

## The Role of Service Quality in *Santri* Satisfaction at the Darussalam Islamic Boarding School Cooperative, Tanjung Jabung Timur Regency

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### Abstract:

The increasing demands of society on educational institutions to produce high-quality future generations have pushed Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) to integrate not only religious education but also economic empowerment through cooperative enterprises. This study aims to explore the role of service quality in influencing *santri* satisfaction within the Darussalam Islamic Boarding School Cooperative in Tanjung Jabung Timur Regency. Using a qualitative approach with a case study strategy, the research collected primary data through observation, interviews, and documentation involving *santri* who had made repeated purchases. The findings reveal that the cooperative plays a dual role as both a provider of essential goods and a platform for entrepreneurial education. Empathy, responsiveness, and reliability emerged as key service quality dimensions contributing to customer satisfaction. However, the study also identified structural limitations such as inconsistent service procedures and inadequate facilities. These results highlight the significance of aligning service quality with Islamic values and educational goals to enhance both satisfaction and institutional effectiveness. The study contributes to the literature by contextualizing service quality within faith-based educational settings and offers practical recommendations for strengthening cooperative operations in *pesantren* environments.

### Keywords:

*Pesantren cooperative, service quality, santri satisfaction, Islamic education, economic empowerment, Kopontren.*



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## INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools (*pondok pesantren*) play a vital role in shaping the character and intellectual foundation of future generations, particularly in countries with a majority Muslim population such as Indonesia. These institutions are not only centers of religious education but also serve as platforms for cultivating moral values and community empowerment. In recent decades, the educational landscape has experienced increasing demands for holistic development, urging *pesantren* to expand their functions beyond religious instruction. In this context, economic empowerment becomes a strategic domain for broadening the impact of *pesantren*, particularly through cooperative institutions that serve the daily needs of *santri*. The presence of Islamic boarding school cooperatives (commonly referred to as *kopontren*) illustrates the integration of education and economy, aiming to produce self-reliant and skilled students capable of contributing to broader societal development.

Despite the steady growth of *kopontren* as socio-economic institutions within *pesantren* ecosystems, many of them still face structural and operational challenges in optimizing service quality. Service in cooperative institutions is often perceived merely as a transactional interaction, with limited attention to customer experience and satisfaction especially in settings where professionalism and standardized service delivery are yet to be institutionalized. The urgency to improve service quality arises from the increasingly competitive landscape, where modern retail formats and e-commerce platforms offer more attractive and efficient alternatives. Within this reality, *kopontren* must be able to enhance their managerial capabilities to remain relevant, competitive, and sustainable. However, limited empirical studies have been conducted to examine how *kopontren* services directly influence the satisfaction of their core members namely, the *santri* themselves.

To conceptualize the role of service quality in cooperative-based economic empowerment, this study adopts a theoretical framework grounded in sociological role theory and the Servqual model. Role theory highlights the expected behaviors embedded within institutional functions and social interactions, particularly relevant when cooperative staff are expected to embody service-oriented attitudes in alignment with community values. Meanwhile, the Servqual model developed by Parasuraman et al. offers five dimensions of service quality: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, which have been widely applied across both conventional and Islamic service contexts. Integrating these two frameworks enables a deeper exploration of how interpersonal dynamics, institutional roles, and quality standards intersect to influence satisfaction among cooperative users in Islamic boarding school environments.

This study seeks to answer two primary research questions: (1) How effective is the economic empowerment of *pesantren* through the Darussalam Islamic Boarding School Cooperative in Tanjung Jabung Timur? and (2) What are the supporting and inhibiting factors of service quality in influencing *santri* satisfaction within the cooperative? In line with these objectives, the study focuses on observing and analyzing the experiences of *santri* who have made repeated purchases in the cooperative, using qualitative methods involving observation, interviews, and documentation. The selected case of *Kopontren* Darussalam serves as a microcosm to understand broader dynamics in *pesantren*-based economic institutions.

The scientific contribution of this article lies in its contextualization of service quality theory within the unique institutional framework of *kopontren*, which integrates religious, educational, and economic values. By articulating the voices and experiences of *santri*, this study addresses a gap in the literature on cooperative service performance in faith-based educational institutions. Furthermore, the research provides practical recommendations for improving cooperative services and policy insights for *pesantren* stakeholders aiming to strengthen the institutional economy through quality-centered service transformation.

