

Social Exchange and Pilgrim Loyalty: A Case Study of Al-Miftah Hajj Guidance Group (KBIH)

Ahmad Baikuni

IAI Miftahul Ulum Pamekasan

baikunia@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates why pilgrims remain loyal to Al-Miftah Hajj Guidance Group (KBIH), an institution affiliated with Miftahul Ulum Panyepen Islamic Boarding School in Pamekasan, although its technical services do not always meet contemporary service standards. This loyalty cannot be explained by service-quality perspectives alone; hence, Social Exchange Theory is applied. A qualitative approach with a single-case study design was adopted. Data were collected from eleven informants through semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, and subsequently analyzed using the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The findings reveal that pilgrims' loyalty is primarily sustained by intangible rewards, including inner peace, belief in *barakah* (divine blessings), and symbolic closeness to the *kyai* (Islamic religious leader)—benefits that no commercial institution can offer. Trust rooted in the pesantren's reputation, a culture of respect for the authority of the *kyai*, and reciprocity manifested through voluntary word-of-mouth recommendations collectively reinforce pilgrims' loyalty. This study contributes to extending the application of Social Exchange Theory within the context of management studies on pesantren-based religious institutions.

Keywords : Pilgrim Loyalty; Hajj Guidance Group (KBIH); Pesantren; Social Exchange Theory; Trust; Barakah

Introduction

The Hajj pilgrimage in Indonesia has long extended beyond its purely religious and ritual dimensions. Over the past several decades, the organization of the Hajj has evolved into a complex undertaking encompassing social, administrative, and long-term assistance for millions of prospective pilgrims. The most pressing challenge lies in the widening gap between the number of applicants and the limited annual pilgrimage quota. According to data from the Integrated Hajj Computerized System (*SISKOHAT*) of the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs as of September 2025, the national waiting list had exceeded 5.4 million prospective pilgrims, while the annual national quota remained approximately 221,000 pilgrims. Consequently, waiting periods in several provinces now extend beyond twenty years. This situation creates administrative challenges and increases demand for institutions providing continuous guidance, particularly for elderly prospective pilgrims who require religious instruction (*manasik*), psychological support, and administrative assistance throughout the prolonged waiting period.

Against this backdrop, Hajj Guidance Groups (*Kelompok Bimbingan Ibadah Haji*—KBIH) have emerged as increasingly important actors in supporting prospective pilgrims. Their role has

evolved beyond merely providing *manasik* (Hajj ritual guidance) training to serving as centers for consultation, socio-religious assistance, and even emotional support throughout pilgrims' preparation for the Hajj. The Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs reports that the number of KBIHs operating nationwide has reached 1,577, representing a diverse institutional landscape. While many are affiliated with Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), a considerable number operate independently as commercial organizations. Competition between these two types of institutions has become increasingly dynamic. Commercial providers generally emphasize superior physical facilities, efficient administrative services, and extensive digital marketing strategies. Yet, despite these competitive advantages, a notable phenomenon persists: many prospective pilgrims continue to choose *pesantren*-affiliated KBIHs, even in the digital era, although the facilities they provide often fall short of modern service standards.

A particularly compelling example of this phenomenon can be found in Al-Miftah Hajj Guidance Group (KBIH), which is affiliated with Miftahul Ulum Panyepen Islamic Boarding School in Pamekasan, Madura. Many pilgrims remain actively involved with the institution despite recurring delays in *manasik* sessions, overcrowded training venues that frequently compromise participants' comfort, and administrative procedures that appear considerably less professional than those typically offered by commercial providers. More strikingly, many pilgrims voluntarily recommend Al-Miftah KBIH to their relatives and acquaintances without any encouragement from the institution's management. Such enduring loyalty cannot be adequately explained solely through the conventional logic of customer satisfaction based on the technical quality of services received.

Existing research on the behavior of Hajj and Umrah pilgrims has largely been dominated by the service quality perspective (Meilani, 2021; Nilam & Aga, 2025; Yuhadi et al., 2022), particularly the SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988). This model evaluates customer satisfaction across five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Within the Indonesian Hajj context, Tri Hutomo and Fathurahman (2025) found that assurance and empathy are the most influential determinants of pilgrims' satisfaction. Similarly, Faizah et al. (2025) demonstrated that the personal attention provided by guides and pilgrims' trust in their authority significantly shape the overall pilgrimage experience. Although these studies provide valuable insights, the SERVQUAL framework fundamentally conceptualizes the relationship between pilgrims and service providers as a transactional exchange, treating pilgrims as consumers who evaluate services according to measurable expectations. Consequently, the model is not designed to explain why pilgrims remain loyal even when the services they receive objectively fall below their expectations.

