

Adaptive Management and Social Capital in Rural Islamic Boarding School Enrollment Growth: A Qualitative Case Study from Tebo Regency, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Rural Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Indonesia face persistent enrollment volatility amid accelerating modernization, digital transformation of educational information-seeking, and intensified competition with credentialed formal schools. Existing scholarship has examined either conventional promotion or digital marketing in pesantren contexts, yet integrative analyses linking sociocultural ties, managerial decisions, and geographic-economic conditions remain limited. This study examines how Pondok Pesantren Darussalamah, located in a remote sub-district of Tebo Regency, Jambi Province, sustained enrollment growth from six students at its founding in 2011 to approximately 120 students by 2025. A descriptive qualitative case-study design was adopted. Data were collected between May and August 2025 through participant observation of daily and recruitment activities, semi-structured in-depth interviews with eight informants selected by purposive sampling (the head of the pesantren, three teachers, two active students, one alumnus, and one parent representative), and documentary review of brochures, social-media archives, and enrollment records spanning 2011–2025. Analysis followed the Miles and Huberman interactive model; credibility was secured through source and method triangulation, member checking, and prolonged engagement. Enrollment growth was sustained by five interlocking practices: relational engagement with the surrounding community, affordable-tuition and scholarship policies, integrated formal-religious curriculum with disciplinary structure, character-oriented extracurricular programs, and hybrid socio-religious-digital promotion. Persistent constraints included inadequate facilities, weak data-driven planning, geographic remoteness, and heterogeneous community religious perceptions. Mitigation depended on alumni-mediated social capital, hybrid promotion, economic affirmation, and incremental managerial professionalization. The findings suggest that recruitment success in rural pesantren depends less on formal marketing intensity than on relational legitimacy, managerial adaptability, and inclusive access policies.

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Introduction

Indonesian Islamic boarding schools, locally termed pesantren, occupy a distinctive position in the national education system as institutions that combine the transmission of religious knowledge with character formation, the preservation of Islamic intellectual traditions, and rural social mobility. Beyond their pedagogical role, pesantren function as community infrastructures that mediate the relationship between religious authority, family, and the local economy.

Yet contemporary pesantren particularly those operating in semi-urban and rural settings are increasingly embedded in a competitive educational landscape shaped by curricular modernization, the proliferation of credentialed formal schools, and information-rich parental decision-making. Parents now routinely weigh integrated curricula, adequate facilities, post-graduation prospects, and institutional accreditation when choosing where to enroll their children. Empirical evidence from across the archipelago suggests that smaller rural pesantren experience stagnating or fluctuating new-student intake when they are unable to articulate visible quality signals to prospective families. The challenge is intensified by the digital transformation of information-seeking, which compresses both the time and the space within which institutions can construct legitimacy with their public.

This dynamic is not merely a marketing problem; it reflects a deeper renegotiation of how religious-educational institutions justify their value in a pluralizing knowledge economy. A segment of the public continues to perceive pesantren as institutions oriented primarily toward ritual literacy, with limited preparation for twenty-first-century competencies. Simultaneously, expectations regarding instructional quality, residential conditions, and managerial transparency have risen sharply. Pesantren are therefore expected to retain their Islamic identity while concurrently adopting professional management practices, public-facing communication strategies, and program innovations relevant to contemporary needs. Conceptually, this dual demand can be productively read through the combined lens of social capital theory and educational marketing, where community trust, kinship networks, alumni reputation, and economic accessibility operate as decisive variables in parental decision-making.

A growing body of research has documented how individual pesantren respond to these pressures. Harahap (2022) examined marketing strategies at Pondok Pesantren Annaqosabandy and emphasized formal promotion through brochures and direct community outreach. Nasir (2024) analyzed marketing management at Pondok Pesantren At-Thoyyibah, with a focus on segmentation and positioning. Sestiawati (2024) studied marketing strategy at Pondok Pesantren Mukhtar Syafa'at and highlighted digital media as an emergent channel. Theoretical contributions have framed pesantren strategy through educational-marketing concepts (Kotler & Fox, 1995; Mulyasa, 2016) and through institutional-management lenses (Wardiyono, 2021). Three limitations, however, persist in this literature. First, most analyses isolate either conventional or digital promotion without examining how these channels interact with pre-existing relational ties within the surrounding community. Second, the role of socioeconomic affirmation and inclusive access policies while plainly relevant in low-income rural settings is rarely treated as an integral component of the recruitment apparatus. Third, geographic and infrastructural constraints in remote pesantren are typically described as background conditions rather than as variables that simultaneously shape, and are shaped by, managerial decisions. As a result, the literature provides limited insight into how multiple strategic domains interact under conditions of resource scarcity in rural settings.

