tawadhu as openness and readiness to learn, and sincerity as the active acceptance of circumstances accompanied by sustained effort. As prospective Guidance and Counseling teachers, they developed coping strategies that integrated problem-focused, emotion-focused, meaning-focused, and religious coping. Prayer, dhikr, tawakkal, and riyadhoh supported emotional regulation, personal resilience, reflective capacity, and adaptation to academic demands.

Research Conclusion — Pesantren socio-spiritual capital serves as an adaptive resource for KIP-Kuliah students preparing to become Guidance and Counseling teachers. Concurrent pesantren and university education strengthens their academic adaptation and personal competencies.

Research Novelty/Contribution — This study proposes an integrative coping model grounded in pesantren socio-spiritual values for prospective Guidance and Counseling teachers. The model informs culturally responsive student support within KIP-Kuliah programs, universities, and pesantren.

Keywords: Guidance and Counseling students; KIP-Kuliah; nonformal education; pesantren; socio-spiritual coping; prospective teachers

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2020, the Indonesian government has implemented Kartu Indonesia Pintar Kuliah (KIP-Kuliah) as its principal higher-education assistance scheme for students from economically disadvantaged families. The program expands access to higher education by reducing financial barriers and supporting students with academic potential (Winarno et al., 2023). For recipients, however, the scholarship represents more than financial assistance: it also carries expectations of academic responsibility, persistence, and timely completion (Fadhilah et al., 2024). These expectations are especially significant for students who pursue university education while remaining actively involved in nonformal learning settings such as pesantren.

KIP-Kuliah selection considers academic potential, economic circumstances, and the consistency of applicants' administrative data (Winarno et al., 2023). Although financial support can strengthen motivation and facilitate timely completion, recipients must also maintain satisfactory academic performance (Permana & Raharjo, 2025). Accordingly, program success should be assessed not only through recipient numbers and graduation rates but also through the extent to which the program reduces structural barriers and supports students' academic and personal development. Such support is important because contemporary education requires critical thinking, adaptability, collaboration, and responsible participation (Adeoye et al., 2024). KIP-Kuliah recipients are expected to remain academically active, comply with university regulations, uphold academic integrity, and complete their studies within the prescribed period. Failure to meet these responsibilities may threaten the continuation of financial support. Consequently, scholarship obligations can become an additional source of pressure for students who must sustain academic performance while managing other institutional and personal demands (Chen & Qi, 2025).

Contemporary higher education expects graduates to demonstrate innovation, social contribution, technopreneurial capability, and global awareness. These expectations create a critical point of negotiation for mahasiswa santri who receive KIP-Kuliah. In this article, mahasiswa santri refers to university students who currently reside in pesantren and continue participating in its daily traditions while pursuing formal higher education. Their ongoing pesantren education cultivates tawadhu, sincerity, istiqomah, patience, disciplined worship, respect for kyai, and communal responsibility. These orientations coexist with a university environment that emphasizes individual academic performance, open discussion, competition, and digital competence. The interaction of these educational settings creates distinctive challenges and resources for students who must meet university demands without disengaging from pesantren life. At the same time, pesantren sustain religious character through everyday communal practice and increasingly require human-resource strategies responsive to educational transformation (Muslikah et al., 2024; Pamungkas et al., 2025).

Managing these demands requires effective coping. Stress-and-coping theory defines coping as dynamic cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage demands appraised as exceeding an individual's resources. It commonly distinguishes problem-focused coping, which addresses the source of stress, from emotion-focused coping, which regulates emotional responses (Ali et al., 2022). Later developments include meaning-focused coping, through which individuals reinterpret stressful experiences in relation to personal values and broader life purposes (Gilbertson et al., 2022). Coping is also shaped by personal resources, such as self-efficacy and resilience, and environmental resources, including social support and institutional conditions (Chen & Qi, 2025).

From an Islamic perspective, stress may be interpreted as *ibtila'* (a test) with spiritual meaning; negative emotions are acknowledged and directed toward constructive spiritual regulation (Darwati, 2022). Prayer, dhikr, patience, ikhtiar, and tawakkal may support affective regulation, self-control, and purposeful action (Şentürk & Isikan, 2024; Roudhotina & Uyun, 2022). Positive religious coping is also associated with resilience and lower psychological distress among university students (Ayun et al., 2024). Islamic coping is therefore both theocentric and transformative: stress can be interpreted not only as a psychological burden but also as an opportunity for personal growth and greater closeness to Allah.