To address this limitation, some scholars have turned to the social capital perspective to explain the persistence of loyalty despite service shortcomings. Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), and Putnam (2000) conceptualize social networks, trust, and shared norms as the foundational elements of enduring social relationships. Within the context of *pesantren*, Kutsiyah et al. (2020) and Nur et al. (2024) demonstrate that relationships among members of the *pesantren* community

are sustained by strong emotional bonds, internal solidarity, and deep respect for the authority of the *kyai*. Nevertheless, the social capital perspective primarily operates at the structural level. It explains the social conditions that facilitate durable relationships but offers only limited insight into the micro-level processes through which these relationships are actively maintained, reinforced, and reproduced over time. In other words, while social capital provides an explanation of the existing relational structure, it does not sufficiently illuminate the underlying mechanisms through which those relationships continue to evolve.

It is within this context that Social Exchange Theory (SET) provides a particularly relevant analytical lens. SET explains the dynamics of relationships between individuals and organizations not only in terms of their structural characteristics but also through the reciprocal exchange processes that sustain them over time. Homans (1958) argues that social relationships endure because individuals implicitly evaluate the balance between the rewards they receive and the costs they incur. Blau (1986) further distinguishes material exchanges from symbolic exchanges—including social status, respect, security, and trust—which often exert a stronger binding influence than tangible benefits. Emerson (1976) subsequently refined this perspective through the concepts of dependence and power, arguing that relationships are sustained when mutual dependence exists between the interacting parties. Within the context of pesantren-based KBIHs, pilgrims perceive rewards in the form of inner peace, confidence in receiving *barakah* (divine blessings), closeness to the *kyai*, and a sense of belonging to a meaningful religious community. In contrast, costs such as limited facilities, irregular schedules, and inefficient administrative services are generally regarded as acceptable trade-offs.

To strengthen the analytical framework, this study also draws upon the literature on loyalty in long-term relationships. Oliver (1999) conceptualizes loyalty not merely as repeated patronage but as a deeply held commitment to maintaining a relationship despite situational pressures or the availability of more attractive alternatives. Likewise, Morgan and Hunt (1994), through their Commitment-Trust Theory, argue that trust and commitment constitute the two fundamental pillars of enduring relationships. Trust provides individuals with confidence and security within a relationship, whereas commitment motivates them to remain loyal even when alternative options exist. Palmatier et al. (2006) further demonstrate that the quality of interpersonal relationships, rather than the technical quality of services alone, is a stronger predictor of long-term loyalty. More recently, Hsiao et al. (2023) found that relationships perceived as positive foster feelings of gratitude, which consistently reinforce customer loyalty over time. Within a religious setting such as a pesantren-based KBIH, spiritual values further strengthen this commitment. Loyalty is therefore understood not simply as customer satisfaction but as a multidimensional attachment encompassing social, emotional, and transcendental dimensions simultaneously.

The local cultural context also deserves careful consideration in this analysis. Within Madurese society, the relationship between *santri* (Islamic boarding school students), pilgrims, and the *kyai* is not founded solely on rational or utilitarian considerations. Harnadi et al. (2021)

observe that the *kyai*'s patronage within the Javanese–Madurese pesantren tradition serves as a source of moral legitimacy, spiritual guidance, and *barakah* (divine blessings), deeply embedded in the social fabric of the community. Respect for the *kyai* is therefore more than a cultural norm; it constitutes an integral component of the value system that shapes how individuals perceive the world and their relationship with religious institutions (Nauval, 2024). Within such a social setting, pilgrims do not necessarily regard themselves as consumers entitled to demand superior services. On the contrary, many feel that it would be inappropriate to voice excessive complaints to the institution's management, whom they perceive as representatives of the pesantren. This culture of deference shifts the basis of loyalty from technical service performance to symbolic and relational considerations.

A review of the existing literature indicates that studies on loyalty among KBIH pilgrims have been dominated by quantitative research grounded in the SERVQUAL framework. In contrast, qualitative studies that specifically employ Social Exchange Theory to explain loyalty within pesantren-based KBIHs—particularly in the socio-cultural context of Madura—remain scarce. Existing studies generally focus on identifying determinants of customer satisfaction without exploring the underlying mechanisms through which symbolic exchange, trust, and reciprocal dependence interact to develop and sustain loyalty over time. This gap represents the primary contribution that the present study seeks to address.