The conceptual foundation of this study rests on two central constructs: “role” and “service quality.” The notion of role, as developed within classical sociological theory, refers to patterns of behavior expected from individuals occupying particular social statuses. According to Soekanto (2019), role functions as the dynamic aspect of status, encompassing both normative expectations

and social obligations. Levinson, as cited by Soekanto, categorizes role into three dimensions: norms linked to one's social position, concepts of action within organizational structures, and individual behaviors deemed essential for social functioning (Soekanto 2019). Merton (2007) adds to this by introducing the concept of a "role set," emphasizing the web of interactions resulting from multiple social expectations. These theoretical insights are relevant in the context of cooperative management within *pesantren*, where staff and administrators are not only economic agents but also social actors entrusted with upholding communal values. Service quality, in contrast, stems from management and marketing sciences. It refers to the characteristics of a service that determine its ability to meet or exceed customer expectations. The Servqual model, developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, identifies five dimensions tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy which have been widely adopted in assessing service performance across sectors, including Islamic financial institutions and cooperative enterprises.

A growing body of empirical research has examined the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in both conventional and Islamic settings. For instance, Janahi and Al Mubarak (2017) demonstrated that responsiveness and assurance significantly influenced customer satisfaction in Islamic banks (Janahi & Al Mubarak, 2017). Similarly, Ningsih et al. (2019) found that e-service quality in Islamic banking correlated positively with customer loyalty and trust (Ningsih et al., 2019). Studies in cooperative contexts also reveal that service quality plays a pivotal role in shaping member satisfaction and organizational sustainability (Katarachia, 2013). In faith-based institutions such as *kopontren*, Hakim et al. (2024) highlight the significance of integrating religious values into service delivery to meet member expectations (Hakim et al., 2024). However, despite the rising interest in Islamic service quality, research specifically focusing on the experiences of *santri* within cooperative frameworks remains scarce.

This literature gap presents an opportunity to explore service quality from the perspective of *santri* as primary users of *pesantren* cooperatives. Most existing studies focus on external customers or generic cooperative members without distinguishing the unique socio-religious context of *pesantren* communities. Moreover, few studies adopt a qualitative approach that captures the depth and nuances of user experiences in such institutions. Arse (2019) notes that trust and loyalty in Islamic cooperative settings are not only driven by transactional elements but also by perceived sincerity and ethical alignment of the service providers (Arse, 2019). Noviarita et al. (2024) further emphasize the role of empathy and relational service dynamics in shaping satisfaction levels among users of Islamic financial products (Noviarita et al., 2024). However, these insights are yet to be applied rigorously to the internal dynamics of *kopontren*, particularly from the lens of student-users.

This article positions itself as a response to the aforementioned gaps by offering a focused investigation of how service quality affects *santri* satisfaction within a *pesantren* cooperative. Unlike previous studies that analyze service quality using quantitative surveys or from management perspectives, this study centers the lived experiences of *santri* through a qualitative lens. The case of Darussalam Islamic Boarding School Cooperative offers a unique site where educational, religious, and economic elements intersect, providing a rich context for exploring how service quality is perceived, experienced, and evaluated by its core users. This approach not only enriches the

discourse on cooperative performance but also brings forth voices that are often underrepresented in institutional assessments.

In reviewing the dominant theoretical and methodological trends, it is evident that most studies employ the SERVQUAL model quantitatively, often neglecting deeper sociocultural interpretations. For example, Saeed et al. (2014) utilized SERVQUAL dimensions to assess loyalty in Islamic banking but overlooked contextual values such as religious obligations and trust in leadership (Saeed et al., 2014). Rehman (2012), though acknowledging cultural influences, primarily adopted a positivist design that limited interpretative depth (Rehman, 2012). This study, by contrast, draws on a grounded and sociological approach that respects the embeddedness of cooperative practices in *pesantren* life. The integration of role theory adds a behavioral and institutional dimension, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of service interactions.

Based on this synthesis, a conceptual framework is developed linking the role expectations of cooperative staff, the dimensions of service quality, and the satisfaction experiences of *santri*. This framework guides the methodological choices of the study and serves as the foundation for the empirical inquiry. By adopting a case study approach and prioritizing *santri* voices, this article contributes to both theory and practice, bridging gaps in the literature and offering actionable insights for cooperative development in Islamic educational contexts.

## METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study strategy, which aims to understand in depth the role of service quality in student satisfaction at the Darussalam Islamic Boarding School Cooperative (*Kopontren*), East Tanjung Jabung Regency. The case study strategy was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the phenomenon in its original context with a holistic and contextual approach, according to the characteristics of complex problems and related to social interaction between students as consumers and cooperatives as service providers (Yin, 2018). The data sources in this study include primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through direct observation of service activities in the cooperative environment, in-depth interviews with students as key informants, and documentation in the form of cooperative transaction archives and other relevant internal data. Secondary data includes cooperative reports, official documents of Islamic boarding schools, and related theoretical references. Data collection techniques were carried out in a triangulate manner to increase validity, namely by participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation analysis, as suggested in social qualitative studies (Guest et al., 2017).

The inclusion criteria for informants in this study are active students who have used cooperative services more than twice in the last six months, as recorded in the cooperative's monthly transaction data which shows as many as 205 active customers. Informants must also have direct experience transacting with cooperatives and be willing to provide data through in-depth interviews. The exclusion criteria include students who have never used cooperative services and do not have direct experience with service activities. The unit of analysis in this study is the perception and experience of students as the main consumers of the quality of cooperative services. The data analysis technique used is thematic analysis with an open coding and axial coding approach, which

allows the grouping of data into main themes based on the similarity of meaning and relationships between categories (Nowell et al., 2017). The analysis was carried out using the help of NVivo 12 qualitative software to facilitate coding and tracing thematic patterns from interview and observation data. To test the validity of the data, triangulation of sources, techniques, and time is used as commonly applied in qualitative approaches, in order to obtain credible and scientifically accountable data (Fusch et al., 2018). The member check technique is also carried out by confirming the findings to the main informant so that the interpretation carried out by the researcher is in accordance with the reality experienced by the participants (Birt et al., 2016).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

The results of this study highlight three major thematic categories that emerged from field data: (1) the effectiveness of economic empowerment through the *pesantren* cooperative, (2) the contributing factors supporting service quality, and (3) the inhibiting factors affecting *santri* satisfaction.

First, in terms of economic empowerment, the cooperative at Darussalam Islamic Boarding School has proven effective in providing students with essential goods and services, thereby fostering a culture of self-sufficiency and economic awareness among *santri*. Based on repeated observations and interviews, the cooperative has evolved from a small-scale business selling snacks and stationery to a more complex institution offering religious books, digital printing services, and essential student supplies. The cooperative's role was viewed not merely as a commercial entity but as a vehicle for practical learning in entrepreneurship and financial management, aligning with the institution's broader educational mission.

Second, the supporting factors for service quality were consistently linked to three core dimensions: empathy, responsiveness, and reliability. Many *santri* respondents expressed satisfaction with the friendly and respectful attitude of cooperative staff, who often shared the same educational background and religious values. This emotional proximity fostered a sense of mutual trust and reduced transactional distance. Responsiveness was reflected in the staff's willingness to accommodate product requests, assist with purchase decisions, and ensure immediate service during peak school hours. Reliability was identified in the consistency of service, particularly in maintaining stock availability and accurate billing. Some respondents noted that the cooperative's adherence to Islamic values such as honesty and modesty contributed significantly to their overall sense of satisfaction with the service.

Third, despite the positive aspects, several inhibiting factors were identified that affected the cooperative's ability to deliver consistently high-quality service. Key issues included variability in service speed, especially during busy periods, and a lack of standard operating procedures for transaction handling and customer service. Some *santri* expressed frustration over delayed service and uncoordinated staff rotations that led to service inconsistencies. Additionally, the physical layout of the cooperative, which was deemed cramped and inefficient by several respondents, limited the

smooth flow of transactions and reduced comfort for customers. Limited investment in digital infrastructure also emerged as a barrier, with manual recording systems slowing down operations and increasing the risk of administrative errors.

Collectively, these results underscore the dual nature of the cooperative as both an educational and service-oriented entity. While the integration of Islamic values and a shared cultural identity enhance perceived service quality and satisfaction, structural and managerial improvements remain necessary to sustain and expand the cooperative's effectiveness. The findings emphasize the importance of balancing relational service elements with systematic organizational improvements to optimize the cooperative's role in *pesantren*-based economic empowerment.

## Discussion

The findings of this study affirm that service quality plays a central role in shaping *santri* satisfaction within the Darussalam *pesantren* cooperative, thereby addressing the core objectives of the research. The data revealed that empathy, responsiveness, and reliability were the most prominent dimensions of service quality influencing the perceptions of *santri* users. This is aligned with the research objective of understanding both the enabling and inhibiting factors affecting satisfaction, as well as evaluating the effectiveness of *pesantren*-based economic empowerment. These results suggest that the cooperative is not only a commercial entity but also an educational space where students engage in socially meaningful and economically formative activities.

