
Kyai's Leadership and Strategic Management in Islamic Boarding Schools: Balancing Culture and Change, a Case Study of Al-Mashduqiah

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how the kiai at Pondok Pesantren Modern Al-Mashduqiah integrates spiritual leadership with strategic management practices to maintain pesantren identity while adapting to modernization and digital transformation. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with 12 key informants, participant observation, and document analysis. The findings highlight four key themes: first, the kiai upholds organizational culture through sufistic values like sincerity and discipline; second, strategic planning is participatory, involving senior teachers and administrative staff; third, selective adoption of digital innovations, such as e-learning modules and online monitoring, enhances efficiency while preserving cultural authenticity; and fourth, the kiai's dual role as both spiritual guide and manager fosters an adaptive, cohesive organizational climate. The study offers insights into value-based strategic leadership in Islamic education and provides practical recommendations for improving governance and digital integration in pesantren.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), as traditional Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, have historically played a decisive role in producing generations of Muslims with strong character, deep religious knowledge, and noble morals. Pesantren are not merely places where classical Islamic texts are taught, but also cultural and moral institutions that shape the ethical foundations of society. As the oldest living educational tradition in the archipelago, pesantren embody a cultural continuity that combines Sufi values, simplicity, communal solidarity, sincerity, and disciplined living. Yet, in the midst of rapid global change, pesantren today face multidimensional challenges ranging from international competition, digital disruption, shifts in societal expectations, and increasing demands for accountability and quality assurance (Azra, 2019). The most decisive factor in navigating these tensions lies in the leadership of the *kiai*. In pesantren governance, the *kiai* is not only a spiritual guide and moral exemplar but simultaneously a policymaker, strategist, manager of human resources, and guardian of institutional identity (Dhofier, 2011). Consequently, the leadership style of the *kiai* becomes a determining factor for institutional sustainability, cultural preservation, and strategic adaptation in an era of modernization.

The increasing influence of globalization has brought major changes in education. Digital learning ecosystems, transnational academic networks, rapid innovation cycles, and new paradigms of knowledge production force all educational institutions, pesantren, to adopt more systematic and adaptive forms of strategic management (Hefner, 2020). Strategic management in education provides a structured framework for formulating long-term visions, clarifying missions, designing programs, mobilizing human resources, and responding to external pressures. In the pesantren context, this process cannot be separated from Islamic ethical values, the authority of the *kiai*, and the centrality of community life (Abdullah, 2021). While many modern pesantren have adopted aspects of contemporary school administration, their success varies depending on the strategic and visionary capacity of their *kiai*. Therefore, studying how *kiai* interpret, negotiate, and operationalize strategic management principles within traditional cultural frames becomes extremely crucial.

Modern pesantren, including Pondok Modern Gontor, Al-Mashduqiah, Darunnajah, and others, represent institutions that consciously integrate Islamic tradition with contemporary educational innovation. These pesantren preserve classical learning practices such as *sorogan*, *wetonan*, and mastery of Arabic texts while incorporating new curricula, foreign languages, sciences, and structured administrative systems (Syam, 2020). The *kiai* of modern pesantren thus hold dual obligations: preserving the cultural legacy of pesantren as inherited from centuries of ulama, and simultaneously leading institutional transformation to remain relevant in the digital age. The culture of pesantren, deeply rooted in Sufi values such as *ikhlas*, *tawadhu'*, *mujahadah*, simplicity, and total obedience to learning, creates a unique organizational climate that distinguishes pesantren from formal state schools. The *kiai*, through exemplary behavior, rituals, habits, and symbolic authority, becomes the primary transmitter of this culture. At the same time, pesantren must be open to innovation—such as the implementation of digital systems, the development of STEM-based programs, the enhancement of governance and quality assurance systems, international cooperation, and modern organizational structuring (Rahmawati & Nilan, 2023).