Against this backdrop, the present study addresses the following research question: How is pilgrims' loyalty toward Al-Miftah Hajj Guidance Group (KBIH) established and sustained when examined through the lens of Social Exchange Theory? More specifically, this study seeks to understand how pilgrims interpret the rewards they receive, what forms of cost they are willing to tolerate, and how trust and reciprocity evolve within the relationships among pilgrims, the KBIH management, and the pesantren. By addressing these questions, this study aims to extend the application of Social Exchange Theory within the field of religious organization management while providing a more comprehensive understanding of the non-material factors that bind pilgrims to pesantren-based Hajj Guidance Groups.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using a single-case study design focusing on Al-Miftah Hajj Guidance Group (KBIH), which is affiliated with Miftahul Ulum Panyepen Islamic Boarding School in Pamekasan, Madura. Data were collected between April and July 2025. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques and included two KBIH administrators, one *pesantren* leader, six pilgrims (comprising pesantren alumni, non-alumni, and participants from outside Madura), one representative from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and one representative from Bank Syariah Indonesia. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, resulting in a total of eleven informants.

Data were collected using three complementary methods: semi-structured in-depth interviews guided by key constructs of Social Exchange Theory (i.e., rewards, costs, comparison level, comparison level for alternatives, trust, reciprocity, and dependence); participant observation of Hajj preparation (*manasik*) activities and pesantren programs; and document analysis, including institutional profiles, pesantren archives, and relevant regulatory documents. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, data credibility was established through source and methodological triangulation, member checking, and the maintenance of a reflexivity journal.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), comprising three iterative stages: data condensation through both deductive and inductive coding, data display using matrices and narrative descriptions, and conclusion drawing and verification. The findings were interpreted through the theoretical framework of Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1986; Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1958) to explain patterns of rewards, costs, comparison with alternative relationships, trust, reciprocity, and dependence underlying pilgrims' loyalty.

Results and Discussion

The findings indicate that pilgrims' loyalty to Al-Miftah Hajj Guidance Group (KBIH) is shaped not by satisfaction with the technical quality of its services, but by the social and emotional relationships that have organically developed within the pesantren ecosystem. This pattern became evident from the early stages of field observation. Although *manasik* sessions frequently began later than scheduled and the training venue often became overcrowded when attendance was high, pilgrims continued to participate consistently, with some even arriving well before the scheduled starting time. Instead of a formal training program, the atmosphere resembled a close-knit community bound by relationships and shared spiritual aspirations. Pilgrims conversed with one another, helped arrange seating before the sessions, and gathered informally in the pesantren courtyard while waiting for the instructors to arrive. These observations suggest that the relationship between pilgrims and Al-Miftah KBIH does not operate within the conventional service provider–customer framework.

Among pilgrims who were alumni of the pesantren, emotional attachment to the institution emerged as the dominant factor sustaining their loyalty. Their previous experience as *santri*, long-standing personal relationships with the *kyai* established since childhood, and enduring memories of life within the pesantren led them to perceive participation in KBIH activities not as the consumption of a service, but as a continuation of an existing relationship. Several informants regarded delayed schedules and modest facilities as entirely normal, describing them as simply "the pesantren way." As one alumnus remarked, "*Being here does not feel like joining a service organization. It feels like coming back to a place where I have always belonged.*" This illustrates Blau's (1986) concept of symbolic rewards—non-material benefits deeply embedded in identity and relationships.

Interestingly, a similar pattern of loyalty was also observed among pilgrims with no previous affiliation with the pesantren, including those from outside Madura. For this group, loyalty was shaped less by emotional attachment than by the pesantren's reputation and trust in the *kyai*'s moral authority. One participant from Surabaya explained, *"I am not an alumnus of this pesantren, but its reputation is well established. That is what gave me confidence."* This form of reputation-based trust is consistent with the concept of trust proposed in Morgan and Hunt's (1994) Commitment–Trust Theory, which argues that trust may develop not only through direct personal experience but also through perceptions of an institution's reputation and integrity. In this context, the long-standing reputation of Miftahul Ulum Panyepen Islamic Boarding School functions as a form of social assurance that extends well beyond the tangible benefits associated with physical facilities or administrative efficiency.

