How Does Kyai Leadership Navigate the Digital Era in Shaping Religious Culture?

Siti Mahmudah[a,1,*], Siti Aminah[a,2], Naila Azahra[a,3], Rozi Irfan Rosyadhi [b,4]

[a] Universitas Islam Kadiri, Kediri, Indonesia

[b] Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University, Hyderabad, India

[1] sitimahmudah@uniska-kediri.ac.id; [2] sitiaminah@uniska-kediri.ac.id; [3] zaranayla18@gmail.com, [4]rozirosyadhi@gmail.com
* Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe the implementation of kyai leadership management in shaping religious culture in the digital era, focusing on the Darussalam Islamic Boarding School, Tosaren Village, Kediri City. The qualitative approach is descriptive, with data collection techniques through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies. The study results show that Kyai applies a combination of authoritative, charismatic, and democratic leadership styles in carrying out spiritual, organizational, and educational leadership functions. An authoritative, charismatic, and democratic leadership style in carrying out the functions of a spiritual, organizational, and educational leader. An authoritative leadership style will improve the discipline and attitude of the students in their daily lives. With a charismatic leadership style, a kyai can set a good example, be wise, inspire followers, and convey a meaningful message in the wider environment. With a democratic leadership style, kyai can think openly, keep up with the times, and involve related parties to collaborate and communicate to create a learning atmosphere in Islamic boarding schools. In addition, the importance of the kyai leadership style is open and adaptive, and they will be able to face challenges in the digital era. From this research, a kyai can adjust his leadership style to the development of technology and existing challenges to improve the quality of Islamic education and *pesantren* management and form the character of religious students.

1. Introduction

Management in the leadership of the *pesantren* emphasises the role of kyai who have total involvement in the existence of the *pesantren*, with decisions taken personally and tend not to be open. [1]. The development of Islamic boarding schools in today's era can be said to be successful and

satisfactory. However, some Islamic boarding schools still need improvement and training, especially related to the leadership management of Islamic boarding schools in the digital era.

The rapid development of information technology in the digital era has brought about significant changes in various aspects of life, including education and religion. As a traditional Islamic educational institution, *Pesantren* faces new challenges in maintaining religious values amid globalisation and digitalisation. Thus, the strategic role of a kyai as a spiritual leader and the manager of the *pesantren* institution becomes very important in forming and maintaining religious culture among students [2].

Kyai's leadership management not only focuses on scientific and exemplary aspects but also includes the ability to adapt to changing times, including using digital technology to support the learning process and character building. The Darussalam Islamic Boarding School, located in Tosaren Village, Kediri City, is an example of an Islamic boarding school that faces these challenges. With the number of students continuing to grow and access to information becoming increasingly open, Kyai is expected to be able to implement effective leadership strategies to instil religious values consistently [3].

The religious culture in the *pesantren* reflects Islamic values carried out in daily life, from worship routines and social interactions to the practice of moral teachings. In the digital era, the formation of religious culture is not sufficient with a traditional approach alone but requires managerial innovation and a contextual approach to remain relevant and accepted by the generation of digital students [4].

With the advancement of technology in this digital era, Islamic boarding schools have begun to use it to improve educational and preaching activities. Islamic boarding schools have begun to use social media, online learning platforms, and mobile applications to facilitate teaching and learning processes and communication between teachers and students.

Despite facing new challenges due to the negative influence of social media and technology, Islamic boarding schools continue to adhere to Islamic values that have been taught from generation to generation. Islamic boarding schools also continue encouraging students to maintain good morals and behaviour in cyberspace to remain role models for the wider community.

Thus, Islamic boarding schools in the digital era still adhere to their religious culture, but can also adapt to developments in the era so that they remain relevant and provide quality education for the young generation of Indonesia.

To maintain a religious culture, Islamic boarding schools need to integrate religious values into the use of technology. One way to accomplish this is to utilise social media to preach and spread positive information. Islamic boarding schools can create educational content related to Islamic values and share it on digital platforms. In this way, Islamic boarding schools act as educational institutions and a medium for spreading the correct understanding of religion.

