

THE ROLE OF THE KYAI IN SHAPING COMMUNITY PREFERENCES: MEDIATING THE IMPACT OF SERVICE QUALITY AND TEACHER COMMITMENT

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ABSTRACT

Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia are growing rapidly, yet many still struggle to maintain competitiveness and community trust. This study examines the influence of service quality and work commitment on preferences in choosing pesantren, with patronage figures (kyai) as mediating variables. Using a quantitative explanatory causal design, data were collected from 380 respondents, consisting of students and guardians at Nurul Jadid Islamic Boarding School, East Java. The data were analyzed with Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling. The results reveal that service quality significantly affects both patronage figures ($\beta = 0.502$, $p < 0.001$) and preferences ($\beta = 0.243$, $p < 0.01$), whereas work commitment significantly influences patronage figures ($\beta = 0.354$, $p < 0.001$) but has no direct effect on preferences ($\beta = 0.096$, $p = 0.212$). Patronage figures have the strongest impact on preferences ($\beta = 0.539$, $p < 0.001$) and mediate the effects of both service quality ($\beta = 0.475$, $p < 0.001$) and work commitment ($\beta = 0.233$, $p < 0.001$). These findings confirm that technical factors such as service quality and teacher commitment shape community preferences only when reinforced by the authority and legitimacy of kyai leadership. The study advances the SERVQUAL and Social Exchange frameworks in faith-based education and suggests that pesantren should integrate service improvements with stronger leadership visibility to sustain community loyalty and institutional competitiveness. The research implies that to effectively increase community preference for Islamic boarding school institutions (pesantren), institutions must not only focus on tangible improvements in service quality but also strategically emphasize the selection and visibility of a respected patronage figure (kyai) who possesses strong legitimacy in the eyes of the community.

Keywords: Patronage Figures, Parental preference, Pesantren, Service Quality, Work Commitment

INTRODUCTION

Education around the world is no longer judged only by academic performance but also by its ability to integrate moral and cultural values (Alam & Mohanty, 2023; Gamage et al., 2021; Viberg et al., 2024). This shift occurs because global competition between educational institutions requires not only quality of service but also credible and culturally responsive leadership to maintain public trust. Scholars have shown that institutions with strong service quality and responsive leadership are more successful in building legitimacy and long-term growth (Hue et al., 2022; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021; Steć & Kulik, 2021; Walid et al., 2024). In many contexts, respected patronage figures play a central role as mediators that influence public preferences and strengthen institutional credibility (Amzat et al., 2023; Bastrygina et al., 2024; Heley et al., 2024). Therefore, examining the combined influence of service quality and patronage leadership is essential to understand how educational institutions compete and remain sustainable in a rapidly changing global landscape. This global dynamic is also reflected in

Indonesia, where pesantren are experiencing rapid growth as families increasingly seek institutions that combine academic learning with a strong religious and moral foundation.

The phenomenon of increasing the number of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia indicates the increasing interest of the community in sending their children to Islamic-based educational institutions (Fauzah & Faizi, 2024; Zuhdi & Dobson, 2024). This aligns with the growing recognition of the importance of education grounded in moral and religious values in shaping the character of high-quality individuals (Mujahid, 2021; Rozi et al., 2023; Mahmud et al., 2023; Akhmad, 2025). However, despite the growth of Islamic boarding schools, many face significant challenges in maintaining their relevance and competitiveness in the modern era. Social and cultural factors play a crucial role in influencing people's preferences for Islamic boarding schools, primarily through the patronage of figures such as kiai who have a significant influence in shaping public trust (Hidayah et al., 2024; Rohman et al., 2025; Ihsan et al., 2025). In addition, the quality of educational services and the commitment of educators are also fundamental elements in attracting public interest in Islamic boarding schools. Therefore, a deep understanding of these factors is important in developing appropriate strategies to increase the attractiveness and effectiveness of Islamic boarding schools as Islamic educational institutions.

This research builds on previous studies that examined similar variables and contexts. Among them is research conducted by Demis Alamirew (2024), who found that variables related to reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and physical evidence are determining factors in assessing and improving the quality of educational institutions. Other research references, as conveyed by Azizah et al (2021) in their research, stated that the leadership of Islamic boarding school educational institutions that are fostered by kyais, who are patronage figures in educational institutions, can increase public trust and increase the loyalty of students and guardians of students towards Islamic boarding school educational institutions. In addition, several similar studies have also been conducted, which have found that the commitment made by education in educating and fostering students has a significant impact on student and parent satisfaction and the increasing preference of the community in choosing these educational institutions compared to other educational institutions (Fahmi et al., 2023; Nawas et al., 2024; Udhma & Minarti, 2025). These findings show that service quality, leadership, and work commitment are essential dimensions in educational choice. However, most studies have examined them separately.