These findings differ in important ways from those reported by Herawaty and Suryandari (2022), who examined challenges in Hajj guidance services at KBIH Labbaika in South Tangerang. Their study identified service limitations—including pilgrims' educational background, age-related factors, and administrative constraints—as major obstacles affecting the quality of guidance provided. Within that context, such limitations were regarded as factors likely to diminish pilgrims' overall experience. By contrast, the present study demonstrates that similar shortcomings at Al-Miftah KBIH are largely tolerated and even normalized by pilgrims. This difference can be attributed to the strong social and spiritual bonds embedded within the pesantren environment. When the relationship between pilgrims and the institution extends beyond a purely transactional exchange, technical service deficiencies no longer become the primary determinant of loyalty.

Perhaps the most salient finding of this study is the role of spiritual rewards as the primary foundation of pilgrims' loyalty. Expressions such as *"I feel more at peace," "I have greater confidence,"* and *"it feels more blessed"* recurred consistently across interviews with almost all categories of informants. Rather than being understood as an abstract theological concept, *barakah* was experienced in tangible ways—through closeness to the *kyai*, the religious atmosphere surrounding KBIH activities, the prayers incorporated into every *manasik* session, and the belief that preparing for the Hajj under the guidance of a pesantren provides greater spiritual assurance. As one pilgrim explained, *"Other institutions may have better buildings or more efficient administration, but what I am looking for is peace of mind."* This statement suggests that pilgrims consciously compare Al-Miftah KBIH with alternative providers, consistent with Emerson's (1976) concept of Comparison Level for Alternatives (CL_{alt}). Nevertheless, they continue to choose Al-Miftah because the non-material rewards it offers cannot be replicated by other institutions, regardless of the quality of their technical services.

These findings present an interesting contrast with the study conducted by Effendy (2024), which examined the loyalty of Umrah pilgrims toward a commercial travel agency through the lens of Customer Relationship Management (CRM). Effendy reported that CRM practices—

including intensive communication, customer retention programs, and systematic customer database management—accounted for 78.9% of pilgrims' loyalty at PT Cahaya Berkah Safar. In that context, loyalty was cultivated through carefully planned and measurable relationship management strategies. At Al-Miftah KBIH, however, loyalty is not the outcome of structured retention programs. Instead, it emerges organically from long-standing social relationships deeply embedded in the pesantren tradition. This distinction suggests that pesantren-based religious organizations possess unique social and spiritual resources that not only substitute for, but may even surpass, the formal CRM mechanisms commonly employed by commercial organizations. Trust within the pesantren is therefore not the product of institutional design, but the outcome of social relationships that have developed and been nurtured over many years.

Although most informants demonstrated a strong sense of loyalty, this does not imply that they were unaware of the institution's limitations. Several pilgrims openly expressed concerns regarding delayed schedules, overcrowded training venues, and administrative procedures that were less organized than those of other Hajj guidance providers. Some even acknowledged that they had seriously considered transferring to another KBIH. What is particularly noteworthy, however, is that these concerns never developed into a loss of trust in the pesantren itself. Instead, pilgrims consistently distinguished between technical shortcomings and the institution's moral legitimacy. Service-related issues were viewed as separate from their confidence in the pesantren and the sincerity of its administrators. As long as the pesantren was perceived as maintaining its integrity and the administrators were regarded as genuinely committed to serving pilgrims, technical inconveniences remained acceptable. These findings reinforce Palmatier et al.'s (2006) argument that the quality of interpersonal relationships, rather than the technical quality of services alone, constitutes the strongest predictor of enduring loyalty.

The local culture of Madura provides an essential context for interpreting these findings. Within Madurese society, respect for the *kyai* extends beyond social etiquette and constitutes a fundamental value that shapes individuals' positions within the community (Dhofier, 1982). Several pilgrims explicitly admitted that they felt uncomfortable expressing excessive demands because they regarded the KBIH administrators as representatives of the *kyai* and the pesantren, both of which deserved profound respect. Consequently, the relationship between pilgrims and the institution cannot be understood as an equal exchange between customers and service providers. Rather, it reflects a voluntary commitment grounded in the belief that the pesantren possesses a unique form of moral and spiritual legitimacy. From the perspective of Social Exchange Theory, this illustrates asymmetrical dependence (Emerson, 1976): pilgrims remain dependent on the pesantren not because alternative providers are unavailable, but because no alternative offers the same combination of symbolic, spiritual, and relational rewards.