In addition, Islamic boarding schools can hold digital literacy training for students. This aims to ensure that students can assess and choose good information and understand the ethics of socialising in cyberspace. With these skills, students are expected to become agents of change who understand religion in depth and can spread Islamic values wisely in the digital era.

Several previous studies have shown the importance of kyai in shaping the character and culture of students. Research has [5] stated that Kyai's democratic leadership style can significantly encourage students' discipline and spiritual awareness. Meanwhile, a study [6] highlighted that Islamic boarding schools that successfully combine the classical education system with digital technology can maintain students' religious values without losing the essence of traditional education. Another research by Zuhdi (2019) shows that digitalisation in Islamic boarding schools can be a strategic tool for kyai in spreading da'wah and Islamic values more widely, as long as it is managed with the right managerial approach.

Based on the background and findings of previous research, this study aims to examine in more depth how the implementation of kyai leadership management shapes the religious culture of students in the digital era, especially at the Darussalam Islamic Boarding School, Tosaren Village, Kediri City. This research is expected to contribute both academically and practically to developing a *pesantren* leadership model that is responsive to the current challenges.

Kyai, a spiritual leader who is a source of inspiration and a good example, can be the main foundation in building a religious society that respects Islamic values. Therefore, kyai leadership is vital in developing religious culture in today's digital era. Combining the unique characteristics of kyai leadership with digital technology is hoped to create a more religious and religiously obedient society.

2. Method

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach to describe and analyze in depth how kyai leadership management is implemented in shaping the religious culture of students in the digital era [7].

Location: Darussalam Islamic Boarding School, Tosaren Village, Kediri City. Subject: *Kyai/pesantren leaders, ustadz/ustadzah*, and students. The selection location in this cottage is ideal because all students are also students who, of course, have a broad insight and are inseparable from the digital world. The subjects consist of kyai, who play an important role in the Islamic boarding school, *ustadz/ustadzah* who teach and students who live in the boarding school. Data collection techniques by 1) Participatory observation: Directly observing *pesantren* activities and kyai interaction with students in the context of religious culture formation. 2) In-depth interview: Conducted with kyai, *pesantren* administrators, and several students. 3) Documentation study: Examine documents such as *pesantren* rules, religious activity schedules and coaching digitization programs.

The data analysis process is done using the Miles and Huberman model. The first is data reduction, which filters out all the information relevant to the research theme. The second is the presentation of data, namely compiling the data obtained as a narrative or thematic table. Third, conclusions will be drawn, namely, summarizing the patterns, meanings, and implications of the findings obtained in the research field.

The data's validity is ensured by triangulation, comparing data from the interviews, observations, and documents of Islamic boarding schools to improve the validity of the data and get a valid picture. Member check, ask for confirmation from the resource persons in this case, Kyai, *ustadz/ustadzah* and students about interpreting data that may not be appropriate. Peer debriefing: Discussions with fellow researchers or supervisors to avoid bias [8].

Therefore, data analysis techniques in qualitative research play a crucial role in understanding and exploring the meanings of social phenomena. Researchers can produce in-depth and comprehensive insights using various methods, such as interviews, thematic analysis, and narrative analysis. Each technique has its own strengths and uniqueness, and selecting the right technique depends greatly on the research question and context being studied. Researchers can produce relevant and useful findings for scientific development with a good understanding of qualitative data analysis techniques.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Cohesive Narrative Kyai's Leadership Management

From observations and in-depth interviews conducted with kyai, *pesantren* administrators, and students, it was found that the management of kyai leadership at Darussalam Islamic Boarding School has the following characteristics [9]:

3.1.1. Kyai's Leadership Style

Kyai applies a combination of three leadership styles:

a. Authoritarian: In terms of discipline enforcement, Kyai firmly established rules that must be obeyed by all students. For example, there are mandatory reciting hours and hours prohibiting the use of gadgets. Students who violate this will be given educational sanctions. This creates order in the cottage-life system.

b. Charismatic: The student has a lot of respect for kyai because he is widely known as a scholar with high knowledge, noble morals, and consistent worship. Kyai became a living example for students. Kyai's personality makes his instructions obeyed voluntarily by students and administrators.

c. Democratic: In organizational decision-making, such as the division of duties of student management or the formulation of annual activities, kyai often involves deliberation with the *ustadz* and administrators. This shows that leadership in *pesantrens* is not completely top-down but accommodates collective aspirations [10].

