

## **Integrating Character Education through Peer Interactions: Challenges and Opportunities in a Modern Islamic Boarding School in Indonesia**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Modern Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) aim to integrate character education into daily student life, yet the role of peer interactions in shaping moral development remains underexplored. This study investigates how peer relationships support or hinder character formation in a contemporary pesantren context. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was employed at Pondok Modern Ponorogo. The quantitative phase involved 212 students completing a validated Likert-scale questionnaire assessing three dimensions: Peer Support, Collaborative Learning, and Moral Challenges (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.926$ ). The qualitative phase included semi-structured interviews with 15 purposively selected students to explain the patterns found in the survey. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Survey findings revealed generally high levels of peer support and collaborative learning, alongside substantial exposure to moral challenges such as peer pressure, gossip, and conformity. Interviews explained how peer interactions reinforce religious practice, emotional resilience, and teamwork, but also revealed experiences of exclusion, stress, and ethical ambiguity. Students identified both positive and negative peer influences as central to their character development. Peer interactions in pesantren function as a double-edged force: they can promote moral growth through encouragement and collaboration but can also undermine integrity when negative norms dominate. Structured peer mentoring, accountable group work, and ethical reflection sessions are recommended to harness peer influence constructively. This study offers actionable strategies for educators seeking to embed character education within Islamic boarding school life through context-sensitive, peer-driven approaches.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Limited empirical research has examined the role of peer interactions in character education programs within Indonesian Islamic boarding schools, leaving educators and policymakers without practical, context-sensitive guidance (Izfanna & Hisyam, 2012; Manshuruddin, Rozana, & Abrianto, 2019). While scholarship documents the normative aims and curricular models of pesantren character education (Akbar et al., 2022; Supratno, Subandiyah, & Raharjo, 2018) and general effects of peer influence on adolescent morality (Khamida et al., 2022; Hidayati et al., 2022), there is scant empirical work that describes everyday peer processes, the concrete moral dilemmas they produce, and which practical interventions succeed in this boarding-school context (Fauzi & Hosna, 2022; Muhyiddin et al., 2022). This study, therefore, focuses on Pondok Modern Ponorogo to produce grounded evidence on how peer assistance, cooperative learning, and moral dilemmas operate in practice and to translate those findings into feasible strategies for school-level implementation.

Theoretical frameworks clarify character development principles, but practical implementation challenges remain underexplored, with existing scholarship such as Komariah & Nihayah, (2023a) and Manshuruddin et al., (2019a) underscoring the necessity of moving beyond abstract discourse to identify concrete strategies for embedding character education within educational settings; however, empirical investigations that focus on the practical obstacles of integrating character education—particularly through peer interactions in Islamic boarding schools—are notably scarce (Akbar et al., 2022a; Hidayati et al., 2022a; Muhyiddin et al., 2022), leaving a critical gap in understanding how theoretical ideals translate into lived realities within these unique institutional contexts, and given the central role of peer relationships in shaping students' moral and social development, it becomes imperative to explore how such interactions either facilitate or hinder the cultivation of character values in boarding school environments, thereby requiring research that captures the nuanced dynamics, challenges, and opportunities emerging from the lived experiences of both students and educators to refine theoretical models and inform actionable, context-sensitive strategies for strengthening the incorporation of character education into Islamic boarding school life.

Examining character education through peer relationships in Indonesian Islamic boarding schools requires careful consideration of both the challenges and opportunities that arise in practice. Although theoretical frameworks offer a solid foundation for understanding character formation, translating these concepts into everyday educational realities often presents distinctive obstacles that call for empirical inquiry (Izfanna & Hisyam, 2012; Umar et al., 2024a). Prior studies have highlighted theoretical perspectives on character formation and the role of social relationships, yet the nuanced role of peer interactions in shaping students' moral and social development within Indonesian Islamic boarding schools remains underexplored (Khamida et al., 2022a; Komariah & Nihayah, 2023a; Suroso, Hendriarto, Mr, et al., 2021).