Leadership of the Kiai, initially perceived as merely charismatic or spiritual, has now evolved into a multidimensional model that includes transformative, servant, and strategic leadership. Recent studies (Nasrullah, 2021; Hakim, 2022) show that kiai increasingly perform managerial roles: planning, supervising, designing strategic programs, evaluating performance, and mobilizing networks. Globalization and digitization offer real opportunities to pesantren—such as the expansion of virtual learning, access to global Islamic scholarship, increased public visibility, and stronger collaborations. However, these opportunities are accompanied by serious risks: erosion of local wisdom, weakening of student discipline, fragmentation of organizational culture, and the danger of technological adoption without ethical grounding (Hosen & Woodward, 2020). In early Indonesian history, pesantren primarily emphasized religious mastery, but in contemporary eras, pesantren graduates are expected to be competent in general sciences, technology, languages, entrepreneurship, and global citizenship.

A classical principle often used to conceptualize strategic leadership in pesantren is the well-known adage: *al-muḥāfaẓatu' alā al-qadīm al-ṣāliḥ wa al-akhḍu bi al-jadīd al-aṣlah*, preserving the good of old traditions while embracing new and better innovations. This principle serves as the philosophical foundation of gradual change management in pesantren. A kiai who adheres to this principle does not reject modernity outright; rather, he evaluates, filters, and adopts innovations that align with Islamic values and strengthen institutional excellence. When traditions remain relevant, they are maintained; when innovations offer clearer advantages, they are adopted. This gradual, dialogical, and ethical process of transformation distinguishes pesantren change management from more aggressive reform models commonly found in Western educational institutions.

To strengthen the academic foundation of this study, a more systematic mapping of the literature is necessary. First, literature on kiai leadership demonstrates three dominant models: charismatic leadership grounded in spiritual authority, transformational leadership that inspires institutional change, and servant leadership that prioritizes service and moral exemplarity (Hakim, 2022; Faisal & Farida, 2021). Second, literature on strategic management in Islamic education highlights the need for visioning, environmental scanning, program design, and evaluation. Still, few studies examine how these processes are spiritually mediated by the kiai (Suyatno, 2023). Third, studies on digitalization in pesantren have increased in the last decade, but most focus on technology adoption rather than its cultural negotiation or leadership dynamics (Sa'diyah, 2022). What remains underexplored is how kiai strategically and culturally mediate tensions between tradition and innovation, and how organizational culture moderates resistance among teachers and students.

This leads to a clear *research puzzle*: although many studies describe the importance of kiai leadership, few offer empirical explanations of *how* kiai strategically manage change, negotiate cultural tensions, utilize networks, and implement digital transformation without eroding pesantren identity. This study addresses that gap by presenting an in-depth examination of the leadership of the kiai at Pondok Modern Al-Mashduqiah.

The *research gap* of this study can be summarized as follows: (1) prior studies tend to be normative rather than empirically grounded in everyday managerial practices of the kiai; (2) they rarely describe the mechanisms through which sufistic values are operationalized into strategic decisions; (3) they provide limited analysis of how organizational culture moderates resistance to change; and (4) few combine the dimensions of spiritual leadership, transformative strategy,

social networking, and digital innovation into a unified model. This study, therefore, offers an integrative framework that explains how Islamic values, leadership charisma, and strategic management intersect in the daily governance of a modern pesantren.

Based on this academic landscape, the research questions formulated are: (1) How does the kiai's leadership mediate the tension between cultural preservation and institutional change? (2) What strategic managerial approaches are used by the kiai in implementing digital initiatives? (3) How does pesantren organizational culture moderate resistance and support toward innovation? These questions guide the entire study and provide a strong theoretical and methodological orientation.

With this strengthened narrative, the introduction not only explains the relevance of kiai leadership studies in pesantren but also offers a clear academic justification for why this research matters, what gap it addresses, and how it contributes to the broader field of Islamic education management.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative case study design to generate an in-depth, contextual understanding of kiai leadership in the strategic management of Islamic boarding schools, particularly in balancing the preservation of pesantren cultural identity with the demands of globalization and digitalization. A qualitative case study is considered appropriate because the phenomena observed, leadership practices, cultural reproduction, and adaptive strategies are embedded in the daily life of the institution and require naturalistic exploration (Creswell, 2018).