For mahasiswa santri, academic responsibilities may intersect with dense pesantren schedules, restricted access to digital devices, economic constraints, and norms governing social interaction. University activities may require public speaking, mixed-group collaboration, organizational participation, and intensive digital engagement, while pesantren routines may regulate when and how these activities occur. This intersection makes digital access and competence important components of academic participation (Darmawan et al., 2025). These pressures are especially relevant in digitally mediated higher education, where digital overload may weaken engagement unless students possess appropriate coping mechanisms (Tafesse et al., 2024).

Pesantren constitutes a major form of nonformal education in Indonesia and develops religious character and socio-spiritual capital through sustained participation in communal routines and practices (Hayat et al., 2024). When mahasiswa santri enter formal academic spaces while continuing to live and learn in pesantren, they negotiate two concurrent educational settings: community-based pesantren education centered on value internalization and communal responsibility, and university education centered on academic performance, critical participation, and technological adaptation. Previous studies indicate that religiosity and pesantren-based practices can support resilience, problem-focused coping, and the management of adaptation and time demands (Izah et al., 2023). However, existing research has often examined academic stress or coping without analyzing how socio-spiritual capital remains actively produced through continuing pesantren participation.

Research on KIP-Kuliah recipients has mainly addressed scholarship benefits, achievement motivation, self-actualization, and economic survival (Fadhilah et al., 2024; Meiriza et al., 2023; Putryani, 2023). These studies generally focus on outcomes within formal higher education. Limited evidence explains how students who are simultaneously enrolled at university and living in pesantren mobilize continuously cultivated socio-spiritual capital to navigate academic demands. This study therefore examines how KIP-Kuliah mahasiswa santri interpret their concurrent roles as university students, scholarship recipients, and santri.

Recent nonformal education research provides a relevant pedagogical basis for interpreting this concurrent learning experience. Community-based provision emphasizes contextual learning and local participation (Hayat et al., 2024, 2026), while andragogical and problem-responsive facilitation connects learning activities with adult learners' immediate needs and expectations (Saepudin et al., 2024; Yuliani et al., 2024). Research on digital literacy further shows that access alone is insufficient: learners construct capability through experience, social interaction, and appropriately facilitated digital environments (Nugroho et al., 2024; Saripah et al., 2025).

Program-design studies complement this perspective by emphasizing project-based practice, multimodal media, mentoring, partnership, and systematic evaluation. These elements support active participation, entrepreneurial competence, and reflective learning rather than one-way instruction (Akhadi & Shofwan, 2024; Darmawan et al., 2025; Djibu et al., 2024; Firdaus et al., 2026; Hidayat et al., 2026; Ilyas et al., 2025; Sari et al., 2024; Sopingi et al., 2026; Suminar et al., 2024). Although these studies are not evaluations of mahasiswa santri coping, they clarify how nonformal learning settings can organize relevant tasks, guidance, and follow-up support.

More specifically, three gaps remain insufficiently addressed: (1) the agency and coping strategies used by mahasiswa santri to meet formal higher-education demands while continuing to live within pesantren routines and traditions; (2) the meaning-making process through which they interpret university values such as innovation, contribution, technopreneurship, and global orientation through continuously practiced pesantren values; and (3) forms of student support that are sensitive to their simultaneous participation in nonformal pesantren education and formal higher education.

Based on this background, this study aims to: (1) describe the narratives of KIP-Kuliah recipients enrolled in the Guidance and Counseling study program who simultaneously pursue university education and reside in pesantren with their established daily traditions; and (2) map the coping strategies they employ, with particular attention to how the socio-spiritual capital continuously developed and practiced in pesantren is reinterpreted as a resource for productive adaptation to university demands. Using a phenomenological-narrative qualitative approach, the study foregrounds the participants' subjective voices and lived experiences. The study offers both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it enriches the literature on nonformal education by providing empirical evidence on the concurrent relationship between pesantren-based nonformal learning and formal higher education. It also develops a conceptual understanding of how religious values cultivated through pesantren education can support the personal competency development of prospective Guidance and Counseling teachers. Practically, the findings can inform KIP-Kuliah program managers, Guidance and Counseling study programs, pesantren administrators, and universities in designing support systems that foster academic excellence while maintaining the students' pesantren identity, religious values, and everyday socio-spiritual practices.

