

Islamic Boarding Schools as Learning Organizations: Integrating Tradition and Digital Innovation in Student Leadership Development

Hermanto Halil

Universitas Al-Amien Prenduan, Indonesia
Correspondence: ✉ masdokter82@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the integration of *pesantren* tradition, managerial innovation, and external collaboration as a model for strengthening *santri* leadership capacity in Indonesia. *Pesantren*, as traditional Islamic educational institutions, play a central role in shaping future leaders grounded in religious values. However, the challenges of modernization, globalization, and digital transformation require *pesantren* to adapt without losing their authenticity. The purpose of this research is to analyze how leadership education in *pesantren* can develop through the synergy of traditional values, technological innovation, and strategic partnerships. The research employed a qualitative approach through participatory observation and in-depth interviews with *pesantren* leaders, *santri*, and external stakeholders. The findings reveal that the integration of tradition, digital managerial innovation, and external collaboration are strategic factors in strengthening *santri* leadership capacity within *pesantren*. Tradition continues to serve as a moral and spiritual foundation instilling honesty, responsibility, and the exemplary role of the *kiai*. Meanwhile, technology-based managerial innovation brings transformative change through digital administration, learning management systems, and online communication applications that foster participatory and adaptive leadership. Furthermore, collaboration with government, NGOs, and the private sector enriches *santri* leadership experiences through practical training beyond the religious sphere.

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INTRODUCTION

Since their inception, *pesantren* as traditional Islamic educational institutions have functioned not only as centers for teaching Islamic sciences but also as institutions for cultivating students' morality, manners, and leadership through communal life and the exemplary conduct of the *kiai* (Hidayah, 2022; Julaeha, 2022). Habituation mechanisms such as congregational prayers, *tadarus* (Qur'anic recitation), *kiai* mentorship, and the integration of ethical values into informal curricula play a vital role in fostering honesty, discipline, responsibility, and social awareness among students. Empirical studies indicate that *pesantren* serve as "incubators of integrity-based leadership," where students develop responsibility, organizational management, and transformational leadership through hands-on practice and internal training programs (Imansyah & Taqiuddin, 2022). However, amid modernization, globalization, and digitalization, *pesantren* face the challenge of maintaining their moral identity while developing 21st-century competencies such as technological literacy, IT-based management, and adaptive leadership grounded in traditional values.

Amid the currents of modernization, globalization, and digital technological advancement, *pesantren* face the dual challenge of preserving their moral-traditional identity while developing adaptive 21st-century leadership capacities such as digital literacy, IT-based management, and cross-disciplinary collaboration (Martono, 2023; Naim, 2016; Wasehudin et al., 2023). As institutions of character and leadership formation, *pesantren* instill values of honesty, discipline, responsibility, and social concern through communal life and the exemplary conduct of the *kiai*.

However, global demands require curricular and managerial innovation to equip *santri* with digital competence, entrepreneurial capacity, and visionary leadership skills without compromising spiritual values. An integrated developmental model that combines character education, project-based leadership training, and *kiai-santri* mentoring has proven effective in cultivating leaders of integrity who can adapt to change (Safitri et al., 2023; Yusuf et al., 2024). Therefore, *pesantren* modernization should prioritize strengthening moral and social functions rather than mere technological adaptation, ensuring that *pesantren* remain vital centers for value-based and relevant leadership formation in the digital era (Haq, 2025; Wasehudin et al., 2023).

The boarding system is a distinctive feature of *pesantren*, placing students (*santri*) in a continuous communal life that fosters solidarity, independence, and *ukhuwah* (brotherhood), while also serving as an arena for leadership socialization through intensive social learning. The boarding culture functions as an effective medium for moral and leadership formation, as community routines, the *kiai*'s and seniors' role modeling, and structured mentoring enable the internalization of enduring values and leadership practices (Khoirunnisa et al., 2025; Rojak et al., 2021). From a leadership theory perspective, the dormitory dynamic cultivates transformational and charismatic leadership styles, where the *kiai*'s personal influence and collective interactions inspire value shifts and student motivation (Prabowo et al., 2024). Meanwhile, from an *organizational learning* standpoint, the boarding environment operates as a "social laboratory" in which normative knowledge, ethical habits, and social skills are produced and replicated through routine practices, social supervision, and collective reflection—aligning with *learning organization* principles of knowledge creation and transfer within educational institutions.