3.1.2. Santri Development Strategy

Kyai implements several strategies for the religious development of students, including:

a. Yellow Book Recitation: This activity is the main tradition in Islamic boarding schools and occurs regularly. Through recitation, kyai transfers knowledge and instils Islamic ethical values, such as honesty, *tawadhu*, and responsibility.

b. Daily Example (Uswah Hasanah): Kyai is always an imam in congregational prayers, starting and closing the recitation with prayer and advice, and living a simple life with students. This example indirectly shapes the mentality of students.

c. Daily Communication and Personal Approach: Kyai opens a warm communication space with students, either through daily lectures, small discussions, or by accepting students who come to consult. It builds emotional and spiritual relationships [11].

3.1.3. Kyai's Role as a Spiritual, Organisational, and Educational Leader

a. As a Spiritual Leader, Kyai became the centre of values and role models regarding religion. He was responsible for maintaining the religious atmosphere in a *pesantren* environment. His teachings are formal and informal, including through *taushiyah* and the supervision of student behaviour.

b. As an Organizational Leader, Kyai regulates the organizational structure of Islamic boarding schools, sets operational policies, and divides tasks into management. He ensured that all *pesantren* activities ran systematically and directly, including digital adaptation.

c. As an Educator (Murobbi), Kyai not only conveys knowledge but also shapes the character and personality of students. He implemented a value-based coaching system that included discipline, trust, *ukhuwah*, and social responsibility [12].

Authoritative leadership styles are usually characterized by tight control and all decisions the leader takes. In the context of Islamic educational institutions or places of worship, a kyai who chooses this approach often has high power, with followers who respect without hesitation. This creates a solid hierarchical structure, but it can curb the participation and creativity of followers. In current leadership theory, this style can be seen from the perspective of transactional leadership, where the leadership process takes place with a reward and sanctions approach. While it can be successful under certain circumstances, it tends to be inflexible in the face of rapid change.

In contrast, charismatic leadership offers a very different approach. A charismatic kyai can attract attention and gain emotional support from his followers thanks to his charm and convincing vision. Leadership with this character can be a source of inspiration and create high morale among followers. However, risks arise when reliance on a charismatic leader can result in instability if the leader no

longer exists. This idea is in line with transformational leadership theory that strongly emphasizes the emotional connection as well as positive influence between leaders and followers.

Furthermore, democratic leadership creates space for engagement and cooperation. In this case, a kyai who applies democratic methods will ask for input from his followers and build agreement in the decision-making process. This style reflects the values of inclusion and participation, which are increasingly considered important in today's leadership theory. The practice of democratic leadership can increase a sense of attachment among members of the group or organization, which positively impacts performance and job satisfaction.

By comparing these three leadership styles with contemporary leadership theories, we realize that adaptability is essential. Each leadership approach may be more effective in certain situations. Authoritarian styles can be more useful in times of crisis that require quick decisions, while charismatic and democratic styles are invaluable for long-term growth and increased participation.

In line with the research conducted by Arif Syihabuddin [13], the transformational leadership of Kyai has a positive impact on innovation in education, technology and modern learning methodologies, creating an energetic learning atmosphere, so that *pesantren* can adapt to the changing times, including in this digital era. Research conducted by Hendrayadi also states that charismatic Kiai has a strategic role in efforts to develop Islamic boarding schools. Kiai can be used as role models by the community inside and outside the cottage [14]. Bashori also stated that in his role, Kyai, as the main leader in the Islamic boarding school, plays an important role in creating and developing good and superior student characters, so that they can make a significant contribution to the progress of the Indonesian nation. A leader in an Islamic educational institution must also be able to innovate and make institutional changes to survive and excel amid competition between existing educational institutions [15].