METHODS

This study employed a phenomenological-narrative qualitative approach to examine participants' lived experiences, adaptation, coping, and meaning-making (Ahmed et al., 2022; Öhlén & Friberg, 2023). Phenomenology was used to interpret the meanings and common structures of participants' experiences, while narrative inquiry organized those experiences across temporality, sociality, and place. The analysis involved three broad processes: eliciting participants' accounts, transcribing and interpreting their experiences within concurrent pesantren and university settings, and restorying the accounts into coherent narratives linked to the study's theoretical framework (Naeem et al., 2023).

Research Procedure

The study was conducted at Ivet University, Semarang, which was purposively selected because it included KIP-Kuliah recipients enrolled in the Guidance and Counseling study program who were also residing in pesantren. Ten participants were selected using four criteria: they were active KIP-Kuliah recipients, active Guidance and Counseling students, current pesantren residents, and had completed at least three semesters. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting 30-45 minutes served as the primary data source. The interviews explored participants' concurrent campus and pesantren experiences, academic and nonacademic pressures, coping strategies, and reinterpretations of pesantren values. Observations, personal documents, academic records, activity records, and certificates provided supplementary evidence. Analysis combined phenomenological and narrative procedures. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim; relevant statements were horizontalized and coded; related codes were grouped into themes; and textural descriptions were developed. The researchers then identified each participant's storyline, reorganized the accounts chronologically, and interpreted how participants understood their experiences. Trustworthiness was supported through triangulation of interviews, observations, and documents; contextual description; an audit trail; and member checking. The sample was designed for information-rich phenomenological inquiry rather than statistical representation; its adequacy was considered in relation to the focused participant group and the depth of the data, consistent with contemporary guidance on qualitative sample sufficiency (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Narrative of Mahasiswa Santri Experiences in Navigating Concurrent Pesantren and University Educational Settings

The main theme of this narrative explains how mahasiswa santri—university students who are currently living in pesantren and continuing its nonformal educational routines—perceive and respond to the demands of formal higher education. Almost all respondents described their ongoing pesantren life as disciplined, simple, activity-intensive, and oriented toward self-control, patience, sincerity, *tawadhu'*, and worship. Some respondents narrated that their daily pesantren routines began before dawn and ended late at night, while others emphasized that campus assignments often had to be completed after pesantren activities (Respondents 3, 4, and 6). Limited family finances meant that KIP-Kuliah was understood not merely as financial assistance, but as an opportunity to continue university study without burdening parents. At the same time, participants continued to live as santri and were confronted with university demands—innovation, contribution, technopreneurship, and global orientation—that they experienced as demanding and challenging.

Some respondents reported culture shock (Respondents 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, and 10) because the values and routines they continued to practice in pesantren—such as *sam'atan wa tha'atan*, *tawadhu'*, *khidmah*, and obedience to pesantren structures—had to coexist with university expectations to be active, critical, competitive, willing to speak publicly, innovative, and contributive. Respondent 6, for example, questioned whether a santri like them could meet such a university vision. Respondent 3 highlighted the difficulty of dividing time between campus and pesantren because of travel distance, while Respondent 9 emphasized the density of pesantren schedules and limited opportunities to access a mobile phone. These findings show that the central issue is not a transition away from pesantren, but the simultaneous negotiation of two educational ecosystems: ongoing community-based nonformal pesantren education and formal higher education with its academic and technological demands (Respondents 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9).

Transactional coping theory interprets participants' negotiation as cognitive appraisal: they assessed university expectations as both challenges and potential pressures (Ali et al., 2022). Pesantren values such as tawadhu, khidmah, obedience, and discipline provided normative frameworks for humility, respect for authority, and social harmony. University culture, by contrast, expected students to think critically, participate actively, present arguments, and express ideas in academic forums.