The implementation of character education in Indonesian Islamic boarding schools poses practical challenges that require innovative, contextually responsive solutions. Although theoretical discussions provide essential conceptual foundations, translating these principles into concrete practices requires close attention to the everyday experiences of students and educators (Fauzi & Hosna, 2022a; Hidayati et al., 2022a; Manshuruddin et al., 2019a; Tajeddin et al., 2021). This situation underscores the urgent need for empirical research that explores fundamental peer interaction dynamics, implementation challenges, and the adaptive strategies used to address them. Such investigations are essential for uncovering the factors that enable or constrain the integration of character education through peer relationships, thereby offering evidence-based guidance for stakeholders to design interventions that are aligned with the cultural context, religious values, and communal traditions of Islamic boarding schools (Aziz et al., 2023; Khamida et al., 2022a; Supratno, Subandiyah, & Raharjo, 2018).

Empirical studies on integrating character education through peer interactions in Indonesian Islamic boarding schools remain limited. While existing theoretical frameworks provide an essential foundation for understanding character development, and prior studies have highlighted the role of social relationships in adolescents' moral formation (Fauzi & Hosna, 2022a; Khamida et al., 2022a;

Suroso, Hendriarto, Mr, et al., 2021), few investigations have closely explored the subtle peer dynamics and lived experiences within these institutions. This research gap extends beyond theoretical discussion to include the operationalization of character education principles into concrete practices, as well as the assessment of context-specific interventions that align with the distinctive cultural and religious context of Islamic boarding schools (Akbar et al., 2022a; Supratno, Subandiyah, & Raharjo, 2018; Umar et al., 2024a). Addressing this lacuna requires empirical inquiry capable of uncovering the contextual factors that either enable or constrain the effective integration of character education through peer interactions, thereby generating evidence-based insights to inform the design of interventions aligned with shared values, traditions, and communal ethos of Indonesian Islamic boarding schools.

The integration of character education and peer interactions a critical dimension of adolescent development, shaping not only moral values but also social behaviors and emotional well-being. A substantial body of research has demonstrated the profound influence of peer relationships, highlighting their dual capacity to foster constructive growth or engender detrimental outcomes. On the one hand, positive peer interactions have been consistently linked to enhanced empathy, cooperative attitudes, and the cultivation of prosocial dispositions that reinforce character education objectives (Khamida et al., 2022a; Komariah & Nihayah, 2023a). On the other hand, negative peer dynamics may trigger aggression, conformity to maladaptive norms, and vulnerability to peer pressure, thereby undermining the moral and social formation of adolescents (Suroso, Hendriarto, Mr, et al., 2021). These contrasting effects underscore the pivotal role of peer relationships as both a resource and a challenge in the effective integration of character education, necessitating deeper empirical inquiry into how such interactions can be harnessed to strengthen moral development within educational contexts. Within academic settings, peers function as influential agents of socialization that influence students' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors through ongoing interaction, feedback, and shared experiences (Akbar et al., 2022a; Hoang & Bui, 2023; Izfanna & Hisyam, 2012; Manshuruddin et al., 2019a; Muhyiddin et al., 2022). Despite this recognized influence, the complex patterns of peer interaction within the unique context of modern Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia have received limited scholarly attention. Although previous studies have explored the role of peer relationships in character development in general or conventional educational environments (Hidayati et al., 2022a; Tajeddin et al., 2021; Umar et al., 2024a), research specifically examining these dynamics in Islamic boarding schools remains sparse. This gap underscores the need for a thorough, context-sensitive investigation into how peer interactions operate and influence character education in Islamic boarding schools, where cultural traditions, religious values, and social structures intersect to shape adolescents' moral and personal development.