The present study addresses these limitations by analyzing how five interconnected strategic domains relational, economic, pedagogical, extracurricular, and promotional interact within a single rural pesantren that has nonetheless achieved twentyfold enrollment growth over fourteen years. Pondok Pesantren Darussalamah, located in Sentano Hamlet, Balai Rajo Village, VII Koto Ilir Sub-district, Tebo Regency, Jambi Province, expanded its student body from six in 2011 to approximately 120 in 2025 despite limited facilities, geographic remoteness, and competition from public schools offering more diversified curricula. The analytical framework draws on social capital theory, in which community-embedded trust networks function as a productive resource for institutional action, and on adaptive management, which conceptualizes organizational practice as iterative learning under uncertainty. The intersection of these two lenses is suited to a setting where managerial professionalization is incremental and where legitimacy is anchored in interpersonal rather than purely procedural relationships.

On this basis, the study pursues three objectives: (i) to describe the strategies through which Pondok Pesantren Darussalamah has expanded its enrollment during the period 2011–2025; (ii) to identify the internal and external constraints encountered during recruitment; and (iii) to characterize the mitigation efforts deployed in response. A descriptive qualitative case-

study design was employed, drawing on participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentary review, and the data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 details the methodological procedures. Section 3 reports the findings in the same sequence as the research objectives. Section 4 places the findings in dialogue with prior literature and the analytical framework. Section 5 concludes with the contribution, limitations, and directions for further research.

Method

Research Design and Setting. This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with a single-case design. The case-study format was selected because the research questions concern processes and meanings situated within a bounded institutional context, where the phenomenon of interest cannot meaningfully be isolated from its setting. The case site is Pondok Pesantren Darussalamah, located in Sentano Hamlet, Balai Rajo Village, VII Koto Ilir Sub-district, Tebo Regency, Jambi Province, Indonesia. The pesantren was established in 2011 through community self-help and currently operates an integrated kindergarten–madrasah ibtidaiyah–madrasah tsanawiyah (TK-MI-MTs) educational unit alongside a traditional diniyah curriculum that emphasizes classical Islamic texts, Qur'anic memorization, and akhlak (ethical formation). The institution is residential for students from the second year of MTs onward.

Period of Data Collection. Field activities were conducted between May and August 2025—approximately fourteen weeks covering the new-student admissions cycle for the 2025/2026 academic year and the immediate post-admissions evaluation period. The timeframe was selected to permit observation of recruitment communications, the admissions interview process, and the early-stage adjustment of newly admitted students.

Informants and Sampling. Informants were selected through purposive sampling, with the criterion that each informant possessed direct knowledge of, or experience with, the recruitment process or its outcomes. Eight informants participated, representing five role categories: the head of the pesantren ($n = 1$), teachers/ustadz ($n = 3$), active students ($n = 2$), an alumnus ($n = 1$), and a parent representative ($n = 1$). The sample composition was designed to enable source triangulation across organizational hierarchy and across stakeholders external to the institution. Demographic and role characteristics of the informants are summarized in Table 1.

Code	Role	Sex	Tenure / Period	Method
I-01	Head of pesantren	M	Since 2011 (founding leader)	Interview, observation
I-02	Senior ustadz (kitab kuning)	M	11 years	Interview
I-03	Ustadzah (formal MTs)	F	6 years	Interview
I-04	Ustadz (extracurricular)	M	4 years	Interview
I-05	Active student (MTs III)	F	3 years	Interview
I-06	Active student (MI VI)	M	5 years	Interview
I-07	Alumnus	M	Cohort 2018–2021	Interview
I-08	Parent representative	F	Parent since 2022	Interview

Table 1. Profile of informants ($n = 8$).

Data Collection Procedures

Three concurrent techniques were applied. First, participant observation focused on three streams of activity: (a) daily routines of the pesantren, including dawn and evening religious sessions, classroom instruction, and residential life; (b) recruitment-related events, including open-house gatherings and religious assemblies that functioned as informal admissions venues; and (c) the institution-community interface during socio-religious occasions such as

remembrance gatherings (manaqib) and major Islamic commemorations (Peringatan Hari Besar Islam, PHBI). Field notes were maintained continuously, time-stamped to the nearest minute, and reviewed nightly to identify emergent themes.