Based on the literature review, it is evident that most previous studies have tended to focus on service quality, leadership, and work commitment separately, resulting in a lack of comprehensive exploration of the relationship between these elements. However, in the context of pesantren, the dynamics of interaction between these three aspects often cannot be understood separately because of the central role of patronage figures in building public trust. Meanwhile, this study will also examine how patronage figures, specifically kyai figures in Islamic boarding school educational institutions, can mediate between service quality and work commitment, influencing the preferences of parents and the community in choosing Islamic boarding school educational institutions. Building on the identified research gap, this study offers a distinctive contribution. The novelty of this research lies in its explicit focus on kyai patronage as a mediating variable, a dimension that has received limited attention in previous literature. By addressing this gap, the study provides new theoretical insights and practical implications for enhancing the competitiveness of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia. Specifically, the study aims to examine the relationships between service quality, work commitment, and community preferences in selecting educational institutions, as well as to analyze the mediating role of kyai patronage within the context of Nurul Jadid Islamic Boarding School.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative approach with an explanatory causal design to examine the direct and indirect relationships among service quality, work commitment, patronage figures, and educational preferences (Fienitz & Siebert, 2023; Maxwell & Levitt, 2023; Svith, 2024). The explanatory causal design was selected because the research relied on numerical data collected through questionnaires to test causal effects among variables (Mast et al., 2023; Maxwell & Levitt, 2023; Sparby, 2024). The study was conducted at Nurul Jadid Islamic Boarding School, Probolinggo, East Java, Indonesia, involving 380 respondents consisting of students and their guardians. Samples were obtained using purposive random sampling to ensure appropriate representation of the target population. Demographic data indicated that most respondents were between 21 and 40 years old and had varied educational backgrounds, ranging from high school to postgraduate, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Data of Respondents

Characteristic	Category	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Age Group	Less than 20 years old	12	3.2%
	21–30 years old	165	43.4%
	31–40 years	140	36.8%
	Over 41 years	63	16.6%
Education Level	High school or equivalent	220	57.9%
	Bachelor’s degree	120	31.6%
	Postgraduate	40	10.5%

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of four latent variables: service quality (SQ), work commitment (WC), patronage figures (PF), and educational preferences (EP). Indicators were adapted from validated studies to ensure accuracy and credibility (Bentouhami et al., 2021; Caesar, 2025; Taveira et al., 2022). Responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The variables and indicators are presented in Table 2. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), which is suitable for testing complex models with mediating variables (Kono & Sato, 2023; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021; Russo & Stol, 2021). The analysis included validity and reliability testing (outer loading, AVE, CR, Fornell–Larcker), multicollinearity testing using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), and mediation testing through pathway analysis and the upsilon-v statistic.

Table 2. Research Variables and Indicators

Dimension	Indicator	Number of Items
Service Quality (from Mendonça et al., 2023)	Reliability	2
	Responsive	2
	Guarantee	2
	Empathy	2
	Physical Evidence	2
Work Commitment (Aprilia et al., 2024)	Dedication of Teaching Staff	3
	Involvement in Student Development	3
	Solve Problems Quickly and Effectively	4
Patronage Figures (Davies, 2023)	Kiyai’s Leadership	2
	Kiyai’s Personal Characteristics	3
	Social Authority and Influence	3
	The Role of Kiyai in Spiritual Formation	2
Educational Preferences (Karim et al., 2025)	Desire to Join	2
	Satisfaction with Islamic Boarding School Services	2
	Believing in Kiyai and the Manager	2
	Social Influence in Choosing a Pesantren	2
	Reputation and Image of Islamic Boarding Schools	2

The research framework illustrates the relationship between SQ, WC, PF, and EP. SQ is hypothesized to directly influence EP (H_1) and also strengthen the role of PF (H_5), while WC is expected to directly affect EP (H_2) and PF (H_6). PF is assumed to have a direct positive influence on EP (H_7). At the same time, patronage figures are hypothesized to mediate the relationship between SQ and EP (H_3) as well as between WC and EP (H_4). In this structure, SQ and WC function as independent variables, PF acts as the mediating variable, and EP represents the dependent variable. The framework reflects the integration of the SERVQUAL model to measure service quality (Bentouhami et al., 2021; James et al., 2024; Jonkisz et al., 2021) and the Social Exchange Theory to explain the mediating role of PF, demonstrating that technical performance, such as SQ and WC, alone may not fully explain EP unless validated through the authority and trust embodied by PF in Islamic boarding schools (Ahmad et al., 2023; Sohail & Hasan, 2021; Thomas & Gupta, 2021). The research framework used in this study is shown in Figure 1.