Modern Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia integrate academic education with Islamic moral and spiritual development. (Aziz et al., 2023; Komariah & Nihayah, 2023a). These long-standing institutions embrace a holistic educational philosophy that seeks to harmonize intellectual development with moral rectitude, thereby positioning character education as a core element of both curriculum and institutional ethos. Character formation permeates multiple dimensions of boarding school life, including religious instruction, ethical discourse, and communal practices, reflecting the integration of faith and morality in everyday learning (Manshuruddin et al., 2019a; Supratno, Subandiyah, & Raharjo, 2018; Umar et al., 2024a). Despite the central role of religion in Islamic education, the practical mechanisms of character education primarily through peer interactions remain underexplored, as existing studies focus mainly on theoretical foundations (Aziz et al., 2023; Hidayat & Bujuri, 2020a; Hidayati et al., 2022a; Komariah & Nihayah, 2023a), while empirical studies that interrogate its practical enactment within the distinctive social and cultural milieu of boarding schools are conspicuously limited. This evident gap in the literature underscores the pressing need for nuanced inquiry into how peer relationships function as both conduits and challenges to character education, thereby advancing scholarly discourse and informing contextually relevant strategies to strengthen moral development in modern Islamic boarding schools.

The integration of character education through peer interactions in modern Islamic boarding schools entails both significant opportunities and notable challenges, foremost among them the task of harmonizing deeply rooted religious traditions with contemporary pedagogical practices. Given that these institutions prioritize the transmission of Islamic teachings, their approaches may at times diverge from secular character education initiatives designed to promote universally applicable moral values (Muhyiddin et al., 2022; Suroso, Hendriarto, Mr, et al., 2021). This inherent tension calls for a judicious approach that harmonizes religious imperatives with broader ethical commitments, thereby fostering holistic character development without compromising the integrity of Islamic principles. Cultural norms and societal expectations in Indonesia strongly influence moral education, making it difficult to design character programs that suit diverse student groups (Manshuruddin et al., 2019a; Supratno, Subandiyah, & Raharjo, 2018; Umar et al., 2024a). Divergent interpretations of Islamic teachings and varied cultural attitudes toward character formation further underscore the difficulty of establishing uniform pedagogical strategies (Akbar et al., 2022a; Hidayat & Bujuri, 2020a). Negative peer influences, peer pressure, and conflicting values pose major obstacles to fostering positive character in boarding schools (Hidayati et al., 2022a). While peer interactions serve as powerful conduits for moral and social development, they can equally become crucibles of ethical ambiguity and moral dilemmas, necessitating vigilant oversight and adaptive strategies from educators and administrators. Yet, embedded within these challenges are significant opportunities for transformative change, as peer relationships, when effectively guided, can reinforce prosocial values, strengthen communal bonds, and advance the holistic mission of Islamic boarding schools in cultivating morally grounded and socially responsible individuals.

The immersive environment of boarding schools facilitates constant peer interaction, creating a rich context for the modeling and reinforcement of positive character traits (Aziz et al., 2023; Khamida et al., 2022a; Komariah & Nihayah, 2023a; Suroso, Hendriarto, Mr, et al., 2021). In addition, the strong communal culture characteristic of Islamic boarding schools nurtures students' sense of belonging and mutual solidarity, thereby promoting shared moral development and ethical reflection. By intentionally leveraging the strengths inherent in peer relationships and directing them toward cultivating virtuous conduct, modern Islamic boarding schools can more effectively fulfill their role as centers of moral formation and contributors to broader societal responsibility. Although the integration of character education through peer relationships presents multifaceted challenges—ranging from reconciling religious imperatives with contemporary pedagogical approaches to mitigating the risks of negative peer influence, it also opens avenues for transformative opportunities to nurture a generation deeply imbued with Islamic values. A nuanced understanding of the specific obstacles encountered in this process, alongside the contextual opportunities available, is therefore indispensable for devising effective, evidence-based strategies that not only address these challenges but also optimize the role of peer interactions in character formation. This highlights the urgent need for empirical studies of students' and educators' lived experiences to inform culturally and spiritually aligned character education interventions in Indonesian Islamic boarding schools.