Rather than simply experiencing a clash of values, participants engaged in meaning-making by translating the university vision into the moral language of pesantren. They understood innovation as the courage to leave familiar routines and extend khidmah from service to the kyai and pesantren toward responsible contribution to the university, including collaboration with peers outside the pesantren community (Respondents 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8). They interpreted contribution through the principle *khair al-nas anfa'uhum li al-nas* (the best people are those most beneficial to others) in three forms: academic responsibility through achievement and assignment completion; institutional contribution through classroom participation and responsible representation of the university and pesantren; and social contribution through service to others (Respondents 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8). In this process, tawadhu became intellectual humility and readiness to learn, while sincerity became active acceptance accompanied by sustained effort rather than passive surrender.

Participants interpreted technopreneurship as technological adaptation and a pathway to financial independence consistent with the principle of benefiting others (Respondent 9). Respondent 3, for example, earned income by selling beverages and promoting them through WhatsApp and Instagram Stories, applying digital marketing practices learned at university. This experience illustrates entrepreneurship as active and creative value creation (Widodo et al., 2024).

Participants interpreted international reputation as a vision of an advanced, globally connected university and an expectation to contribute beyond national boundaries (Respondents 7 and 9). Although they regarded this vision as challenging, it encouraged broader aspirations. They defined success not only as a high GPA but also as a balance among academic achievement, spiritual integrity, innovation, social contribution, and personal independence. Thus, they enacted the university vision by integrating academic excellence with moral-spiritual development rather than abandoning their identities as santri (Respondents 1-10).

The participants' narratives further indicate that concurrent engagement in pesantren and university education contributed positively to religious character development. Continuing practices of discipline, sincerity, tawadhu, khidmah, self-control, and worship strengthened qualities relevant to their preparation as prospective Guidance and Counseling teachers. In the digital era, these qualities provide an ethical basis for self-awareness, empathy, emotional regulation, responsibility, reflective judgment, and responsible technology use in counseling services. This integration supports the participants' personal and professional development as prospective Guidance and Counseling teachers.

Coping Strategies as Mobilization of Ongoing Pesantren-Based Capital across Concurrent Educational Settings

Participants first encountered the university's expectations through campus orientation, displays, and social media. They described the vision of innovation, contribution, technopreneurship, and international reputation with mixed emotions, calling it demanding but promising (Respondents 4, 5, 8, and 9). Their hesitation reflects primary appraisal, through which individuals interpret a situation as a threat, challenge, or loss, and secondary appraisal, through which they evaluate the resources available to manage it (Ali et al., 2022). Participants therefore viewed university expectations as both an opportunity to participate confidently with peers and a potential threat to their academic continuity and personal stability.

Participants' motivation to study through KIP-Kuliah extended beyond receiving financial assistance. They understood the scholarship as a trust from Allah that required responsibility and commitment (Respondents 3, 4, and 6). This appraisal initially produced emotion-focused responses, including confusion, self-doubt, and discomfort when speaking publicly because such behavior appeared inconsistent with tawadhu. Over time, participants combined emotional regulation with problem-focused action as they sought practical ways to meet university expectations.

Adaptation developed through the negotiation of meanings across the two educational settings. Participants gradually found common ground between pesantren values and university expectations, demonstrating resilience in responding to academic pressure. Psychological resilience can help students interpret stressful events more constructively, mobilize available resources, and recover from learning stress

(Gong et al., 2023). This pattern is consistent with evidence that spirituality can strengthen academic resilience through meaning, perseverance, social connection, and help-seeking (Lehihi et al., 2025).

Religious coping was evident when participants used sincerity, tawakkal, and istiqomah as sources of meaning during academic pressure. They did not abandon these values; instead, they reinterpreted classroom participation as an intellectual responsibility that could be performed politely and responsibly. Prayer and other religious practices also created space for emotional regulation and reflection. This pattern is consistent with evidence that positive religious coping can provide comfort and meaning, whereas unresolved spiritual struggles may intensify psychological distress (Gilbertson et al., 2022).

Participants described their lives as an ongoing negotiation between pesantren and university cultures. Coping therefore functioned not merely as a reaction to isolated pressures but as a framework for interpreting challenges, regulating emotions, and negotiating identity. Dense pesantren schedules, innovation demands, risks to academic performance, economic constraints, and tensions between tawadhu and competitive university expectations were repeatedly reassessed through religious beliefs and pesantren traditions. Difficult academic tasks could consequently be reframed as responsibilities, personal training, or forms of worship.