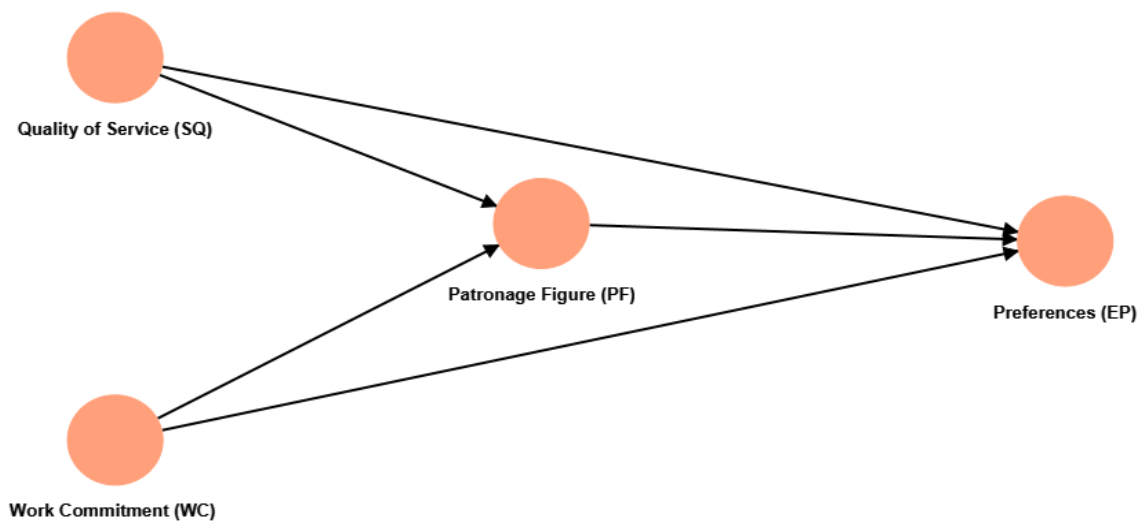


Figure 1. Research Framework

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Description of Measurement Model

The measurement model in this study is designed to test the relationship between latent variables consisting of SQ, WC, PF, and EP. Each latent variable is measured using several reflective indicators shown in the diagram. Validity and reliability tests are carried out to ensure that each indicator has a significant contribution to its variables. The evaluation of the outer model involves the analysis of loading factor, Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and Composite Reliability (CR) to measure the reliability and internal consistency of the model. The relationship between variables was tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) based on Partial Least Squares (PLS) to identify the relationship patterns between independent, mediated, and dependent variables. Thus, this model aims to test the direct and indirect influence of SQ and WC on EP through the mediating role of PF, as shown in Figure 2.

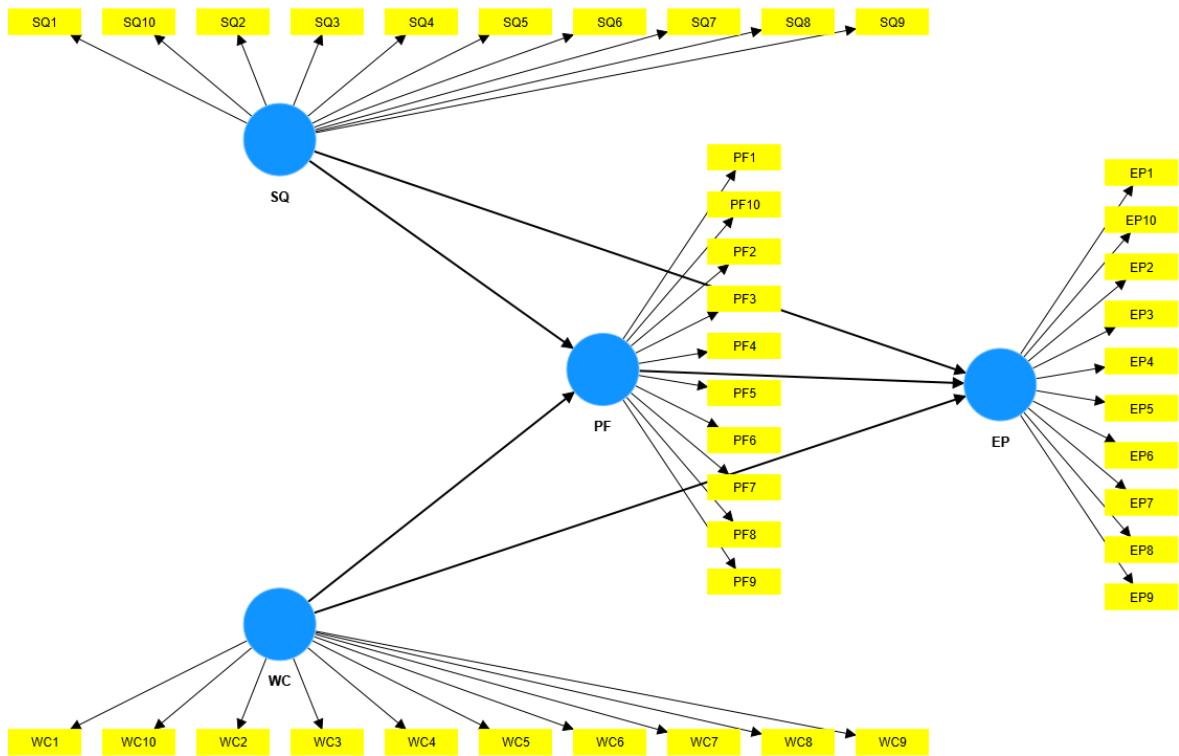


Figure 2. Description of the Measurement Model

The figure displays a research model based on Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), which consists of four latent variables: SQ, WC, PF, and EP. SQ and WC act as independent variables, while EP is the dependent variable. PF functions as a mediating variable that connects SQ and WC with EP. Based on the description of the measurement model above, up to 40 items were tested to determine the level of accuracy using the “outer loading” test, with the criterion that an item is eligible if its value exceeds 0.7.