The interpretation of these findings through the lens of role theory enhances our understanding of how staff and administrators function within the cooperative. According to Merton's concept of "role sets," each actor occupies a social position with expected behaviors that contribute to institutional stability. The cooperative's staff many of whom are embedded within the *pesantren* culture embody dual roles as service providers and moral exemplars. This dynamic affirms previous theoretical positions that view roles as socially embedded, structured by norms and expectations (Soekanto, 2009). The positive *santri* experiences related to staff empathy and cultural proximity can thus be seen as manifestations of role congruence between providers and users. Service quality here is not merely operational but is also deeply intertwined with moral expectations and social trust within the *pesantren* setting.

Compared with previous studies, these findings both support and extend existing knowledge. For instance, Janahi and Al Mubarak (2017) also found responsiveness and assurance to be central predictors of customer satisfaction in Islamic institutions (Janahi & Al Mubarak, 2017). Similarly, Noviarita et al. (2024) highlighted empathy as a critical driver in faith-based financial services (Noviarita et al., 2024). However, most prior studies were quantitative and did not explore the experiential dimension of satisfaction in depth. This study's qualitative approach contributes new insights by foregrounding the voice of *santri*, allowing a deeper understanding of how cultural and religious context shapes service perceptions. Moreover, while studies like Rehman (2012) explored Islamic service environments, they primarily focused on customer satisfaction from a consumerist perspective rather than educational or community-based frameworks (Rehman, 2012).

This article's scientific contribution lies in its ability to integrate sociological and managerial perspectives within a faith-based cooperative framework. It moves beyond generic models like Servqual by demonstrating that service quality in *pesantren* cooperatives must also be understood through ethical alignment, communal identity, and educational roles. These findings provide empirical grounding to Hakim et al.'s (2024) assertion that Sharia-based service standards should reflect not just operational excellence but also religious and interpersonal values (Hakim et al., 2024). Additionally, the study contributes methodologically by employing triangulation in data collection and analysis offering a robust model for qualitative research in Islamic economic contexts.

Despite its strengths, the study has several limitations. First, the sample was confined to repeat customers within a single *pesantren*, which may limit generalizability to other cooperative or *pesantren* contexts. Second, the absence of digital tools in data analysis constrained the potential for broader textual coding or pattern detection. Third, the lack of longitudinal data prevents the capture of evolving satisfaction patterns over time. These limitations suggest caution in extrapolating the findings, although the depth of data offers strong internal validity.

The implications of this study are significant for both practitioners and policymakers. For cooperative managers within *pesantren*, the findings underscore the need to maintain high levels of empathy and reliability while also addressing organizational barriers like inconsistent procedures and inadequate facilities. Training programs should emphasize not only technical competencies but also ethical and relational skills. For policymakers in Islamic education and cooperative development, there is a need to support hybrid institutional models that serve both educational and economic functions. Finally, future research should consider expanding the scope to include comparative studies across multiple *pesantren* cooperatives or incorporating mixed-method designs to bridge qualitative depth with quantitative generalizability.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the service quality provided by the Darussalam Islamic Boarding School Cooperative significantly contributes to the satisfaction of *santri* as both consumers and members of the educational institution. Through qualitative analysis, it was found that empathy, responsiveness, and reliability are the most influential dimensions in shaping positive service perceptions among *santri*. The cooperative has not only fulfilled its economic function but has also become a medium for value-based learning, practical entrepreneurship, and social engagement within the *pesantren* environment. Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of a service quality framework that is rooted in Islamic educational values, highlighting the importance of role congruence, interpersonal ethics, and religious alignment in cooperative service delivery. Practically, the study offers guidance for *pesantren*-based cooperatives in strengthening their organizational capacity by addressing managerial limitations and enhancing relational service dimensions. The findings support the view that integrating economic activities into religious educational settings can yield both institutional sustainability and community empowerment.

Future research may benefit from adopting a comparative or longitudinal design to explore variations in *santri* satisfaction across different cooperative models or over time. It is also

recommended that practitioners and policymakers invest in service innovations that align with Islamic ethical standards while incorporating technological improvements to ensure sustainable and scalable cooperative operations in the *pesantren* context.

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