Meaning-focused coping was central to this process. Participants did not merely endure pressure; they actively generated constructive meanings for it. Statements such as 'innovation is a modern form of service' and 'technopreneurship is a way to become more useful' demonstrate positive reappraisal (Respondent 4). Practices such as patience, tawakkal, dhikr, Qur'an recitation, night prayer, and riyadhoh supported emotional regulation, reflection, and problem-solving. One participant's statement that ideas for completing assignments emerged after tahajjud illustrates how worship created reflective space and cognitive clarity. These findings reflect key functions of positive religious coping: meaning, perceived control, comfort, social connection, and personal transformation (Gilbertson et al., 2022). Prayer and dhikr provided comfort; tawakkal supported acceptance after sustained effort; peer support within pesantren strengthened social connection; and khidmah transformed academic pressure into purposeful responsibility. These resources were not isolated individual attributes. They were continually cultivated through the routines and relationships of pesantren as a nonformal educational setting.

A single religious practice could support several coping processes. Night prayer, for example, reduced anxiety (emotion-focused coping), clarified purpose (meaning-focused coping), generated ideas for completing assignments (problem-focused coping), and strengthened connection with God (religious coping). These experiences also have implications for the development of prospective Guidance and Counseling teachers. Pesantren-based coping values can strengthen empathy, emotional regulation, ethical judgment, reflective practice, and sensitivity to students' religious and cultural backgrounds. When integrated with professional counseling knowledge and evidence-based techniques, these resources may support culturally and spiritually responsive assistance for students facing academic, emotional, social, and digital challenges. For prospective Guidance and Counseling teachers, this finding also supports counselor education that treats spiritual competence as part of culturally responsive and socially just practice, while avoiding the imposition of the counselor's beliefs on students (Avent Harris & Gonzales-Wong, 2024).

Overall, the findings position pesantren not merely as participants' biographical background but as a nonformal educational setting that continuously produces socio-spiritual capital. Worship practices, khidmah, religious interpretations of adversity, and pesantren community networks formed a coping infrastructure that participants mobilized while meeting university demands. Pesantren and university education therefore operated as concurrent and mutually reinforcing settings rather than separate stages (Hayat et al., 2024, 2026).

The practical implications concern nonformal education, educational equity, and Guidance and Counseling teacher development. First, KIP-Kuliah managers and universities should recognize that some recipients concurrently participate in university and pesantren education; support programs should accommodate the demands of both settings. Second, pesantren, universities, and Guidance and Counseling study programs can collaborate in providing academic communication, digital literacy, time management, reflective mentoring, career development, and technopreneurship activities that respect pesantren values and routines. Third, coping strategies grounded in pesantren socio-spiritual values can support the personal and professional development of prospective Guidance and Counseling teachers. Integrated with professional counseling knowledge, these strategies may help them provide culturally and spiritually responsive support for students experiencing academic, emotional, social, and digital difficulties. Finally, the proposed integrative coping model can inform support for learners who participate concurrently in nonformal communities and formal institutions.

CONCLUSION

This study found that KIP-Kuliah mahasiswa santri navigated formal higher education while continuing to reside in pesantren and participate in its daily nonformal educational traditions. Their experience represented a concurrent negotiation between two educational settings rather than a transition that required leaving pesantren behind. Participants reinterpreted university expectations through pesantren values: khidmah became academic responsibility; the principle of benefiting others guided academic, institutional, and social contribution; technopreneurship represented useful independence; and global orientation encouraged contribution beyond local boundaries. Their coping integrated problem-focused, emotion-focused, meaning-focused, and religious strategies. Night prayer, dhikr, tawakkal, and riyadhoh supported emotional regulation, reflection, and meaning-making. Pesantren thus remained an active source of socio-spiritual capital for academic adaptation. These coping resources also provide a culturally grounded basis for strengthening the personal competencies of prospective Guidance and Counseling teachers in the digital era.

This study involved 10 KIP-Kuliah recipients from one Guidance and Counseling study program and particular pesantren settings. The findings therefore provide contextual and phenomenological depth rather than statistical generalization. The study also relied mainly on participants' accounts rather than longitudinal observation across institutional arrangements. Future research should compare students residing in modern, salaf, and other types of pesantren; examine variations in university-pesantren schedules and support; and test the proposed integrative coping model with broader samples.

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