According to Pahrizal, leadership skills play a pivotal role in preparing for a better life, beginning with the ability to lead oneself in order to establish a clear life direction as well as a realistic and attainable vision and mission (Pahrizal et al., 2023). The quality of a leader is reflected through the achievements attained during their tenure of leadership. An effective leader is one who understands the various dimensions of leadership and is able to identify the appropriate situations and conditions in which leadership functions are required. Furthermore, a capable leader must embody three essential forms of awareness: awareness of when leadership is necessary, awareness of value changes within both organizational units and the wider community, and awareness of the importance of leadership effectiveness and the ability to mobilize others to work productively. In addition, a credible leader must possess fundamental qualities, including honesty, forward-thinking, competence, and the ability to inspire others

Ismail's research reveals that *pesantren* have a systematic way of instilling character values such as independence, simplicity, and discipline through dormitory life (Ismail, 2019). In line with this, Efendi emphasizes that the management of dormitories in boarding schools plays an important role in shaping students' religiosity through shared worship routines, social supervision, and the close relationship between students and their mentors (Efendy et al., 2022). This indicates that dormitory life not only strengthens spiritual aspects but also serves as an effective medium for continuous character education.

Meanwhile, Tasdiq and Mustofa found that daily habits at Al Umami Dormitory contributed to shaping students' morality through supervision, behavioral guidance, and the enforcement of discipline (Tasdiq S., 2024). In other words, the *pesantren* boarding system can be seen as a microcosm of community life that teaches solidarity, leadership, and social responsibility. This is what gives *pesantren* a dual role: not only transmitting religious knowledge but also preparing future leaders with strong character in line with contemporary demands.

On the other hand, the relationship between students (*santri*) and the *kiai* is one of the core aspects of education in *pesantren*. A *kiai* not only teaches religious knowledge but also serves as a moral and spiritual role model who directly guides students in their daily lives (Azra, 2015). The *kiai*'s attitudes, words, and decisions become tangible examples that are imitated and internalized by students in their own lives. This relationship builds deep emotional and spiritual bonds, making

pesantren education more personal, as it educates students not only intellectually but also nurtures their emotional and spiritual maturity (Steenbrink, 1986).

The strong religious culture in *pesantren* reinforces the formation of students' integrity through collective worship routines, the study of the *kitab kuning* (classical Islamic texts), and scholarly traditions transmitted through the *sanad* of classical scholars. In this context, the *kitab kuning* is not merely a religious text but also a medium for deep moral and ethical education. For instance, research on the *tahfidz menginap* program at Rumah Qur'an Ridhotullah Sangatta found that students living in a religious environment with consistent religious routines showed improved discipline and religiosity in their daily lives (Fitria & Nursalim, 2024). Similarly, the study management of learning the *kitab kuning* in *pesantren* demonstrates that systematic management of *kitab kuning* teaching can strengthen students' character, particularly in terms of responsibility and honesty (Fikri H. and Fatkhullah, F. K., 2025).

Students learn discipline through consistent worship practices and responsibility entrusted by *pesantren* organizations. Research on the integration of character education in the *kitab kuning* into students' daily life at Pondok Pesantren Al-Mustaqim Bugel Jepara shows that character values such as honesty, responsibility, and social concern grow more easily when these values are instilled routinely in students' daily lives (Fikri H. and Fatkhullah, F. K., 2025). The study explains that students actively involved in *pesantren* organizations, discussion forums (*musyawarah*), and small entrusted responsibilities gradually develop strong social and moral awareness, learning not only from religious materials but also from direct practice.

Furthermore, the boarding system, direct guidance from the *kiai*, and religious traditions together create a holistic educational ecosystem. The boarding system provides a context in which religious and moral values are present in every daily activity; the study of the *kitab kuning* and scholarly transmission (*sanad*) connect students to the authentic intellectual traditions of Islam; while the *kiai*, as a role model, bridges the gap between theory and the practice of religious values. Research on the role of scholarly *sanad* in the development of *pesantren* shows that the *sanad* ensures that the teachings conveyed remain authentic and that students understand the context of this scholarly tradition in depth (Mahfudloh, 2023).

Thus, the combination of religious culture, discipline through religious activities, study of the *kitab kuning*, and the role of the *kiai* makes *pesantren* not only religious educational institutions but also comprehensive centers for character and leadership education. The students formed are not only knowledgeable but also possess integrity, responsibility, and readiness to become leaders with integrity capable of meeting the challenges of the times.