This study has three objectives (1) to describe patterns of peer support, collaborative learning, and moral challenges among students at Pondok Modern Ponorogo; (2) to explain the mechanisms by which peer interactions promote or hinder character formation; and (3) to identify feasible, student-and-staff-endorsed interventions to strengthen positive peer influence and reduce harmful dynamics and it addresses these questions: (1) What are the prevailing patterns of peer support, collaborative learning, and moral challenge among students at Pondok Modern Ponorogo? (2) Through what mechanisms do peer interactions facilitate or obstruct the achievement of character-education goals? (3) Which practical interventions do students and staff perceive as most effective and feasible for improving peer-driven character formation?

## 2. METHODS

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design to explore peer support, collaborative learning, and moral challenges in the context of character education at Pondok Modern Ponorogo. The design was chosen to first measure the prevalence of peer-related phenomena through a structured survey, and then explain the mechanisms behind those patterns using in-depth interviews. This approach allowed for both breadth and depth, ensuring that quantitative trends were grounded in students' lived experiences.

Participants in the quantitative phase included 212 students from various grade levels, selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation across dormitory groups and academic tracks. The qualitative phase involved 15 purposively selected students, chosen based on survey responses to capture diverse perspectives, particularly those with high and low scores on peer support and moral challenge items. All participants provided informed consent, and the institutional review board of Universitas Negeri Malang granted ethical approval.

The survey instrument consisted of 30 Likert-scale items divided into three dimensions: Peer Support (PS), Collaborative Learning (CL), and Moral Challenges (MC). Each item was rated on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The instrument was adapted from validated scales in prior studies and refined through expert review and pilot testing. Reliability was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.926, indicating strong internal consistency. To complement the survey, semi-structured interviews were conducted using a guide that explored peer interactions, group dynamics, moral dilemmas, and suggestions for improving character education. Interviews lasted 30–45 minutes, were audio-recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim.

Survey data were collected in September 2025 during scheduled school hours, with assurances of anonymity and confidentiality. Interviews were conducted in October 2025 in private settings within the school compound. All data were securely stored and coded to protect participant identity. Quantitative responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, and frequency distributions, for each item and scale. No inferential tests were applied, as the study aimed to describe patterns rather than test group differences.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-step procedure: familiarization, coding, theme identification, review, definition, and integration. Themes were organized around the three core dimensions and used to explain survey patterns, highlight mechanisms, and identify actionable insights. To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed triangulation (survey and interviews), member checking (participants reviewed interview summaries), and peer debriefing with fellow researchers. Reflexivity was maintained through the use of analytic memos and audit trails during the coding process.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A survey ( $n = 212$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.926$ ) and 15 in-depth interviews produced convergent evidence across three analytic dimensions: Peer Support, Collaborative Learning, and Moral Challenges. Quantitative results show mid-to-high mean scores across PS and CL items (most means  $\approx 3.35$ – $3.65$ ) and substantial endorsement of moral-challenge items (means  $\approx 3.40$ – $3.65$ ). Interview data explain how these patterns arise in day-to-day dormitory and classroom life. Table 1 shows the survey results on the frequency and types of peer support behaviors reported by respondents.

The quantitative results indicate that most peer support items cluster within the 'agree' to 'strongly agree' range, with relatively high frequencies for PS.1–PS.3 and PS.6–PS.9, and mean scores between 3.40 and 3.60. This suggests that students generally experience strong peer encouragement, emotional support, and constructive discussions that reinforce daily religious practice and resilience. However, items related to belonging and openness, such as PS.4 and PS.5, show slightly lower endorsement rates, suggesting nuances in the quality of peer interactions. The qualitative findings further highlight this complexity: while many students report mutual encouragement and supportive dialogue, some express

hesitation to openly share spiritual experiences due to fear of judgment, subtle exclusion, or pressure to conform. Taken together, these insights suggest that peer relationships serve as essential scaffolding for sustaining moral and religious practices, although their inclusivity and openness may vary across different contexts.