The Al-Mashduqiah Modern Islamic Boarding School was chosen purposively as the research site because it represents a pesantren that systematically integrates classical Islamic tradition with contemporary educational and managerial innovations. The research subjects consisted of the kiai, the highest leader; daily administrators responsible for academic and non-academic divisions; ustadz/ustadzah with teaching and managerial duties; and senior students selected as representatives who had experience in leadership interactions over several years.

Informants were identified through purposive sampling using explicit criteria, including role, length of service (at least 3 years), gender representation, and direct involvement in decision-making or policy implementation, and then expanded through snowball sampling to capture actors with unique insights (Sugiyono, 2019). In total, 18 informants were interviewed, consisting of one kiai, five administrators, eight teachers, and four senior students.

Data were collected through three complementary techniques: (1) in-depth semi-structured interviews lasting 45–90 minutes per informant, conducted in office spaces, classrooms, and pesantren meeting areas; (2) participatory observation of daily routines, leadership meetings, student activities, and classroom interactions, recorded in detailed field notes; and (3) documentation review of the pesantren's curriculum, organizational statutes, meeting minutes, financial governance guidelines, and historical manuscripts relevant to leadership norms (Moleong, 2018). The analysis followed a rigorous thematic interpretation using a hybrid inductive–deductive process.

All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and then coded in NVivo 14 to ensure systematic data management. Coding proceeded through open coding to identify initial concepts, axial coding to connect categories such as "leadership interaction," "cultural preservation,"

"digital adaptation," and "policy mediation," and selective coding to integrate these categories into core themes representing the leadership pattern of the kiai. An example of the analytical flow includes the transcript excerpt "kiai selalu memberi contoh sebelum memberi perintah," which was coded as *exemplary leadership*, merged into the *ethical-spiritual authority category*, and later formulated as part of the main theme, *value-based transformational leadership*.

The unit of analysis focused on leadership actions, decision-making processes, and cultural-symbolic practices. Inter-coder agreement was conducted through cross-checking between two researchers, resolving discrepancies through discussion until consensus was achieved. Data saturation was monitored using a stopping rule—new interviews were discontinued when no new codes emerged for two consecutive informants. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation of sources (kiai–administrator–teacher–student), methods (interview–observation–documents), and time (data collected across different pesantren activity cycles). At the same time, trustworthiness was upheld through prolonged engagement in the field, peer debriefing with external experts, and member checking by returning summaries of findings to key informants (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Ethical considerations were addressed through informed consent, institutional permission from the pesantren leadership, anonymization of informant identities using coded labels, secure storage of data, and full adherence to research confidentiality standards (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through this systematic methodological design, the study offers a valid, transparent, and deeply contextualized portrayal of how kiai leadership at the Al-Mashduqiah Modern Islamic Boarding School operationalizes strategic management grounded in pesantren values while remaining responsive to the imperatives of educational transformation in the digital era.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

At Al-Mashduqiah Modern Islamic Boarding School, the kiai is a key figure who can balance the traditional heritage of the boarding school with the demands of an ever-changing era. His role is not only as a spiritual leader, but also as a skilled manager who determines the direction of the boarding school's vision, mission, and major steps. Every decision combines Islamic values with new ideas, whether in education, social activities, or economic management.

The kiai's charisma commands both respect and awe from the students and the community. At the same time, his visionary leadership style encourages everyone at the Islamic Boarding School to adapt to rapidly changing technology and social trends quickly. It is this combination of authority and progressive thinking that keeps the Islamic Boarding School faithful to its cultural roots while remaining agile in its renewal and innovation.