The findings reinforce the transformational leadership theory that effective leaders can influence their followers through inspiration, motivation, and examples. In the context of *pesantrens*, kyai is not only a formal figure but also a central spiritual and social figure that forms the collective culture of students. The mixed leadership style (authoritative, charismatic, and democratic) shows that the kyai can adapt their approach according to needs and context. Firmness, combined with example and deliberation, makes students feel directed without feeling pressure.

Coaching strategies based on examples and personal communication have proven effective in instilling religious values. In a *pesantren* society that highly values scientific *sanad* and adab, kyai plays a dual role: as a formal leader and spiritual coach. Thus, the role of kyai organizers cannot be ignored [16]. In the digital era, kyai adapts *pesantren* to technology without abandoning traditional values. This shows that kyai leadership management is not only symbolic, but also real in managing change.

3.2. The Formation of Religious Culture Among Students

The religious culture of the Darussalam Islamic Boarding School is formed through a structured and spiritually meaningful system of daily life. Based on field observations, interviews with students, and *pesantren* administrators, researchers have found that religious culture has become a symbol and part of students' habits and identity. Some of the main activities that are instrumental in the formation of religious culture include the following [17]:

a.   Congregational Prayer and Dhikr Together

Students were required to participate in five prayers in congregations at the mosque of the lodge. The presence of a kyai as an imam or prayer supervisor strengthens the impression that worship is the main part of students' lives.

After prayer, the students do dhikr together, and prayers are led by the *ustadz* or the kyai. This dhikr is a routine and a moment of internalization of spiritual values, such as patience, *tawadhuan*, and gratitude.

b.   Yellow Book Study Every Morning and Night

The tradition of reciting the yellow book is at the heart of the learning system in Islamic boarding schools. The books studied included *fiqh*, monotheism, morals, and Sufism. With the *Sorogan* and *Bandongan* methods, kyai guides students to understand religious science in depth and contextually.

Through this recitation, students learn texts and live with the values of manners, discipline, and respect for knowledge and scholars.

c.   Strengthening Morals through *Taushiyah* and Kyai's Example

Kyai regularly gives students *taushiyah* (advice) in official and informal forums. The *taushiyah* revolves around the importance of sincerity in learning, maintaining the oral, respecting parents, and avoiding arrogance.

Moreover, kyai has become a living example. The way he speaks, eats, dresses, and interacts with students reflects the values of pure Islamic morality. This makes students learn not only from words, but also from real actions [18].

d.   Inculcating Manners for Teachers and Fellow Students

One of the main values upheld at the Darussalam Islamic Boarding School is teachers' manners (ta'dzim lil ustadz). Students are taught to be polite when speaking, not interrupt when speaking, and maintain an attitude of knowledge in the assembly. In addition, students are accustomed to respecting each other, living in harmony, and working together in their daily activities. There are cleanliness rotations, mutual cooperation during large events, and moral evaluations carried out periodically by the management.

Religious culture among students is formed systemically and consistently, based on the strong tradition of Islamic boarding schools [19]. Disciplined worship practices, intensive scientific studies, and kyai form an environment conducive to the growth of religious characters. According to the theory of habitus (Pierre Bourdieu), continuous habituation of values shapes the structure of individual thinking and acting. In this case, students who worship, recite, and live with Islamic ethics slowly develop a religious personality that is naturally formed.

Values in forming religious culture are an important element in social life. Religious culture significantly influences the actions of individuals in their daily lives. These values have a great contribution to the formation of a person's character and ethics in religion.

One of the values contained in religious culture is sincerity in worship. This sincere attitude teaches each individual to perform worship wholeheartedly and without expecting anything in return from others. This value also encourages individuals to always be grateful and appreciate every gift from God.

In addition to sincerity, the value of patience also has an important role in forming religious culture. Patience teaches individuals to remain steadfast in the face of challenges and tests from the Lord. By having a patient attitude, individuals are expected to be able to manage their emotions and not easily feel hopeless when faced with problems.

Furthermore, the value of compassion is an essential element in religious culture. Compassion teaches individuals to respect, love, and help each other. With the value of affection, it is hoped that harmonious and kind relationships will be formed among individuals in society.