Test Measurement Models

The measurement model in this study is designed to test the relationship between latent variables consisting of SQ, WC, PF, and EP. Each latent variable is measured using several reflective indicators shown in the diagram. Validity and reliability tests are carried out to ensure that each indicator has a significant contribution to its variables. The “outer loading” test carried out in this study is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Outer Loading Test			
Variable	Measurement Items	Outer Loading	Criterion
Work Commitment (WC) X2	WC1	0.845	Valid
	WC10	0.881	Valid
	WC2	0.889	Valid
	WC3	0.902	Valid
	WC4	0.883	Valid
	WC5	0.871	Valid
	WC6	0.861	Valid
	WC7	0.832	Valid
	WC8	0.765	Valid
	WC9	0.592	Invalid
Quality of Service (SQ) X1	SQ1	0.825	Valid
	SQ10	0.761	Valid

Variable	Measurement Items	Outer Loading	Criterion
	SQ2	0.831	Valid
	SQ3	0.844	Valid
	SQ4	0.723	Valid
	SQ5	0.672	Invalid
	SQ6	0.836	Valid
	SQ7	0.760	Valid
	SQ8	0.793	Valid
	SQ9	0.729	Valid
	PF1	0.760	Valid
Patronage Figure (PF) And	PF10	0.832	Valid
	PF2	0.851	Valid
	PF3	0.722	Valid
	PF4	0.793	Valid
	PF5	0.779	Valid
	PF6	0.751	Valid
	PF7	0.683	Invalid
	PF8	0.836	Valid
	PF9	0.721	Valid
Preferences (EP) With	EP1	0.786	Valid
	EP10	0.759	Valid
	EP2	0.672	Invalid
	EP3	0.807	Valid
	EP4	0.857	Valid
	EP5	0.842	Valid
	EP6	0.805	Valid
	EP7	0.848	Valid
	EP8	0.769	Valid
	EP9	0.829	Valid

Building on the results of the outer loading test analysis above, this section presents the results of the Outer Loading test, which measures the validity of indicators in each latent variable: WC, SQ, PF, and EP. The results of the analysis show that most indicators have an outer loading value of ≥ 0.7 , indicating that they are valid in measuring their construction. However, several indicators did not meet the validity criteria, namely WC9 (0.592), SQ5 (0.672), PF7 (0.683), and EP2 (0.672), because they had values below 0.7. After going through the outer loading test, 36 items were selected and used after the invalid items were removed, as shown in Figure 3.

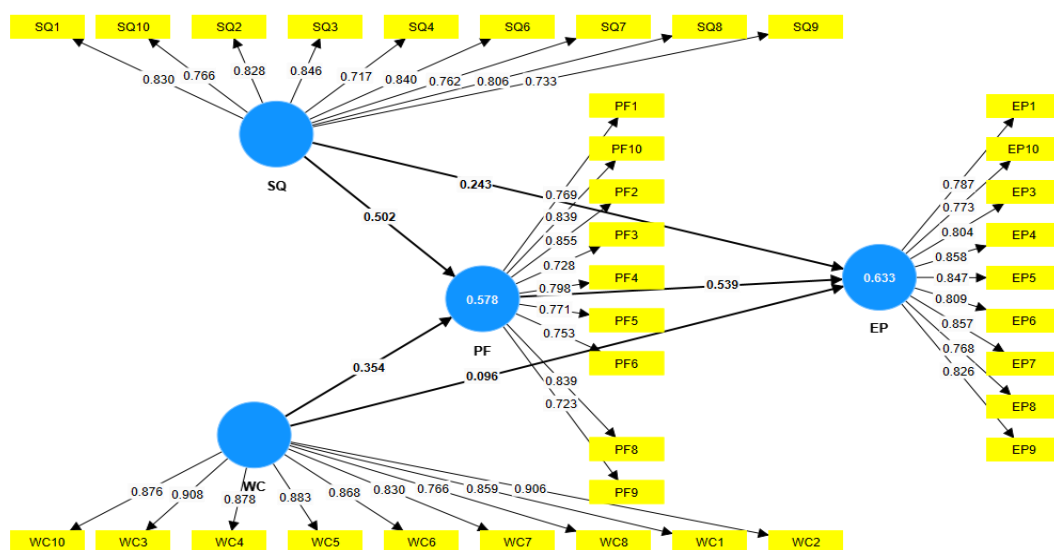


Figure 3. Measurement Model

Figure 3 shows the measurement model after the invalid item is deleted and not used as a measurement model. Then, validity and reliability tests are carried out to ensure that the remaining constructs are still able to represent the latent variables well. The validity test was carried out through Average Variance Extraction (AVE) to assess the extent to which the indicator could explain the latent variable variance, while the reliability was tested with Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach's Alpha to measure the internal consistency of each construct. The test results show that all remaining indicators have an outer loading value of ≥ 0.7 , AVE above 0.5, and a CR value that meets the criteria of >0.7 , which indicates that the measurement model has a strong level of validity and reliability, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Evaluation of Measurement Models