The leadership of the kiai at the Al-Mashduqiah Modern Islamic Boarding School plays a central role in maintaining a balance between the cultural values of the boarding school's cultural values and the need for change in the era of globalization. The kiai is seen not only as a spiritual leader, but also as a strategic manager who directs the boarding school's policies. This is evident in important decisions that always take into account both Islamic traditions and modern challenges. The position of the kiai remains a dominant factor in shaping the vision, mission, and management of education at the Islamic Boarding School. Other findings show that the kiai plays an active role in the decision-making process regarding the educational, social, and economic aspects of the Islamic Boarding School. The leadership model demonstrated combines

charismatic traits with a transformational approach. The kiai's charisma confers spiritual legitimacy, while his transformational approach motivates students, teachers, and administrators to be more adaptable in responding to technological and social developments. This aligns with Burns' (1978) theory of transformational leadership, which emphasizes organizational cultural change through the leader's vision.

In terms of culture, the study found that Kiai consistently maintain traditional Islamic Boarding School practices such as sorogan, wetonan, and the reading of classical Islamic texts. These activities are a distinctive feature of the Islamic Boarding School that must not be lost despite the ongoing development of the digital era. This strategy demonstrates efforts to preserve local wisdom values, which form the foundation of students' moral education. According to Geertz (1989), the Islamic Boarding School tradition is the cultural basis that shapes the uniqueness of Islam in the archipelago, ensuring its continued significance.

The Kiai also adopted modern strategies in managing the Islamic Boarding School, such as the use of a digital-based administration system, transparent financial management, and the development of an integrative curriculum that combines religious and general knowledge. This was done to respond to the community's need for Islamic Boarding School graduates who are competent in the world of work. This approach is in line with Mintzberg's (1994) idea of the importance of strategic management in maintaining the sustainability of organizations in the face of contemporary challenges. Kyai Al-Mashduqiah also emphasizes the importance of collaborating with external parties, including universities, the government, and private institutions. This strategy demonstrates the Islamic Boarding School's external orientation, which focuses not only on internalizing values but also on strengthening networks. This effort aligns with social network theory (Granovetter, 1985), which emphasizes the importance of external relationships in enhancing the organizational capacity. Thus, Islamic Boarding Schools can maintain their traditions while adapting to the demands of globalization. From the perspective of human resource management, the kiai applies an approach to developing the capacity of teachers (asatidz) through regular training, further study at universities, and spiritual guidance. Thus, asatidz not only master religious knowledge, but also modern pedagogical methods. This finding is in line with the concept of Islamic human resource management (Tohirin, 2017), which emphasizes a balance between academic competence and spirituality in educating the student generation.

The kiai at the Al-Mashduqiah Modern Islamic Boarding School remains faithful to preserving the distinctive characteristics of Islamic boarding schools, such as sorogan, wetonan, and classical Islamic texts, which form the foundation of the moral education of the students. On the other hand, he is also quick to keep up with the times by implementing a digital administration system, a neat and transparent financial management system, and a combined curriculum that integrates religious and general knowledge. This combination keeps the learning atmosphere rooted in tradition while not lagging behind technology.

This study also found that the Kiai faced significant challenges in managing change, namely, resistance from some teachers and students to digital innovation. Some felt that the use of technology could erode the traditional practices of the Islamic Boarding School. However, the kiai managed this resistance through persuasion and example.

According to Kotter (1996), resistance to change is a common phenomenon in traditional organizations, but it can be overcome with communicative leadership. Other discussions show

that the values of sincerity, simplicity, and obedience remain the basic principles of kiai leadership. These values serve as the foundation for a religious and character-building culture at an Islamic Boarding School. These Sufi values reinforce the role of kiai in maintaining the continuity of spiritual culture in the Islamic Boarding School. This aligns with the study by Dhofier (2011), which emphasizes that the ethos of simplicity and sincerity lies at the core of the Islamic Boarding School tradition. Kiai strives to integrate knowledge by introducing foreign language, science, and technology programs without reducing the portion of book studies. This strategy enables students to be globally competitive without losing their Islamic identity. This curriculum integration aligns with the concept of the Islamization of knowledge developed by Al-Attas (1980), which emphasizes the integration of religious knowledge with contemporary knowledge.