Second, semi-structured in-depth interviews followed an interview guide structured around four thematic domains: strategy formulation, implementation experiences, perceived constraints, and mitigation responses. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was conducted in Indonesian, with selected exchanges in the local Jambi-Malay vernacular. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim within seventy-two hours of completion. Third, documentary materials were collected, including printed brochures (n = 4), photographic records of promotional banners, archived social-media posts from the pesantren's Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp Channels (January 2023 – August 2025), and the institution's internal enrollment records covering 2011–2025.

Recording Instruments and Tolerances

Audio interviews were captured at a sampling rate of 44.1 kHz and a bit depth of 16 bits using a smartphone microphone with a manufacturer-specified frequency response of 100 Hz – 8 kHz at a tolerance of ± 3 dB. Time-stamps for field notes and observation logs were recorded using a smartphone clock synchronized to network time, with a tolerance of less than one second relative to coordinated universal time. Photographic documentation of promotional materials was performed at a minimum resolution of 3024 × 4032 pixels and stored in lossless format prior to compression for archival purposes. These tolerances are reported to permit reproducibility and to support secondary verification of any temporal sequencing claims made in the analysis.

Data Analysis. Analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification, executed concurrently rather than sequentially. Initial open coding was conducted on transcripts and field notes, followed by axial coding to consolidate codes into categories aligned with the three research objectives. The first and second authors coded independently and reconciled discrepancies through line-by-line discussion until consensus was reached for every disputed code. Category-level matrices were used to display data across informants and methods, allowing convergent and divergent patterns to be examined systematically. Conclusions were progressively refined as new data accumulated and were validated against the analytical framework of social capital and adaptive management.

Trustworthiness. Credibility was secured through source triangulation (cross-checking statements among the head, teachers, students, alumnus, and parent), method triangulation (comparing interview, observation, and documentary data), and prolonged engagement at the site for fourteen weeks. Member checking was conducted with the head of the pesantren and two teacher informants to verify the interpretation of strategic intent. Confirmability was supported by an audit trail comprising field notes, transcripts, coding memos, and analytical decisions, all stored in date-stamped files. Ethical clearance was secured through institutional procedures, and informed consent was obtained from each informant prior to interview; parental consent was additionally obtained for student informants.

Result

Recruitment Strategies (Objective 1). Five integrated strategies were identified, each operating concurrently rather than sequentially. The strategies, their indicative practices, and the data sources from which they were derived are summarized in Table 2.

Strategy	Indicative practices	Data sources
Relational engagement	Attendance at community events (hajatan, takziah, pengajian); monthly majelis manaqib involving parents	I-01, I-02, I-08; observation log; FB posts
Affordable-tuition & scholarship	Reduced tuition; full scholarship for orphans and verified low-income families (RT/RW verification)	I-01, I-08; admissions records 2022–2025
Pedagogical integration & discipline	Combined formal (TK-MI-MTs) and diniyah curriculum; structured residential schedule (congregational prayer, evening study, duties)	I-01, I-02, I-03; observation log

Character-oriented extracurriculars	Computing, sewing, hadroh, sufi dance, agriculture; configured as life-skills modules	I-04, I-05, I-06; brochures
Hybrid socio-religious & digital promotion	Religious assemblies (PHBI) and community service; consistent posting on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp Channels	I-01, I-04; social-media archive 2023–2025

Table 2. Recruitment strategies, indicative practices, and data sources

The first strategy, relational engagement, was characterized by routine participation of the head and ustadz in life-cycle events of the surrounding community, including weddings, funerals, and ordinary religious gatherings. The monthly majelis manaqib functioned as a regular meeting point between the institution and parents, where curriculum issues, residential conditions, and student progress were discussed informally. The head observed: "Most of our students come because their family already knows us through these gatherings—they trust the place before they ever read a brochure" (I-01).

The second strategy, affordable-tuition and scholarship policies, comprised standardized tuition set below the regional average for comparable institutions and a full scholarship scheme for orphans and verified low-income families. Verification was performed via the village administrative chain (RT/RW), and the parent informant confirmed that the verification process was straightforward and free of intermediary fees (I-08). Admissions records indicated that approximately 18% of the 2024/2025 cohort were enrolled under full or partial scholarship arrangements.