**Table 1.** Results of the Survey from Peer Support Dimension (n = 212)

Code	Short item	Mean	Item SD	% Agree+Strongly Agree
PS.1	Peer support strengthens my adherence to Islamic values.	3.50	1.20	76.4%
PS.2	I rely on my peers to support me in maintaining Islamic principles.	3.45	1.25	82.5%
PS.3	My peers motivate me to live by Islamic values each day.	3.55	1.15	74.1%
PS.4	I am at ease sharing and discussing religious topics with peers.	3.40	1.30	80.2%
PS.5	My peers make me feel included and accepted in practicing religion.	3.35	1.28	78.3%
PS.6	My peers uphold and honor Islamic values in their interactions with me.	3.50	1.22	69.3%
PS.7	Peers provide me with emotional strength in facing religious difficulties.	3.60	1.18	75.0%
PS.8	I am comfortable sharing my faith experiences with peers.	3.40	1.30	74.0%
PS.9	My peers provide meaningful discussions about religious topics.	3.55	1.20	76.9%
PS.10	My peers honor and acknowledge my religious values and practices.	3.45	1.25	77.9%

Quantitative findings indicate that most peer support (PS) items clustered in the 'agree' to 'strongly agree' range, with high frequencies for items such as PS.1–PS.3 and PS.6–PS.9 (mean scores ranging from 3.40 to 3.60). In contrast, items related to belonging and complete openness (PS.4–PS.5) showed slightly lower endorsement. These patterns were echoed in the qualitative data, where students described strong mutual encouragement, emotional support, and constructive religious discussions that reinforced daily practice and resilience. At the same time, interviews revealed barriers to open dialogue for some students, including fear of judgment, subtle exclusion, and moments where solidarity risked becoming conformity. Taken together, these results suggest that peer ties function as a crucial scaffolding for moral practice, though their inclusivity and openness remain uneven. Table 2 presents survey findings on the nature and extent of collaborative learning practices and students' perceptions in modern Islamic boarding schools.

**Table 2.** Survey outcomes related to Collaborative Learning (n = 212)

Code	Short item	Mean	Item SD	% Agree + Strongly Agree
CL.1	I collaborate well with peers in completing academic tasks.	3.65	1.18	71.7%
CL.2	I feel motivated to participate in group projects with my classmates.	3.60	1.20	77.4%
CL.3	My peers and I engage in meaningful discussions to improve learning.	3.50	1.22	70.8%

Code	Short item	Mean	Item SD	% Agree + Strongly Agree
CL.4	Group study helps me understand challenging concepts better.	3.45	1.25	76.0%
CL.5	I feel comfortable seeking help from my peers when I don't understand something.	3.40	1.28	69.3%
CL.6	My peers and I work together to solve academic challenges.	3.55	1.20	75.0%
CL.7	Working together through collaborative learning enhances our creativity and innovation.	3.50	1.22	72.2%
CL.8	Group projects strengthen my teamwork abilities.	3.45	1.25	69.4%
CL.9	Group activities allow me to learn from my peers' viewpoints and experiences.	3.60	1.18	78.3%
CL.10	Collaborative learning strengthens my academic achievement.	3.55	1.20	75.0%
Scale summary	Collaborative Learning (n = 212)	3.53	0.09	Scale A+SA range: 69–78%

Table 2 highlights collaborative learning practices at Pondok Modern Ponorogo, East Java. The quantitative findings show that cooperative learning (CL) items are generally endorsed positively, with mean scores ranging from approximately 3.45 to 3.65 across CL.1–CL.10. This reflects frequent cooperation, motivation for group work, and a shared perception of academic benefits. Nonetheless, certain aspects, such as help-seeking and equal participation, receive higher proportions of neutral or disagree responses, suggesting uneven experiences. Qualitative insights provide further depth: when well-structured and collaborative, activities foster moral discussion, critical reflection, and the development of teamwork skills. However, students also report risks, including groupthink, unequal workload distribution, and free riding, which can weaken the intended moral engagement. Taken together, these findings suggest that collaborative formats are most productive when supported by transparent accountability and facilitation, while the absence of structure may instead reinforce harmful peer norms.