Other findings show that the kiai's communication strategy is crucial in building harmonious relationships with students and the surrounding community. The Kiai uses simple language, real-life examples, and everyday examples of exemplary behavior. This humanistic communication strategy strengthens student loyalty and community support. According to Yukl (2013), effective communication is of key characteristic of successful leadership. In terms of organizational management, the kiai at Al-Mashduqiah divides the leadership structure into more specific work units, such as education, economics, and community service. This delegation of authority creates a more organized work system. This strategy approaches the participatory management model proposed by Likert (1967), in which the participation of all elements of the organization is key to managerial effectiveness.

The Kiai faced a major challenge when bringing the Islamic Boarding School into the digital age, especially since some asatidz and students initially rejected technological innovation. They were concerned that the classical traditions of the Islamic Boarding School would be eroded. However, the kiai dealt with this persuasively and set a direct example, so that these concerns gradually diminished. Basic values such as sincerity, simplicity, and obedience remain the foundation of the religious and character-building culture of the Al-Mashduqiah Islamic boarding school. By adhering to these Sufi values, the kiai can maintain a balance between preserving spiritual culture and implementing reforms.

Maintaining tradition at Al-Mashduqiah, the kiai also actively integrates religious knowledge with contemporary knowledge. Foreign language, science, and technology programs are introduced without reducing the portion of classical Islamic texts studied, so that students have global competitiveness and a strong Islamic identity. Communication is the key to success: the kiai uses simple language, sets an example in daily life, and involves many parties in decision-making. The Islamic Boarding School's organizational structure is divided into education, economics, and community service, fostering orderly, participatory management. This approach allows the Islamic Boarding School to remain strong in its traditions while being agile in facing the changes of the times.

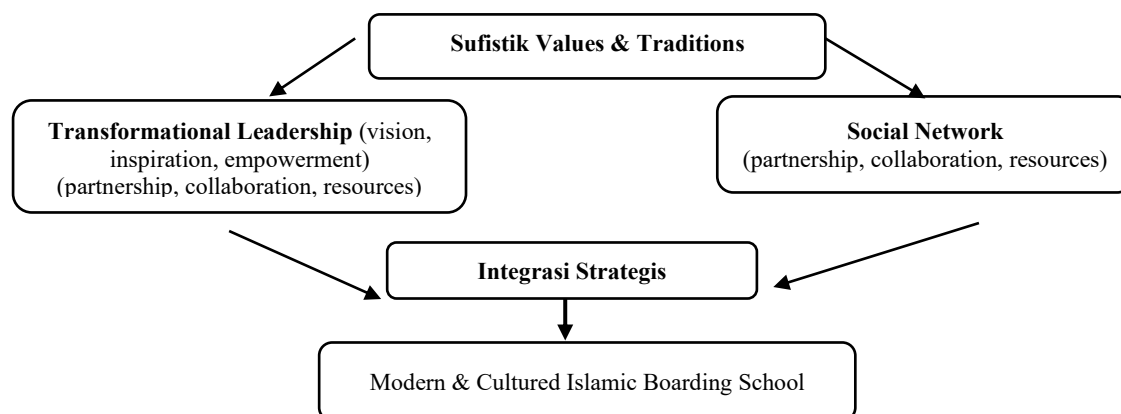


Figure 1. *Transformational leadership concept and social network theory*

Figure 1 explains that Sufi values and the traditions of Islamic boarding schools provide an important moral and spiritual foundation for the change process. The concept of transformational leadership (Burns, 1978) emphasizes the leader's ability to articulate a clear vision, inspire followers, and empower members of the organization. With this foundation, Islamic Boarding School leaders can foster a collective spirit among students and administrators. This approach encourages innovation, maintains commitment, and stimulates the development of the Islamic Boarding School for the better. Visionary leadership not only drives internal change but also strengthens the identity of the Islamic Boarding School. Sufi values such as sincerity and simplicity become the spiritual energy that guides the direction of transformation. A strong vision combined with empowerment creates a dynamic learning environment. Thus, traditions are preserved even as changes are made. The entire process emphasizes a balance between spirituality and modern progress.