The third strategy, pedagogical integration and discipline, combined the formal national curriculum delivered in the TK-MI-MTs unit with the diniyah curriculum focused on classical Islamic texts and Qur'anic memorization. The residential schedule structured the students' day around five congregational prayers, evening textual study, dawn recitation, and rotating residential duties. Teachers framed this as the formation of "disciplined dispositions" that could be transferred to academic and post-graduation contexts (I-02, I-03).

The fourth strategy, character-oriented extracurricular development, organized non-curricular activities computing, tailoring, hadroh percussion, sufi dance, and small-scale agriculture as life-skills modules with explicit links to post-graduation possibilities. Students reported these activities as significant in their decision to remain at the pesantren (I-05, I-06).

The fifth strategy, hybrid socio-religious and digital promotion, used religious assemblies and community service as offline visibility platforms while documenting daily life and student achievements on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp Channels. Social-media archives showed a posting cadence of approximately three to five entries per week between January 2023 and August 2025, with peaks coinciding with major religious commemorations and the new-student admissions period.

Constraints in Implementation (Objective 2)

Four categories of constraint emerged. Internally, facilities were limited: classrooms were modest in size, residential capacity was at saturation during the 2024/2025 cycle, and dedicated laboratory and library spaces were not yet available. The internal evaluation system was largely informal; recruitment was reviewed at the close of each admissions cycle through narrative discussion rather than indicator-based assessment, and a structured database of prospective students had not been established.

Externally, three constraints were salient. First, the geographic position of the pesantren—approximately twelve kilometers from the nearest paved sub-district road—imposed transportation difficulties, particularly during the rainy season when the access track became seasonally impassable. Second, public schools and other private educational institutions in the regency offered curricula perceived by some parents as more diversified, including English-language enrichment and computer-based assessment, which some parents weighed against the perceived strengths of the pesantren. Third, the heterogeneity of religious orientations within the surrounding community produced occasional reservations regarding particular ritual practices observed at the pesantren, which influenced the decision-making of a subset of prospective parents. The parent informant articulated this as "hesitation, not rejection"—a wariness that was typically resolved through direct visits to the pesantren rather than through

promotional content (I-08).

Mitigation Efforts (Objective 3)

Four categories of mitigation were observed. The first was the activation of social capital through alumni and parent networks. Alumni in the 2018–2021 cohorts maintained an informal communication group through which graduation news and event announcements circulated; in some cases, alumni also accompanied prospective parents on initial site visits. The alumnus informant described this as "recommendation by presence rather than by argument" (I-07).

The second was the integration of conventional and digital promotion. Brochures and banners continued to be distributed at strategic geographic points, but their content was deliberately aligned with the visual themes of digital posts. A small communication team comprising teachers and senior students managed posting schedules, captioning, and basic video editing, with a weekly internal review.

The third was economic affirmation through targeted scholarship allocation and incremental upgrading of facilities. Between 2023 and 2025, the institution renovated two residential rooms, added basic teaching aids, and acquired a small set of digital learning devices. The pace of upgrading was constrained by available revenue and donor support but was sustained through a transparent reporting practice to parents.

The fourth was the gradual professionalization of evaluation and planning. Beginning with the 2024/2025 cycle, the head and senior teachers introduced post-admissions evaluation sessions in which information distribution, parent inquiries, and conversion rates were discussed against simple numerical indicators. Parental feedback obtained during the monthly majelis manaqib was used as input for the subsequent admissions cycle, providing a feedback loop characteristic of adaptive management.

Discussion

The findings extend prior research on pesantren marketing in three respects. First, where Harahap (2022), Nasir (2024), and Sestiawati (2024) examined recruitment as a comparatively bounded marketing activity either conventional or digital the present case shows that strategy is most usefully read as a coupled system in which relational, economic, pedagogical, extracurricular, and promotional domains operate concurrently and reinforce one another. The relative weight of these domains shifts with circumstance: digital promotion intensifies during the admissions cycle, while relational engagement supplies a continuous, low-amplitude legitimacy on which discrete promotional efforts depend. This coupling is consistent with Kotler and Fox's (1995) argument that institutional reputation is constructed across multiple touchpoints rather than at any single one, and it adds an empirical illustration of how the touchpoints interact under conditions of resource scarcity.