Furthermore, *pesantren* holds significant influence in shaping a generation of leaders with integrity and adaptability. Many *pesantren* alumni have played pivotal roles across various sectors, including formal leadership in government, socio-religious organizations, and education. This highlights that *pesantren* does not merely produce pious individuals but also leaders with social sensitivity, adaptability, and a strong commitment to community service.

Recent studies over the past decade have highlighted the significant role of *pesantren* in shaping *santri* leadership. Zaini, through his research on empowering leadership in *pesantren*, demonstrates that empowering *santri* by involving them in decision-making processes and providing mentoring effectively strengthens their self-confidence as well as their commitment to Islamic values (Zaini, 2023). Meanwhile, the study conducted by Munayah and Ratnaningsih on Pondok Pesantren Al-Amien Prenduan illustrates how, since 1952, this institution has consistently produced cadres of leaders (*munzirul qaum*) through an educational model that integrates religious values with modern managerial approaches (Mahrus & Ratnaningsih, 2024).

However, preliminary data indicate that several challenges remain to be addressed. An internal survey conducted by the Institute for Islamic Education Research (LPPI) in 2023 across five *pesantren* in East Java revealed that 85% of students expressed satisfaction with the leadership of the *kiai* in managing the institution. Nevertheless, only 45% felt that such leadership genuinely provided participatory space in daily decision-making. Field observations further corroborated these

findings, showing that many *pesantren* still employ hierarchical leadership structures, make limited use of technology for leadership training, and have restricted external partnerships that could broaden students' perspectives. Field observations also support these findings, revealing that many *pesantren* continue to adopt hierarchical leadership structures, make minimal use of technology in leadership training, and maintain limited external partnerships that could otherwise expand students' perspectives.

Based on this framework, the study has several primary objectives: first, to analyze the contribution of management innovation in *pesantren* toward improving *santri* leadership quality; second, to identify forms of integration between *pesantren* traditions and modern approaches relevant to leadership formation; third, to evaluate the extent to which external partnerships with government, civil society organizations, and the private sector strengthen *santri* leadership capacity; and fourth, to formulate a contextual leadership education model that responds to contemporary social needs (Rahmadani & Raharja, 2025).

The significance of this study lies in both theoretical and practical dimensions. Theoretically, it enriches the literature on leadership in Islamic education, particularly *pesantren*, by offering an integrative analysis that bridges traditional values and modern innovations. This broadens our understanding of how Islamic educational institutions can preserve religious authenticity while adapting to global demands. Practically, the study offers concrete contributions for *pesantren* leaders, administrators, and policymakers in designing strategies to enhance *santri* leadership quality. Its recommendations are also expected to inform the development of more effective leadership training programs and strengthen *pesantren* educational policies at both local and national levels.

In terms of novelty, this research provides several new contributions. First, it integrates empirical data from surveys and field observations with a literature review to explore management innovations in *santri* leadership. Second, it does not limit its analysis to the moral or spiritual aspects of *pesantren* but also incorporates modern management approaches. Third, it introduces the role of external partnerships with government, NGOs, and the private sector as variables enriching *santri* leadership experiences, an aspect relatively underexplored in *pesantren* leadership studies. Fourth, the study aspires to produce an operational leadership model for *pesantren* that is responsive to the digital era and globalization. Thus, this research is expected to provide substantial contributions to both theory and practice in the development of *pesantren*-based leadership education in Indonesia.

METHODS

This study is a qualitative field research conducted at two Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in East Java Province—one traditionally oriented and the other integrating modern management practices—during the period of June to September 2024. The selection of sites and research duration aligns with case study approaches emphasizing contemporary and contextually relevant empirical settings (Ketokivi & Choi, 2014). Participants were purposively selected to capture variations in roles and experiences, with a total of 20 participants consisting of 5 *pesantren* leaders, five teachers (*ustāz/ ustāzah*), five senior students (*santri*), three alumni, and two external stakeholders. This sampling strategy reflects theoretical reasoning and the pursuit of in-depth understanding typical of qualitative and case study research (Tkachenko et al., 2022).