Construction	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Service Quality (SQ). X1	0.926	0.928	0.938
Work Commitment (WC). X2	0.958	0.962	0.964
Patronase Figure (PF). Y	0.923	0.924	0.936
Educational Preferences (EP). Z	0.937	0.937	0.947

Table 4 shows the results of the measurement model evaluation based on Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) tests for each construct in the research model. A high Cronbach's Alpha value (>0.9) for the entire construct indicates excellent internal consistency of the measurement items. Composite reliability (CR) is also above the threshold of 0.7, indicating an extreme reliability level for the indicators in each construct. In addition, the AVE value of the entire construct exceeds 0.5, indicating that the latent variable sufficiently explains the variance of the indicator to meet the validity of convergence. The results of this evaluation show that the measurement model has good validity and reliability and is suitable for further structural analysis in research. After evaluating the measurement model, a discriminatory validity test was conducted using the Fornell-Larcker Criterion. It showed that each construct was more strongly related to its indicators than others, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Results of Validity of Discrimination (Fornell-Larcker Criterion)

Construction	WC	SQ	PF	EP
WC	0.865			
SQ	0.562	0.793		
PF	0.637	0.701	0.787	
EP	0.575	0.674	0.77	0.815

Based on the results of the validity of discrimination using the Fornell-Larcker criterion model, as shown in Table 5. The criterion model is employed to test and validate whether each construct in this study has a more substantial explanatory value for its own indicators than other constructs. From the table above, it can be inferred that the test results, as per the Fornell-Larcker criterion model (WC = 0.865, SQ = 0.793, PF = 0.787, EP = 0.815), indicate that each construct is more strongly associated with its own relationship than with the relationships of the other constructs. This means that the construct used in the study does not trigger multicollinearity because it can be stated to have good criteria, so that the research model can be used and is worthy of continuing in the research conducted.

Structural Model Evaluation

Before testing the hypothesis, a statistical collinearity test (VIF) is first carried out to determine whether there is multicollinearity between variables in the model. This test is

important because a high degree of multicollinearity can bias parameter estimation and reduce the accuracy of the interpretation of regression results. Using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) indicator, a VIF value of >10 indicates a high degree of multicollinearity, while a VIF < 5 is still considered safe. If a variable with a high VIF is found, mitigation actions can be taken, such as removing excessive variables or converting the model. The results of this collinearity test ensure that the independent variables in the study are not excessively correlated with each other, allowing for more effective and accurate hypothesis analysis. The evaluation of the Structural Model (Inner VIF) is shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Evaluation of Structural Model (Inner VIF)

	WC	SQ	PF	EP
WC			1.461	1.759
SQ			1.461	2.059
PF				2.369
EP				

SQ were 1.461, and the VIF EP was 1.759 and 2.059, respectively, indicating that the two independent variables were not too correlated with the dependent variables. Meanwhile, the VIF PF relative to EP is 2.369, still within the safe range, and does not show data redundancy. This result strengthens the results of parameter estimation in SEM, PLS is robust (unbiased). Once it is known that the results of the measured parameters have a strong and unbiased VIF value, hypothesis testing can proceed. The hypothesis test used to measure each variable is illustrated in Figure 4.