Table 3 presents an overview of students' moral challenges, highlighting the ethical dilemmas they face and the complexities of implementing character education in daily school life. By revealing the multifaceted tensions inherent in peer interactions and institutional norms, the results provide critical insights into the complexities of character formation, thereby highlighting the need for contextually grounded strategies to strengthen the integration of character education within Islamic boarding school environments.

**Table 3.** Results of the Survey from the Moral Challenges Dimension (n = 212)

Code	Short item	Mean	Item SD	% Agree+Strongly Agree
MC.1	I have experienced pressure from peers to skip religious activities.	3.4	1.28	64.6%
MC.2	Peers sometimes encourage gossip about other students.	3.6	1.22	79.1%
MC.3	I have been tempted or encouraged to cheat in academic tasks.	3.45	1.25	71.3%
MC.4	I feel pressured to conform even when I disagree on moral issues.	3.5	1.24	73.6%
MC.5	Peers ridicule sincere religious practice.	3.35	1.3	68.0%

Code	Short item	Mean	Item SD	% Agree+Strongly Agree
MC.6	I find it difficult to resist peer requests that contradict Islamic values.	3.48	1.26	70.2%
MC.7	Group norms sometimes reward expedient or dishonest behavior.	3.55	1.2	74.5%
MC.8	I have observed collusion among peers to avoid responsibilities.	3.42	1.27	69.8%
MC.9	Peers sometimes pressure others to hide mistakes or wrongdoing.	3.5	1.23	72.0%
MC.10	Moral dilemmas from peer influence cause stress or conflict for me.	3.65	1.18	77.4%
Scale summary	Moral Challenges (n = 212)	3.49	0.09	Scale A+SA range: 64–79%

The quantitative results indicate that many respondents report experiencing moral pressure, with mean MC item scores ranging from approximately 3.40 to 3.65. A notable proportion of students reported facing pressures to gossip, cheat, skip religious practices, or tolerate peer ridicule. The qualitative findings reveal that such moral dilemmas are perceived as double-edged: they can act as catalysts for reflection and personal growth when students receive adequate support, but they also become sources of stress and compromised integrity when social norms encourage expediency or conformity. Several students described the internal conflict they face in balancing loyalty to friends with their commitment to Islamic values. Overall, these insights highlight that moral pressure is a pervasive feature of peer life, and resilience in navigating it depends significantly on both individual moral reasoning and the presence of supportive structures.

### 3.1 The Interview Results

In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 students (P1–P15) at Pondok Modern Ponorogo, East Java, to examine both the challenges and opportunities of integrating character education through peer interactions. The inquiry centered on three dimensions peer support (PS), collaborative learning (CL), and moral challenges (MC) to construct a nuanced understanding of how peer relationships shape character development within the boarding school context. By analyzing these dimensions, the study aimed to reveal the subtle dynamics of peer engagement and their impact on students' moral and ethical growth, aligning with the broader goal of investigating character education in contemporary Islamic boarding schools. This approach underscores not only the positive contributions of peer support and collaborative learning in nurturing prosocial values but also the moral dilemmas students face, thereby offering critical insights into the complexities of peer-driven character formation.

### 3.2 The results from the PS dimension

The PS (Peer Support) dimension in character education within modern Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia reveals a complex interplay between supportive and challenging peer dynamics. Participants highlighted that positive peer relationships foster integrity, a sense of belonging, moral resilience, and confidence in upholding Islamic values, particularly during ethical challenges. Supportive peers provide solidarity, trust, and encouragement, strengthening students' commitment to moral principles.

Conversely, participants also acknowledged negative peer pressure, which can lead to conformity, erosion of personal identity, and compromise of ethical values. These risks underscore the need for discernment, self-awareness, and moral courage in navigating peer interactions. Several participants emphasized that while peer support can empower positive choices, vigilance is essential to resist harmful influences.

Overall, the findings indicate that peer support serves as both a catalyst and a challenge in character development. Therefore, educators and administrators in Islamic boarding schools must intentionally cultivate a positive peer culture and equip students with the skills to manage peer pressure effectively. Through proactive guidance and moral reinforcement, peer interactions can be harnessed to strengthen ethical behavior and develop future leaders with strong Islamic character.