Meanwhile, the explanation of the image above, according to Granovetter (1985), highlights the importance of interconnectivity between individuals through weak ties. In the context of Islamic boarding schools, extensive social networks facilitate partnerships with various parties, including the government, educational institutions, and community groups. This collaboration opens up opportunities for the exchange of information, resources, and ideas that support the development of Islamic boarding schools. The integration of transformational leadership with social networks allows Islamic boarding schools to access relevant external support.

Synergy between internal vision and external relationships. With strong partnerships, Islamic boarding schools can maintain their traditional roots while adapting to the needs of the times. Social networks serve as a bridge connecting Islamic boarding schools to the outside world without losing their identity. Partnerships also facilitate the spread of values of tolerance and religious moderation. As a result, Islamic boarding schools have developed into modern and cultured institutions that remain rooted in Sufi values.

Kiai also plays an important role in maintaining the relationship between the Islamic Boarding School tradition and the local culture of the Situbondo community. These Islamic Boarding Schools are not only centers of education, but also social and religious centers for the surrounding community. Thus, Islamic Boarding Schools function as agents of social change that strengthen local identity while facing modernity. Parsons' functionalism theory explains that educational institutions function to maintain social stability through values and norms (Parsons,

1951). Research has found that kiai in Islamic boarding schools develop economic strategies based on independence, such as cooperatives, agriculture, and book-printing businesses. These strategies not only support the financial independence of the Islamic Boarding School but also provide students with entrepreneurial experience. This aligns with Yunus' idea of social entrepreneurship in Islamic educational institutions that can strengthen economic resilience (Yunus, 2013).

In managing change, the kiai uses a gradual approach, avoiding immediate replacement of old traditions. Instead, the Kiai adopts a blended system strategy, which combines classical values with modern systems. This strategy has proven to be more acceptable to the Islamic Boarding School community. According to Fullan, changes in educational institutions must be carried out gradually to be more effective and sustainable. Kiai also strengthens the culture of innovation by providing students with space to develop their creativity through extracurricular activities, small research projects, and scientific competitions. This support creates an adaptive and productive learning environment. (Fullan, 2007)

The cleric at Al-Mashduqiah Modern Islamic Boarding School manages change gradually, rather than immediately replacing old traditions. He implements a blended system strategy, combining classical values with modern systems to make them more acceptable to the entire boarding school community. This gradual approach ensures a smooth and sustainable adaptation process. The Kiai also encourages a culture of innovation by allowing students to channel their creativity through extracurricular activities, small research projects, and scientific competitions, thereby creating a dynamic and productive learning environment.

Vygotsky's constructivist theory explains that experience-based learning is more effective in shaping the character of students. The role of the Kiai is to serve as a figure who upholds the morality and integrity of the boarding school (Vygotsky, 1978). The Kiai is the primary role model for honesty, simplicity, and discipline. This personality serves as the main example for students in their daily lives. According to Greenleaf's servant leadership model, the importance of a leader's example in shaping the morality of their followers is emphasized. The kiai also utilizes the development of social media to expand the Islamic Boarding School's da'wah and branding (Greenleaf, 1977). Through digital channels, the Islamic Boarding School can reach a wide audience while strengthening its modern image without losing its traditional values. This aligns with McQuail's mass communication theory, which holds that new media can strengthen the identity of educational organizations (McQuail, 2010).