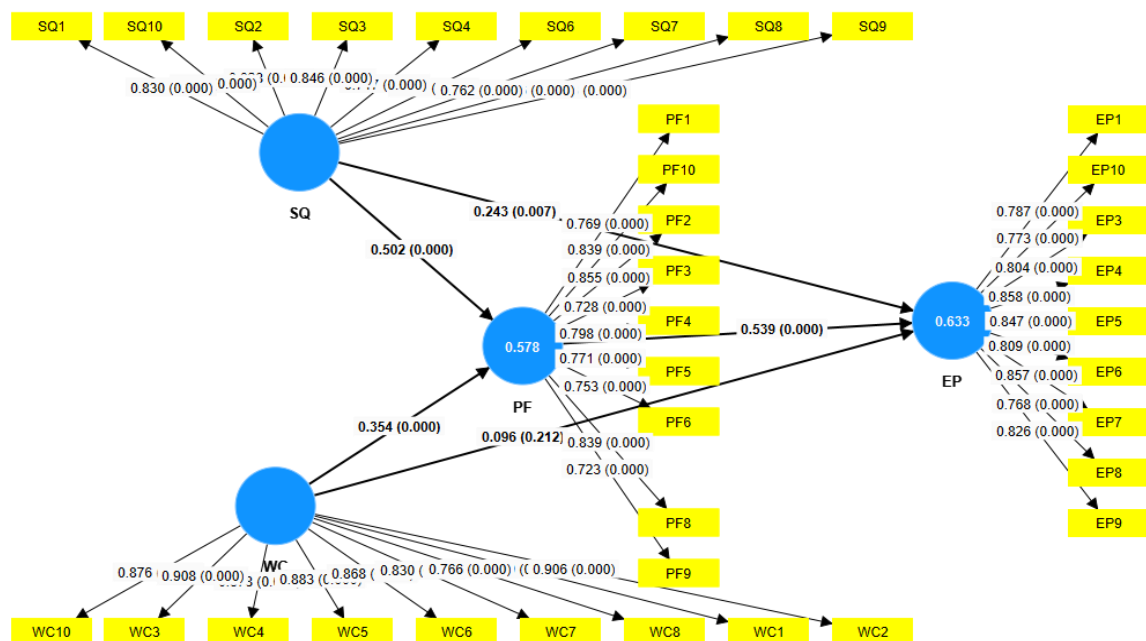


Figure 4. Path Coefficient and P-Values Results

Departing from Figure 4. The results of the path coefficient and p-values are used as materials to determine the hypothesis of each variable studied. The figure above shows the results of hypothesis testing in a structural model (PLS-SEM), where path coefficients, p-values, and R^2 are used to evaluate the relationship between latent variables. The results showed that

SQ and WC had a significant effect on the level of PF, and PF had a significant effect on EP. However, WC does not have a direct influence on EP, meaning that its influence will be more substantial if mediated by PF. The R^2 values for PF and EP are 0.578 and 0.633, respectively, indicating that the models have quite good predictive power. Overall, these findings confirm that sponsorship data plays an important mediating role in increasing an individual's preference for a service or institution. Meanwhile, to find out the confidence interval and F-square, the results of hypothesis testing can be presented as shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Hypothesis Test (Direct-Effect)

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient	P-Value < 0,05 (Sig)	95% Confidence Interval Path Coefficient		F- Square
			Upper Limit	Lower Limit	
H ₁ WC > PF	0.354	0.000	0.221	0.505	0.203
H ₂ WC -> EP	0.096	0.212	-0.063	0.236	0.014
H ₃ SQ -> PF	0.502	0.000	0.350	0.639	0.409
H ₄ SQ -> EP	0.243	0.007	0.068	0.424	0.078
H ₅ PF -> EP	0.539	0.000	0.351	0.719	0.334

The first hypothesis (H₁) was accepted, namely that there was a significant influence of WC on the PF with a path coefficient (0.354) and p-value ($0.000 < 0.05$). Any increase in WC will increase the PF. In the 95% confidence interval, the influence of WC on PF is in the range of 0.221 to 0.505. However, the effect of WC on PF is in the small to medium category at the structural level (F-Square = 0.203).

The second hypothesis (H₂) was rejected, showing that WC had no significant direct influence on EP, with the path coefficient (0.096) and p-value ($0.212 > 0.05$). The 95% confidence interval for this relationship ranges from -0.063 to 0.236, which suggests that the influence is not strong enough to be said to be significant. Thus, the mediating role of the PF is important to explain how WC can affect EP indirectly.

The third hypothesis (H₃) was accepted by showing that SQ had a significant effect on the PF with a path coefficient (0.502) and p-value ($0.000 < 0.05$). Any improvement in SQ will increase the PF. In the 95% confidence interval, the influence of SQ on PF is in the range of 0.350 to 0.639. The existence of SQ in forming the PF has a significant influence on the structural level (F-Square = 0.409).

The fourth hypothesis (H₄) was accepted, showing that SQ had a significant direct influence on EP with a path coefficient (0.243) and p-value ($0.007 < 0.05$). A 95% confidence interval indicates that this influence ranges from 0.068 to 0.424, which means that SQ contributes to increasing EP. However, this influence is relatively small compared to the indirect influence through PF (F-Square = 0.078).

The fifth hypothesis (H₅) was accepted, showing that the PF had a significant influence on EP with a path coefficient (0.539) and p-value ($0.000 < 0.05$). In a 95% confidence interval, the influence of PF on EP ranged from 0.351 to 0.719, indicating a strong relationship. The role of PF in increasing EP is very dominant, with a high influence at the structural level (F-Square = 0.334).

The Hypothesis Testing Test (Indirect-Effect) was carried out to measure the indirect influence between independent and dependent variables through mediated variables in the PLS-SEM model. The results of the indirect effect test show whether the mediation variable plays a significant role in bridging the relationship between variables. This test uses a coefficient path and a p-value, with a hypothesis accepted if the p-value < 0.05 , as well as a 95% confidence interval that does not include a zero value. In addition, Upsilon (V) was used to evaluate the effectiveness of mediation, where a \geq value of 0.175 indicates a high mediation effect, 0.075 –

0.175 a medium effect, and < 0.075 a low effect (Hoang et al., 1999), where the results of the calculation of Upsilon v are as shown in Table 8.

Tables 8. Statistics Upsilon (V)

Influence	Upsilon Statistician (V)	Information
H ₆ (WC → PF → EP)	$(0.354)^2 \times (0.539)^2 = 0.036$	Low influence
H ₇ (SQ → PF → EP)	$(0.502)^2 \times (0.539)^2 = 0.073$	Low influence

After calculating the Upsilon (V) test, as presented in Table 7, the next step is Hypothesis Testing (Indirect-Effect) to assess the extent to which mediating variables play a role in the relationship between independent and dependent variables. This test was performed by looking at the path coefficient, p-value, and 95% confidence interval to ensure that the mediation effect was significant.