Data were collected through three main techniques: participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Participant observation covered daily activities, leadership training, and decision-making forums, totaling approximately 120 hours of recorded observation. Thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted, each lasting between 45 and 90 minutes, recorded and transcribed to capture diverse perspectives. Document analysis included the review of curricula, organizational guidelines, historical archives, and governance policies. This multi-method approach was designed to generate rich, contextual data consistent with multi-source triangulation principles in case study research (Jackson, 2021).

Data analysis followed a thematic approach involving open coding, categorization, and iterative synthesis of key themes. Analytical decisions were recorded in a codebook and audit trail to strengthen dependability and transparency (Cypress, 2017). To ensure credibility and internal validity, the study employed data triangulation (observation, interviews, and documents), member checking of key findings, and peer debriefing as mechanisms of verification and critical reflection during analysis (Cypress, 2017; Jackson, 2021). Ethical procedures included institutional review approval, written informed consent from all participants, anonymization of data, and secure data storage. Overall, the methodological design emphasized transparency, rigorous documentation, and verification strategies to enhance the reliability and credibility of findings in this case study on leadership formation within *pesantren* (Cypress, 2017; Jackson, 2021; Ketokivi & Choi, 2014).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Transformational Leadership Model: Blending Spiritual Values with Modern Managerial Approach

When reviewing research from the past decade, an interesting development can be observed. In 2016, Tamam and Syaefudin highlighted that leadership effectiveness in *pesantren* remained suboptimal, particularly in aspects of delegation of authority, decision-making, and conflict management (Tamam & Sa'ud, 2016). Two years later, Juhan, through a study at *Pesantren Al-Huda Bonggah Ploso Nganjuk*, found that a more democratic leadership style emphasizing group cohesion and student participation resulted in healthier organizational dynamics (Juhan & Susilo, 2018). Subsequently, Amini, stressed that in the era of globalization, the leadership orientation of *kiai* needs to be more flexible and open while maintaining the core principles of *pesantren* (Amini & Ramadhan, 2021).

Entering the period of 2022 to 2023, research on the development of *santri* leadership increasingly emphasized participatory methods. Mentorship programs through observation, action, and reflection were proven to enhance *santri* leadership soft skills (Prasetyo, 2022). Prasetyo, also underlined the importance of participatory leadership style as a key element of effective *pesantren* (Prasetyo, 2022). By 2024, scholarly attention shifted more toward integrating *pesantren* traditions with modern managerial approaches as well as the utilization of digital technology to strengthen *santri* leadership.

From the mapping of existing literature, it becomes evident that there is a gap between *das Sein* (the actual condition) and *das Sollen* (the ideal condition). Ideally, *pesantren* should not only function as institutions for moral and spiritual education but also as incubators for leadership that is adaptive, participatory, and innovative. In reality, however, many *pesantren* remain constrained in their internal management systems, lack structured leadership training programs, and demonstrate limited external collaboration to broaden *santri* perspectives. This indicates the need for serious efforts to address these gaps.

This study is intended to respond to both conceptual and practical gaps regarding how *pesantren* can optimize their role in cultivating *santri* leadership. The central argument advanced here is that strengthening *santri* leadership capacity can be achieved through a harmonious integration of *pesantren* traditions, modern management innovations, and strategic collaborations with external partners. Drawing upon empirical data, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive explanation of *pesantren*'s transformation from merely traditional religious institutions into educational organizations capable of producing leaders with integrity, vision, and readiness to confront the complexities of global challenges.

Based on participatory observations and in-depth interviews with *pesantren* leaders, students, and external stakeholders, this study finds that the integration between *pesantren* traditions and modern management innovations has begun to emerge in several significant aspects. One of the most prominent is the transformational leadership practiced by the *kiai*. They serve not only as spiritual figures but also as role models who inspire and encourage students to actively participate in decision-making processes.

An example of this can be seen in student deliberation forums, which clearly demonstrate how the tradition of *musyawarah* (deliberation) is combined with modern principles of participatory management. These practices illustrate a shift toward more inclusive governance, where students are trained to engage in collective problem-solving, voice their perspectives, and share responsibility in shaping institutional directions. This approach aligns with the concept of empowering leadership, in which leaders create greater space for members to contribute to determining the vision, strategies, and policies of the institution (Zaini, 2023).