Experience-based learning, as described in Vygotsky's constructivist theory, is clearly evident in the role of the kiai at the Al-Mashduqiah Modern Islamic Boarding School. The Kiai not only teaches religious knowledge but also instills moral values through real-life examples. The kiai's honesty, simplicity, and discipline serve as role models for the students, shaping their character not only through classroom lessons but also through direct interaction with their leaders. Relying on role models, the Kiai also uses social media to expand the reach of their preaching and strengthen the image of the Islamic Boarding School. Digital channels are used to spread Islamic values while presenting Islamic boarding schools as modern institutions that still uphold tradition. This strategy makes Islamic boarding schools better known to the public without losing their identity as centers of Islamic education, deeply rooted in the culture of Islamic boarding schools.

The major challenge faced by the kiai is maintaining a balance between modernization and spirituality. Some students are more interested in technology than in mastering classical texts. However, the kiai emphasizes that modernization must be understood as a tool, not an end in itself. This approach aligns with Nurcholish Madjid's (1992) view of the importance of modernization grounded in Islamic values.

The main challenge faced by Kiai at the Al-Mashduqiah Modern Islamic Boarding School is maintaining a balance between the tide of modernization and spiritual depth. Some students seem more interested in technology and digital trends than in studying classical texts. In response to this, the kiai emphasized that technology is only a supporting tool, not the ultimate goal. In this way, the kiai positioned modernization as a tool to strengthen learning rather than replace the core of Islamic Boarding School education. Nurcholish Madjid's thought emphasizes the importance of modernization grounded in Islamic values. The cleric emphasizes that mastery of religious knowledge and the formation of noble character remain priorities. Technology and innovation are accepted as long as they strengthen the process of education and da'wah processes, so that Islamic boarding schools remain relevant in the global era without losing their spiritual identity.

Table 1. *The findings of the study "Leadership and Strategic Management of Kyai in Islamic Boarding Schools: Balancing Culture and Change (Case Study of Al-Mashduqiah Modern Islamic Boarding School)" are as follows:*

Main Theme	Empirical Evidence	Informant Quotes
Charismatic–Transformational Leadership	Kiai becomes the center of strategic decision-making, combining spiritual charisma with a vision for change.	"Important decisions always go through the kiai, but he opens up space for dialogue and inspires change." (Informant A, Administrator)
Preservation of Islamic Boarding School Traditions	The practices of sorogan, wetonan, and kajian kitab kuning continue to be maintained as the identity of the Islamic Boarding School .	"Even in the digital age, the yellow book remains a priority, because it is the spirit of the Islamic Boarding School ."
Modern Management & Digitalization	The implementation of digital administration, transparent financial management, and an integrative religious-general curriculum.	(Informant B, Asatidz)
Teacher (Asatidz) Human Resource Development	Regular training, further study, and spiritual guidance to improve academic and spiritual competence.	"Now registration and financial reports are online, making it easier for students and their guardians." (Informant C, Administrative Staff)
Change Resistance Management	Some teachers and students initially rejected digital innovations, but this was overcome through role	"We regularly receive training in pedagogy and spiritual motivation from the kiai." (Informant E, Teacher)
		"At first I was skeptical that technology would erode tradition, but the kiai set a wise example so

Main Theme	Empirical Evidence	Informant Quotes
Integration of Science and Globalization	modeling and persuasive communication.	we were willing to try." (Informant F, Senior Student)
	The curriculum incorporates foreign languages, science, and technology without reducing the portion of classical texts.	"Learning English and science is just as important, but reciting the Quran remains the priority." (Informant G, Student)
Humanistic Communication of Islamic Scholars	Simple language, role modeling, and a personal approach foster student loyalty and community support.	"The way he speaks softly but firmly makes us respect and obey him." (Informant I, Student Guardian)
Blended System & Innovation	Gradually combining classical values with modern systems to avoid cultural shock.	"Changes are made slowly so as not to lose the distinctive characteristics of the Islamic Boarding School ." (Informant J, Administrator)

Table 1 explains that the thematic overview above regarding "Leadership and Strategic Management of Kyai in Islamic Boarding Schools: Balancing Culture and Change (Case Study of Al-Mashduqiah Modern Islamic Boarding School)" emphasizes the central role of the kiai as a driver of Islamic Boarding School culture and as a transformational leader.. The kiai not only preserves tradition through exemplary morals, an attitude of qona'ah (contentment), and wara' (restraint), but also serves as a spiritual role model for students and administrators. This exemplary behavior shapes the character of the Islamic Boarding School, which consistently upholds the values of sincerity, simplicity, and discipline.