By understanding and implementing the values that exist in the formation of religious culture, it is hoped that the community will be able to live in harmony and balance. A religious culture that

is built on noble values will bring goodness and progress to the individual and the community as a whole.

In line with the research from Mutia Sari et al, it is stated that the cultivation of religious values aims to integrate religious principles and support the development of religious character that is beneficial both for individuals and for society. The cultivation of religious values can be realized in personal and social actions that align with the aspects of faith, worship, and morals. Character includes the values and habits inherent in individuals, including religious character, which includes persistent behavior and attitudes in worship, tolerant attitudes, and coexistence with adherents of other religions [20].

Values such as sincerity, patience, honesty, *tawadhu*, and responsibility are taught and revived in the *pesantren's* collective culture. With supervision from kyai and a supportive social environment, students tend to internalize these values easily. Forming this religious culture not only impacts their stay in the *pesantren*, but also becomes a moral and spiritual provision when they return to society. This culture is also a shield against the challenges of the digital era, which often contradict Islamic values [21].

Thus, the values in forming religious culture serve as a solid foundation in shaping the character and morals of individuals in religion. These values have a significant role in helping individuals live a better life per their religious teachings.

3.3. Utilisation of Technology in the Digital Era

The Darussalam Islamic Boarding School has adapted well to the development of digital technology without sacrificing religious values or Islamic boarding school traditions. Kyai and *pesantren* management use technology as a means to support teaching and learning activities and da'wah. Some important findings related to the use of technology in Islamic boarding schools are as follows:

a.   Creation of WhatsApp Groups for Announcements and Sharing of Religious Materials

As the main means of communication, WhatsApp groups are used for various purposes, ranging from daily announcements, reminders of recitation schedules, to light discussions about religious materials. *Santri* can ask questions directly to management or kyai through this group, making communication more efficient and faster.

WhatsApp Group Functionality for Announcement of Routine Activities of the *Pesantren* (for example, congregational prayer schedules, recitations, exams): Sending the subject matter or book that is being studied, making it easier for students to learn further material outside of recitation hours, making it easier for students to learn further material outside of recitation hours [22].

b.   The Use of YouTube and Social Media for Online Da'wah

Islamic boarding schools use YouTube and social media such as Instagram and Facebook to upload videos of lectures, recitations, and *pesantren* activities. Kyai and *ustadz/ustadzah* of the pesantren also create short lecture videos that are uploaded regularly.

Functions of social media for Da'wah for Dissemination of lectures and recitations: Through YouTube, a wider audience can access recitations at Islamic boarding schools inside and outside the city. Inspirational religious content: Kyai and the *pesantren* administrators use social media to provide short advice in the form of pictures or videos, which can be easily accessed by the general public, including the younger generation.

c.   Digitising Book Materials to Make Text Access Easier

In addition to direct recitation, Islamic boarding schools digitized the materials of the books taught. The yellow book used by students is not only available in physical form, but also in digital format. Students can access these books through their devices (laptops, smartphones, etc.).

The benefits of digitizing books for Students do not need to bring thick and heavy physical books, because these books can be accessed practically through digital devices, providing access for students to learn more material and making it easier for them to find additional references. Digitalization allows students to access recitation materials from anywhere and anytime, making them more flexible in the learning process n23[23].

The use of technology shows the adaptation of *pesantrens* to time without sacrificing traditional values. WhatsApp facilitates communication between students and administrators, although structured management is required. YouTube and social media have expanded the reach of da'wah, but they need to be monitored by content. The digitization of books makes access to knowledge more flexible but does not reduce the importance of learning through physical books.

3.4. Challenges in the Formation of Religious Culture in the Digital Age

Although technology provides many benefits in learning and da'wah, several challenges arise in forming a religious culture among students of the Darussalam Islamic Boarding School. Some of the main challenges faced by Islamic boarding schools are as follows.

a.   Student Discipline That Decreases Due to Gadget Distractions

With the increasing use of gadgets, many students have become distracted from pesantren activities, especially during study. Dependence on social media, games, or other applications causes students to lose focus on both recitation and worship.

b.   Individualism Tendency because Students Are Busy with Their Own Devices

The digital era also impacts students' social interactions. Students spend more time on personal devices (smartphones and laptops), which reduces direct communication between them. This can potentially worsen the sense of togetherness and spirit of mutual cooperation, which is an important part of *pesantren* culture.

c.   Reliance on Technology Reduces Interest in Reading Books Manually

The digitization of book materials makes them easier to access but also creates a tendency to rely on electronic devices. This can reduce students' interest in reading books manually and reduce their expertise in traditionally understanding the yellow book [1].