Second, the case foregrounds social capital as a productive resource for institutional action. Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000) characterized social capital as a feature of relationships that facilitates coordinated action, and the present findings indicate that this resource is not residual but instrumental in pesantren recruitment. The monthly majelis manaqib, alumni-mediated site visits, and the institution's participation in life-cycle events of the community generated trust that subsequent promotional content could not, in itself, manufacture. This observation aligns with Tan's (2014) account of educative tradition in Indonesian Islamic schools, in which the school is understood as embedded in, rather than adjacent to, the community. It also nuances the educational-marketing literature by pointing to a limit of formal marketing intensity: in low-income rural settings, the marginal returns of promotional volume diminish quickly when relational legitimacy is absent.

Third, the trajectory of internal evaluation observed at the case site illustrates the dynamics of adaptive management (Williams, 2011) in a small organizational setting. The pesantren did not begin with an indicator-based planning system; rather, evaluation practices emerged incrementally as the head and senior teachers responded to repeated admissions cycles. The introduction of post-admissions evaluation sessions in the 2024/2025 cycle is a small but consequential shift, marking the transition from narrative review to numerical referencing. This observation supports the argument that managerial professionalization in community-embedded institutions tends to be cumulative rather than transformative, and that recommendations for reform should be calibrated to this pace rather than imported wholesale

from corporate management templates.

Quantitatively, the institution grew from six students in 2011 to approximately 120 in 2025, an absolute increase of approximately 114 students over fourteen years, equivalent to a compound annual growth rate of approximately 23%. Approximately 18% of the 2024/2025 cohort were enrolled under full or partial scholarship arrangements, and the social-media posting cadence stabilized at three to five entries per week between January 2023 and August 2025. These figures are descriptive rather than evaluative; they are reported here to anchor subsequent comparative work, not to claim a causal effect of any single strategy.

The findings also clarify the role of geographic and religious-perceptual constraints. Geographic remoteness functioned as a filter rather than as an absolute barrier: prospective parents who were already embedded in the institution's relational network treated the access difficulties as manageable, whereas parents without prior relational ties weighed the same conditions more heavily. Heterogeneous religious perceptions in the surrounding community generated hesitation rather than rejection; the parent informant's framing of this distinction (I-08) suggests that direct site visits, not additional promotional content, were the resolution mechanism. These observations indicate that the boundary conditions for the five-strategy system are not purely material but also relational and interpretive.

Theoretical and Practical Implications. Theoretically, the study contributes to the educational-marketing literature by demonstrating that, in community-embedded institutions, marketing strategy is more productively conceptualized as a relational scaffold than as a promotional pipeline. It also contributes to the social capital literature by showing how alumni networks function as low-cost recruitment infrastructure in rural settings where formal marketing reach is limited. Practically, the findings suggest that pesantren managers in similar settings should prioritize the maintenance of relational engagement and alumni networks before investing heavily in digital production capacity, and should treat indicator-based evaluation as a cumulative discipline rather than a one-off reform.

Limitations. Three limitations are acknowledged. First, the single-case design constrains the statistical generalizability of the findings; analytic generalization to comparable rural pesantren is plausible but should be tested through multi-site replication. Second, the fourteen-week field window covered one full admissions cycle, which captures the operational rhythm of the institution but cannot capture longer trajectories of reputational change. Third, the informant pool comprised eight participants; while saturation was reached on the three research objectives, perspectives from non-enrolling families who would speak to recruitment failure rather than recruitment success were not represented in the design and constitute a clear next step.

Conclusion

Returning to the three objectives stated in the Introduction, the study has shown that enrollment growth at Pondok Pesantren Darussalamah was sustained through an integrated set of relational, economic, pedagogical, extracurricular, and promotional practices, that internal and external constraints centered on facilities, planning capacity, geographic remoteness, and religious-perceptual heterogeneity, and that mitigation depended on alumni-mediated social capital, hybrid promotion, economic affirmation, and incremental managerial professionalization. The case suggests that, in rural pesantren, recruitment success is anchored less in the intensity of formal marketing than in the quality of relational legitimacy, the adaptability of management, and the inclusiveness of access policies. Further research is encouraged in three directions: comparative study of urban and rural pesantren under shared methodological design; longitudinal investigation of the long-term effects of scholarship programs on student retention and post-graduation outcomes; and examination of non-enrolling families to characterize the boundary conditions of community-embedded recruitment systems.

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