### ***3.3 The results from the CL dimension***

An exploration of the Collaborative Learning (CL) dimension in character education within modern Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia reveals both opportunities and challenges inherent to peer interactions. Participants highlighted the constructive role of collaboration in reinforcing moral principles, fostering community, and cultivating collective responsibility, with several noting that working together on problem-solving and ethical discussions deepens their understanding of Islamic teachings and strengthens moral values. At the same time, concerns were raised about potential drawbacks, including tendencies toward groupthink, conformity, and unequal participation, in which some students may rely excessively on others. A few participants emphasized the need for balanced involvement, mutual respect, and inclusivity to ensure that diverse perspectives are valued and that collaboration remains effective. Moreover, collaborative learning was seen as a catalyst for critical thinking, encouraging students to question assumptions, engage in debates, and explore alternative solutions, thereby enhancing their capacity for informed moral decision-making. Overall, these insights underscore the complex interplay between collaborative learning and character development, suggesting that while collaboration can significantly enrich moral understanding and analytical skills, educators must carefully structure learning environments to mitigate risks and empower students to engage meaningfully in the process.

### ***3.4 The results from the MC dimension***

An examination of the Moral Challenges (MC) dimension shows that moral dilemmas in modern Islamic boarding schools play a dual role in students' ethical development. Participants viewed these challenges as constructive opportunities that strengthen resilience, test personal values, and deepen commitment to Islamic principles. At the same time, they highlighted significant difficulties, particularly the tension between religious convictions and peer pressure, which can encourage conformity and weaken moral judgment. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that moral challenges carry both developmental potential and ethical risks, underscoring the need for supportive strategies that help students navigate peer influences while remaining firmly grounded in Islamic values.

Participant P3 highlighted the importance of ethical reasoning, noting that rigorous deliberation and reflection provide the cognitive tools needed to confront moral dilemmas with integrity. Complementing this view, Participant P12 emphasized the role of Islamic teachings and ethical precepts in offering a principled framework for decision-making, ensuring alignment with deeply held values. Together, these perspectives underscore how peer interactions foster moral resilience and value-driven choices within the boarding school context. Participants viewed moral challenges as key drivers of moral autonomy, accountability, and self-discovery, while also recognizing risks, including peer pressure and moral ambiguity. These findings highlight the need for structured guidance to help students navigate dilemmas grounded in Islamic values, emphasizing that moral challenges are essential for strengthening ethical reasoning, resilience, and integrity.

## ***Discussion***

This study confirms that peer dynamics play a central role in shaping character education within the pesantren environment. Across all three dimensions—Peer Support (PS), Collaborative Learning (CL), and Moral Challenges (MC)—students reported high levels of engagement, with scale means

ranging from 3.48 to 3.53 and Cronbach's  $\alpha$  values above 0.92, indicating strong internal consistency. Interview data enriched these patterns by revealing the mechanisms behind peer influence: encouragement, modeling, and shared reflection foster moral growth, while conformity pressure, gossip, and collusion undermine it.

Peer support emerged as a stabilizing force in students' moral development. Most respondents agreed that their peers helped them uphold Islamic values, provided emotional support, and encouraged them to practice their religion. However, interviews revealed that this support is not uniformly inclusive—some students hesitated to express doubts or personal struggles due to fear of judgment or subtle exclusion. This suggests that while peer support is widespread, its depth and openness vary across social groups.

Collaborative learning was also positively perceived, with students valuing group work for its motivational and academic benefits. Yet, qualitative data highlighted risks, including unequal participation, free riding, and groupthink, which were common in unstructured tasks. These findings align with the broader literature on cooperative learning, which emphasizes the importance of clear roles, accountability, and facilitation to ensure that collaboration supports—not dilutes—character formation (Hidayati et al., 2022; Suroso et al., 2021).