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Table 1. Kyai's Leadership Strategy in Shaping Religious Culture

No.	Kyai's Leadership Strategy	Form of Implementation	Impact on Santri
1	Exemplary in behaviour	Kyai shows his daily religious attitude	Students imitate and form similar morals
2	Strengthening worship habits	Routine of Prayer, Prayer, and Prayer	Cultivate discipline and positive habits
3	Utilization of digital media for da'wah	Lecture via YouTube, a WhatsApp group of students	Reaching students more widely and flexibly
4	Continuous supervision and coaching	Evaluation of worship and moral development regularly	Religious culture is maintained and developed
5	Personal and emotional approach	Spiritual dialogue and personal guidance	Students feel cared for personally

Based on research from Syamraeni et.al, it is stated that there is a Distortion and Dissemination of Invalid Information: The accessibility of digital technology allows anyone to disseminate religious teachings without official supervision, potentially creating misinterpretations and deviations from religious values [24]. False or inaccurate information can quickly spread, causing religious communities to be divided.

Abidin et.al. research the influence of social media and negative content. Social media can create distance between individuals, spread negative content, and lead to unhealthy dependence, which can disrupt spiritual relationships and religious practices that should be deep and meaningful [25]. Ethical Challenges and Value Adaptation: Technological developments, such as artificial intelligence, have both positive and negative impacts on human life [26].

Some of these challenges reflect the conflict between tradition and modernity, often occurring in various educational institutions in the digital era. According to the theory of social change, technological advancement has both positive and negative effects. On one hand, technology improves efficiency and accessibility; on the other hand, it brings challenges related to the decline in discipline and social patterns [12].

The development of the digital age has a great influence, both on the positive and negative sides. Easier access to information can drive progress in the education sector. However, issues such as data protection, technology access gaps, and effects on social relationships need to be seriously addressed. Cooperation between the government, the business world, and society is urgently needed to optimize the benefits and reduce the losses brought by the digital age. Through collective efforts, we can only build a more inclusive and sustainable society in this digital era.

In the context of strengthening religious values in *pesantren*, observing how the internalization process of values occurs through systematic habituation is important. Previous studies emphasized that the success of *pesantren* in maintaining its identity heavily depends on leadership and the value system instilled daily through interactions between individuals and their environment [27]. This context aligns with the practices observed at the Darussalam Islamic Boarding School in Kediri, where the kyai acts as a spiritual leader and a cultural architect.

Furthermore, another study highlights the importance of value management carried out by the kyais as a strategy to overcome value crises brought about by the tide of digitalization. The kyai, in

this regard, serves as a moral agent who safeguards the institution from cultural infiltration contrary to Islamic values [28]. Hence, the kyai's leadership is not merely administrative, but also ideological.

4. Conclusion

The management of kyai leadership at the Darussalam Islamic Boarding School plays an important role in shaping the religious culture of students in the digital era. By combining authoritative, charismatic, and democratic leadership styles, kyai can create a disciplined, spiritual, and adaptive *pesantren* environment for technological developments.

The strategies implemented include examples of behaviour, strengthening worship activities, a personal approach to students, and the use of technology such as WhatsApp, YouTube, and the digitization of books to expand the reach of da'wah and learning. The religious culture formed is systemic and sustainable, reflecting Islamic values in students' daily lives, such as honesty, discipline, responsibility, and manners.

However, the digital era also brings challenges such as declining discipline due to gadget distractions and individualistic tendencies. Even so, kyai can balance preserving traditional values by adapting to changing times. Thus, the leadership of kyai's in *pesantren* not only functions spiritually and educationally, but also strategically in answering the challenges of modernity wisely.

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