Pilgrims' loyalty was manifested not only through their continued participation in the institution but also through behaviors that extended well beyond organizational commitment. Nearly all informants reported that they had voluntarily recommended Al-Miftah KBIH to family

members or close acquaintances without any encouragement from the institution's administrators. As one participant explained, *"I joined the program first, and later I encouraged my wife and younger sibling to register here as well."* In several cases, pilgrims even took the initiative to assist their relatives with the registration process. More importantly, some continued to attend religious gatherings and study circles organized by the pesantren after completing their Hajj pilgrimage, indicating that their relationship with the institution did not end with the completion of the guidance program. From the perspective of Social Exchange Theory, this reflects generalized reciprocity, whereby beneficiaries reciprocate not through direct repayment to the institution but by extending its social network through voluntary recommendations and continued engagement. Such reciprocal behaviors ultimately contribute to the long-term sustainability of the institution.

These findings on reciprocity and organizational resilience also complement the study by Awaludin and Hakim (2023), which examined the survival strategies of Shafira Tour & Travel during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their study found that the company's resilience depended largely on the effective integration of operational, marketing, and financial management, combined with its ability to adapt rapidly to crisis conditions. In that context, customer loyalty served as an important asset in preventing widespread booking cancellations. The case of Al-Miftah KBIH, however, reveals a fundamentally different source of organizational resilience. Whereas Shafira relied primarily on managerial capabilities and service innovation, Al-Miftah derives its resilience from deeply embedded socio-religious relationships that have evolved over many years. These contrasting cases suggest that organizations providing Hajj-related services may develop resilience through different pathways: one rooted in managerial competence and organizational adaptability, and the other in trust-based social capital cultivated within a religious community. For pesantren-based KBIHs, social capital grounded in tradition and the moral authority of the *kyai* appears to provide a remarkably durable foundation, even in the absence of sophisticated management systems.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that pilgrims' loyalty toward Al-Miftah KBIH is sustained through a social exchange mechanism in which non-material rewards—including *barakah*, inner peace, closeness to the *kyai*, and a sense of belonging to a meaningful religious community—constitute the principal forms of exchange. These symbolic and spiritual rewards consistently outweigh technical considerations such as the quality of facilities or adherence to scheduled activities. Consequently, this study not only extends the application of Social Exchange Theory to the context of faith-based organizations but also refines its explanatory power. The exchange process observed within pesantren-based KBIHs is neither purely bilateral nor exclusively based on rational cost-benefit calculations, as assumed in Homans' (1958) original formulation. Instead, it is inherently multidimensional, integrating spiritual, cultural, and communal dimensions that reinforce one another. Loyalty generated through such exchanges therefore, represents far more than consumer preference; it reflects a deeply rooted socio-religious attachment that endures well beyond the completion of the Hajj pilgrimage.

Conclusion

This study concludes that pilgrims' loyalty toward Al-Miftah Hajj Guidance Group (KBIH) is shaped not by satisfaction with the technical quality of its services but by a social exchange mechanism operating through symbolic, spiritual, and relational dimensions. Pilgrims' perceived rewards inner peace, barakah, and closeness to the *kyai* exert stronger influence on loyalty than facilities or administration. Service limitations that might otherwise undermine customer loyalty in commercial organizations were instead normalized and accepted within the pesantren environment because pilgrims perceived their relationship with the institution not as a commercial transaction but as an expression of a deeper socio-religious bond.

Trust developed within the pesantren environment is not the outcome of deliberately designed relationship management programs, as is commonly found in commercial organizations. Rather, it emerges from enduring social ties, a shared historical legacy, and the moral authority of the *kyai*, all of which are deeply embedded in the local culture of Madurese society. From the perspective of Social Exchange Theory, this reflects a form of dependence based on unique rewards: pilgrims remain committed to the pesantren not because they lack alternative providers, but because the symbolic and spiritual rewards offered by the pesantren are perceived as irreplaceable. Moreover, the culture of respect for the *kyai* reinforces this mechanism by creating moral and social barriers to switching that extend well beyond economic considerations.

From a theoretical perspective, this study extends the application of Social Exchange Theory by demonstrating that exchange relationships within pesantren-based religious organizations are inherently multidimensional and cannot be adequately explained through a simple cost-benefit framework. Spiritual and cultural dimensions function as powerful forms of reward that sustain long-term relationships even when technical service limitations are evident. These findings also highlight the limitations of the SERVQUAL model and Customer Relationship Management (CRM) in explaining loyalty within organizational settings characterized by strong socio-religious embeddedness. For managers of pesantren-based Hajj Guidance Groups (KBIHs), the findings suggest that strengthening pilgrims' spiritual attachment and fostering meaningful interpersonal relationships may constitute a more sustainable strategic investment than focusing exclusively on improvements in physical facilities or administrative efficiency.

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