Table 9. Hypothesis Testing (Indirect-Effect)

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient	P-Value	95% Confidence Interval Path Coefficient		Upsilon V
			Upper Limit	Lower Limit	
H ₆ WC → PF → EP	0.233	0.000	0.104	0.303	0.036
H ₇ SQ → PF → EP	0.475	0.000	0.156	0.404	0.073

The sixth hypothesis (H₆) was accepted, namely that there was a significant influence of WC on EP through PF with a path coefficient (0.233) and p-value ($0.000 < 0.05$). Any increase in WC will increase the PF, which further affects the EP. In the 95% confidence interval, the magnitude of this indirect influence is in the range of 0.104 to 0.303, which indicates that the effect is significant. However, the mediation effect of the PF in this relationship is relatively low at the structural level, with Upsilon V = 0.036.

The seventh hypothesis (H₇) is accepted, namely that there is a significant influence of SQ on EP through PF with a path coefficient (0.475) and p-value ($0.000 < 0.05$). Within the 95% confidence interval, this influence ranges from 0.156 to 0.404, indicating a significant effect. However, the mediation role of the PF in this relationship is still relatively low to moderate, with Upsilon V = 0.073, which indicates that although mediation occurs, the effect is not very dominant in explaining the relationship between SQ and EP.

The present study employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to examine seven hypothesized relationships concerning work commitment, service quality, kyai patronage, and community preference within the pesantren context. The findings indicate that work commitment significantly influences kyai patronage, although it does not directly affect community preference. In contrast, service quality has a significant effect on both kyai patronage and community preference, highlighting its broader impact across institutional and stakeholder dimensions. Additionally, the results confirm that kyai patronage exerts a strong, direct influence on community preferences, reaffirming the centrality of kyai leadership in shaping parental decision-making in traditional Islamic educational settings.

Beyond these direct relationships, the study also reveals important mediating mechanisms. Kyai's patronage fully mediates the effect of work commitment on community preference, suggesting that teachers' commitment contributes to external stakeholder perceptions primarily by reinforcing leadership legitimacy. Meanwhile, service quality exhibits partial mediation through kyai patronage, indicating that both its technical components and relational implications shape parental preference. Collectively, these findings provide a coherent structural understanding of how internal institutional attributes translate into external community outcomes, establishing kyai patronage as a pivotal intermediary within the pesantren ecosystem.

This study examined seven hypotheses using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) based on data collected from 380 respondents within the pesantren context. The analysis reveals a significant influence of work commitment on kyai patronage (H_1), indicating that teachers' dedication, loyalty, and sustained professional engagement meaningfully strengthen the legitimacy of kyai leadership. This pattern aligns with Social Exchange Theory, which conceptualizes trust-based relationships as the result of continuous reciprocal interactions and mutual obligations (Ahmad et al., 2023; Thomas & Gupta, 2021; Yang et al., 2023). The positive association between teachers' commitment and enhanced leadership legitimacy also aligns with the findings of Qolby et al. (2023), Saleha (2023), and Hart (2025), who similarly emphasize that stable, consistent social relations reinforce confidence in institutional leadership structures.

The congruence between these findings and those reported by Iqbal et al. (2023) further underscores the argument that teacher professionalism plays a vital role in elevating leadership credibility within Islamic educational environments. Yet, the study simultaneously reveals that work commitment does not exert a direct effect on community preference (H_2), diverging from earlier research. Notably, Amzat et al. (2023) found a significant direct relationship between teacher commitment and parental preference in other faith-based schooling systems. This divergence suggests that pesantren communities operate according to distinctive socio-cultural logics in which parental decision-making is more strongly conditioned by the authority and charisma of the kyai than by teachers' visible commitment or performance. Such contextual considerations highlight the importance of situating organizational behavior research within its specific cultural setting, particularly in Islamic education.

This divergence also illustrates a central characteristic of pesantren institutions, where the kyai holds deeply entrenched symbolic, spiritual, and cultural authority that strongly shapes both institutional dynamics and community preferences. Within this hierarchical structure, teachers' commitment exerts influence primarily through its capacity to enhance the kyai's legitimacy rather than directly influencing parents. This pattern demonstrates how relational authority mediates institutional interactions in traditional Islamic settings and supports the study's conceptual framework, which positions kyai patronage as a crucial mediating mechanism connecting internal institutional attributes, such as teacher commitment, to external community responses (Agus et al., 2023; Wahid et al., 2022).

The study further finds that service quality significantly affects both kyai patronage (H_3) and parental preference (H_4). These findings align with the SERVQUAL model, which highlights reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and physical evidence as core determinants shaping stakeholder trust and satisfaction (Jonkisz et al., 2021, 2022; Suro & Anggraeni, 2024; Hussen et al., 2024; Hidayati et al., 2025). Supporting this theoretical alignment, Demis Alamirew (2024) demonstrates that high-quality service delivery enhances institutional reputation, thereby strengthening perceptions of leadership authority, including the role of the kyai in pesantren contexts. This indicates that service quality is both a technical and symbolic asset shaping institutional legitimacy.