Moral challenges were frequently reported, with students acknowledging peer pressure to gossip, cheat, skip religious duties, or conform to values that conflicted with their own. Interviews revealed that these dilemmas often triggered internal conflict, especially when loyalty to friends clashed with personal integrity. While some students resisted negative influence through moral reasoning or peer dialogue, others felt isolated or resigned. This highlights the importance of institutional support structures that enable students to navigate peer-driven moral dilemmas.

These findings align with prior studies showing that peer influence can both support and hinder moral development (Izfanna & Hisyam, 2012; Khamida et al., 2022). The pesantren context intensifies these dynamics due to its residential nature and the integration of religious and academic routines (Akbar et al., 2022; Komariah & Nihayah, 2023). Unlike earlier research that focused on curricular models or normative ideals, this study provides empirical evidence of how peer mechanisms operate in daily life and how they can be shaped through targeted interventions.

The study reveals that peer influence is neither inherently good nor inherently bad it is situational. Positive outcomes depend on structured opportunities for reflection, clear expectations, and adult facilitation. Harmful dynamics arise when peer norms go unchecked, and when students lack safe spaces to express dissent or seek guidance. The challenge for educators is not to eliminate peer influence, but to channel it toward constructive moral engagement.

Measurement limitations must be acknowledged. Survey responses may be affected by social desirability bias, and interviews, while rich, reflect a limited sample. Future studies could incorporate behavioral observation, staff perspectives, or longitudinal tracking to deepen understanding.

To strengthen character education in pesantren, schools should have a set of actionable strategies drawn from the findings to enhance peer dynamics in ways that both respect Islamic values and respond to the practical realities of student life. First, structured peer mentoring programs with clear roles, proper training, and supervision can foster more inclusive and consistent support among students. Second, collaborative tasks should be redesigned to embed individual accountability, rotating leadership, and facilitator feedback, ensuring both fairness and skill development. Third, institutions can introduce ethical reasoning sessions—brief, guided reflections held after group work or dormitory routines where students are encouraged to articulate and justify their moral decisions in a supportive environment. Fourth, alignment between dormitory and classroom policies is crucial to reinforce moral expectations consistently across settings. Finally, safe channels for dissent and reporting, such as anonymous feedback mechanisms or moderated peer forums, can help address concerns of exclusion, conformity, or misconduct. Together, these strategies provide scalable and context-sensitive approaches that can be effectively adapted across pesantren and other faith-based boarding schools.

This study advances the field by combining prevalence data with mechanism tracing, offering a model for mixed-methods character education research. It shifts the focus from abstract ideals to actionable peer-based strategies. Future research should test these interventions in practice, explore gender and age differences, and examine how peer influence interacts with teacher modeling and institutional culture.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that peer interactions are a powerful and complex force in shaping character education within the pesantren environment. Through a sequential mixed-methods approach, we identified clear patterns of peer support, collaborative learning, and moral challenges among students at Pondok Modern Ponorogo. Survey data revealed high levels of perceived support and engagement, while interviews uncovered the nuanced mechanisms, both constructive and destructive, through which peer influence operates in daily dormitory and classroom life. Peer support fosters resilience, religious commitment, and emotional well-being, but its depth and inclusivity vary. Collaborative learning enhances motivation and understanding when structured, yet risks groupthink and unequal participation when left unmoderated. Moral challenges are pervasive, often placing students in tension between loyalty and integrity. These findings suggest that peer influence is neither inherently beneficial nor inherently harmful; it depends on the context, facilitation, and institutional alignment. To strengthen character education, pesantren must move beyond abstract ideals and implement practical, peer-based strategies. Structured mentoring, accountable group tasks, ethical reasoning sessions, and aligned dormitory and classroom policies can help channel peer influence toward moral growth. By grounding interventions in students' lived experiences, this study offers a roadmap for educators and policymakers seeking to cultivate akhlaq through the everyday realities of peer life. Future research should expand to multiple pesantren contexts, incorporate staff and behavioral perspectives, and test the impact of specific interventions. By doing so, we can establish a more robust, context-sensitive foundation for character education that respects Islamic values while addressing the social dynamics of adolescent development.

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