To preserve cultural values, the Kiai implements visionary transformational management strategies. These efforts include long-term planning, strengthening human resources, curriculum innovation, and the use of digital technology in administration and learning. Thus, the Islamic Boarding School can integrate the Salaf curriculum with the modern education system, maintaining a balance between preserving tradition and the demands of the changing times—the importance of social networks and human resource empowerment. Kiai actively builds collaborations with the government, alums, and the community to support the sustainability of Islamic boarding schools through funding, scholarships, and development programs. On the other hand, increasing the capacity of teachers and providing managerial training for administrators strengthens the quality of the institution.

The leadership of the kiai at Al-Mashduqiah Islamic Boarding School has combined the roles of cultural guardian and agent of change. This approach has become an important model for other Islamic boarding schools in facing the challenges of modernization without abandoning spiritual values and local wisdom.

The leadership of the kiai at Al-Mashduqiah Islamic Boarding School has succeeded in establishing a strategic management system that preserves tradition while being adaptive to change. This balance is achieved through a combination of spiritual charisma, modern management, and effective communication strategies. The Islamic Boarding School has remained

relevant amid the rapid currents of globalization and digitalization. It can be concluded that the Kiai leadership model at Al-Mashduqiah is a concrete example of balancing culture and change. This model can serve as a reference for other Islamic Boarding Schools in managing modern challenges without losing their identity. Kiai leadership based on spiritual values and vision has proven capable of preserving Islamic Boarding School culture in the era of globalization.

CONCLUSION

The leadership of the kiai at the Al-Mashduqiah Modern Islamic Boarding School demonstrates how pesantren culture can be harmonized with the demands of globalization and digitalization. The findings show that the kiai plays a mediating role between tradition and change by integrating three strategic domains. First, cultural values such as sincerity, simplicity, discipline, and exemplary behavior are institutionalized through daily routines, role modelling, and organizational norms. Second, the Kiai implements participatory, collaborative strategic management in curriculum development, governance, and human resource capacity building, allowing teachers and administrators to be active contributors to institutional decisions. Third, the pesantren adapts to the digital era through incremental integration of information technology in learning, administration, communication, and branding. Collectively, these strategies answer the research question by demonstrating that pesantren culture is not eroded by modernization; instead, it becomes the internal compass that guides managerial innovation and institutional transformation.

These findings have operational implications for modern Islamic boarding school governance. Pesantren leaders can adopt a practical implementation checklist derived from the Al-Mashduqiah case: (1) *digital governance enhancement*, including digitizing attendance, finance, archives, and communication systems; (2) *capacity-building programs for asatidz*, focusing on pedagogical competence, digital literacy, and adaptive leadership; (3) *network orchestration*, involving strategic collaborations with universities, alumni, government, and global Islamic institutions to strengthen resources and knowledge exchange; and (4) *phased change management*, which balances tradition and innovation by ensuring reforms are gradual, dialogic, and culturally validated. When implemented systematically, these steps help pesantren maintain cultural authenticity while remaining competitive in the contemporary educational landscape.

This study, however, has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The research was conducted in a single pesantren over a limited observation period and relies heavily on self-reported experiences, which may be subject to social desirability bias. The findings, therefore, cannot be generalized to all pesantren without caution. Future research can deepen these insights through comparative studies across multiple branches of Gontor Putri or modern pesantren networks, longitudinal studies that examine leadership impacts over time, and social network analyses examining how kiai utilize formal and informal networks to orchestrate institutional change. Further work can also explore how digital transformation affects the formation of pesantren identity among students, providing a more holistic understanding of culture–management–technology interactions in Islamic educational institutions.

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