Although service quality exerts a direct effect on parental preference, its magnitude is weaker than its effect on kyai patronage. This suggests that pesantren stakeholders evaluate service quality not only in terms of technical performance but also through relational and socio-religious perspectives. Consequently, both the technical dimensions of educational service delivery and the quality of interpersonal engagement influence parental decisions. The strong effect of kyai patronage on community preference (H_5) reinforces the centrality of the kyai as a cultural and religious figure in educational decision-making. This finding is consistent with

Wasaya et al. (2024) and Mousa et al. (2023), who assert that religious leaders play a pivotal role in shaping stakeholder choices in faith-based institutions.

The mediation analysis extends these insights by demonstrating that work commitment influences parental preference indirectly through kyai patronage (H_6), indicating complete mediation. This means teachers' commitment affects community decisions only when it strengthens the legitimacy and authority of the kyai, consistent with Social Exchange Theory's emphasis on relational trust and reciprocity (Thomas & Gupta, 2021; Yang et al., 2023). Conversely, service quality exerts both direct and indirect effects on parental preference through kyai patronage (H_7), reflecting partial mediation. This dual pathway illustrates the integrated relevance of technical competence, as highlighted in SERVQUAL, and relational legitimacy, as emphasized in Social Exchange Theory, for understanding decision-making processes in Islamic educational institutions.

These mediation findings further show that enhanced service quality strengthens stakeholder satisfaction while simultaneously consolidating the authority and credibility of the kyai, ultimately shaping parental choices. This pattern aligns with prior research documenting how service performance intersects with leadership structures in Islamic schooling (Purnomo et al., 2021; Olaifa et al., 2022; Sanjani et al., 2024; Maimunah et al., 2025). However, the results diverge from earlier studies that emphasize direct technical effects without accounting for leadership mediation (Aboramadan et al., 2022; Ansori et al., 2023). This suggests that the pesantren context embodies a unique social configuration in which leadership legitimacy is deeply institutionalized and culturally embedded.

Taken collectively, the findings confirm that kyai patronage constitutes the primary mechanism shaping parental and community preferences. This mediating role illustrates how internal institutional factors, such as teacher commitment and service quality, translate into broader institutional outcomes through the relational and symbolic authority of the kyai. Theoretically, these findings reinforce the value of integrating SERVQUAL with Social Exchange Theory, demonstrating that social legitimacy enhances the impact of technical service delivery in educational organizations (Ahmad et al., 2023; Jonkisz et al., 2021). This integrated framework provides a more comprehensive lens for examining decision-making processes in culturally embedded institutions such as pesantren.

The practical implications of the study are significant for pesantren administrators and policymakers. Adopting a dual strategic orientation that simultaneously enhances service quality and reinforces kyai leadership may substantially improve institutional credibility and parental trust. As parents increasingly consider both religious authenticity and professional educational services in school selection, pesantren must strengthen teacher development, service procedures, governance structures, and communication systems. Maintaining the traditional authority of the kyai, while modernizing service delivery, may provide a balanced approach for sustaining institutional competitiveness and long-term sustainability within the expanding educational landscape.

Beyond its empirical findings, this study makes an important theoretical contribution by demonstrating how technical and relational dimensions interact to shape institutional preference in Islamic educational contexts. Previous scholarship has often treated service quality and leadership legitimacy as separate constructs; however, this study shows that their interaction creates a powerful explanatory mechanism for understanding parental decision-making. By revealing how kyai patronage mediates the effects of both work commitment and service quality, the study enriches theoretical discourse on organizational behavior in faith-based institutions

and enhances the applicability of SERVQUAL and Social Exchange Theory to non-Western educational settings.

In addition to its theoretical contributions, the study opens several avenues for further research. Future studies could explore how variations in kyai leadership style, generational transitions, or institutional modernization affect the mediation pathways identified here. Longitudinal research would be beneficial in capturing the dynamic nature of teacher commitment, service quality, and leadership legitimacy over time. Comparative studies across diverse Islamic educational institutions, such as madrasah, dayah, or Islamic boarding schools in other countries, would also help determine the generalizability of the model. Such research could refine our understanding of the interplay between cultural authority, service delivery, and community decision-making in religious education.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the patronage figure factor plays a crucial mediating role in the relationship between work commitment and service quality in shaping selection preferences for Islamic educational institutions. Within the framework of Islamic education, parents' and communities' preferences are influenced not only by technical aspects such as service quality and educator commitment but also by the significant role of social leaders, particularly kyais, who shape trust and decision-making. These insights underscore the importance of relationship-centered leadership in enhancing the competitiveness of Islamic educational institutions. Practically, the study provides a strategic foundation for administrators to design more effective policies by improving service quality and strengthening the role of patronage figures as key components for increasing stakeholder preference and loyalty. Theoretically, it enriches the understanding of determinants influencing individual preferences in faith-based education, particularly in the Islamic context, by introducing the patronage figure as a mediating variable, an area often overlooked in previous literature focused on technical dimensions. Despite these contributions, the study's focus on specific Islamic educational institutions may limit the generalizability of its findings. Future research is encouraged to apply this framework in diverse contexts to validate and expand these insights.

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