The involvement of students in these deliberation forums not only enhances their self-confidence but also gradually strengthens their leadership skills. Students who are accustomed to being included in decision-making processes demonstrate significant improvements in their ability to express opinions, construct logical arguments, and internalize the values of honesty and responsibility. In this way, the *pesantren* functions not merely as a center for religious education, but also as a leadership laboratory that nurtures a democratic and collective mindset. Interviews with several alumni further revealed that the skills acquired through such active participation proved valuable when they later assumed leadership roles in society, whether in social organizations, politics, or religious institutions.

The involvement of students in *musyawarah* (deliberative forums) not only enhances their self-confidence but also gradually strengthens their leadership skills. Students who are accustomed to participating in decision-making demonstrate improvements in courage to express opinions, the ability to construct logical arguments, and an awareness of the importance of honesty and responsibility. These findings are consistent with Prasetyo's research, which affirms that participatory leadership styles in *pesantren* encourage students' courage in argumentation while simultaneously instilling a sense of collective responsibility (Wahrudin B., 2023).

In this regard, *pesantren* function not only as centers of religious education but also as leadership laboratories that cultivate democratic and collective mindsets. This concept is reinforced by Badiah, who shows that students' participation in *musyawarah* reflects the role of *pesantren* as agents of social change, where education takes place holistically, encompassing intellectual, spiritual, and social dimensions (Hasan, 2023). The *musyawarah* forum also serves as a contextual arena for democratic learning, as each student directly experiences deliberative practices within the *pesantren* community.

Interviews with several alumni confirm that the skills acquired through active participation in such forums proved beneficial when they assumed leadership responsibilities in society, whether in social organizations, politics, or religious institutions. This demonstrates that *pesantren* have succeeded in producing leaders who not only understand religious texts but also possess practical competencies in communication, conflict management, and collective decision-making. In other words, *pesantren* fulfill a dual role as both religious educational institutions and leadership incubators relevant to the needs of contemporary society.

In addition, the practice of transformational leadership in *pesantren* also highlights a strong dimension of spirituality. *Kiai* emphasize the values of exemplary conduct, sacrifice, and community service as essential components of leadership education. These spiritual values are integrated with modern approaches that stress long-term vision and more systematic organizational management. This combination produces a distinctive leadership model one that does not merely focus on managerial and intellectual competencies, but also cultivates moral and spiritual consciousness among students. Consequently, *pesantren* are able to prepare future leaders with strong integrity, a clear vision, and readiness to face the complexities of contemporary challenges.

These findings further affirm that *pesantren* hold great potential as centers for developing adaptive leadership. On the one hand, they preserve local wisdom and religious traditions that serve as the foundation of leadership values. On the other hand, they remain open to innovations in modern management that provide greater space for student participation. This demonstrates that the integration of tradition and innovation is not contradictory, but rather complementary, producing a *pesantren*-based leadership model that is distinctive. Such a model differentiates *pesantren* from

other educational institutions, as it successfully merges spiritual, moral, and managerial values within a comprehensive framework of leadership education that is highly relevant to the needs of contemporary society.

These findings further affirm that *pesantren* hold great potential as centers for the development of adaptive leadership. On the one hand, *pesantren* continue to preserve local wisdom and religious traditions that serve as the foundation for leadership values such as honesty, responsibility, and exemplary conduct. These values are reinforced by the study of Wahrudin (Wahrudin B., 2023), which identifies that transformational leadership in *pesantren* includes components such as idealized influence and inspirational motivation, both of which are strongly shaped by the kiai as a moral role model within the *pesantren* community.

On the other hand, research shows that *pesantren* are increasingly open to innovation in modern management, particularly through the use of technology. For example, a study on the digital transformation of Islamic education in Madura *pesantren* by Hasan illustrates that several *pesantren* have implemented digital information systems and digital literacy facilities to support learning activities and leadership training that are more responsive to contemporary developments. Through such innovations, students are given greater space to voice their opinions, contribute to decision-making, and connect more broadly through digital media—without sacrificing the core religious values of *pesantren* (Hasan, 2023).

The integration of tradition and innovation indicates that the two are not contradictory but can operate harmoniously to produce a distinctive *pesantren* leadership model. This model provides a unique advantage compared to general educational institutions because it is able to combine three critical dimensions: spirituality, morality, and managerial competence. Thus, *pesantren* emerge as educational institutions that not only produce individuals with religious knowledge but also leaders of integrity, broad vision, and readiness to meet contemporary global challenges.

Findings on the utilization of digital technology in *pesantren* management strongly align with the concept of the learning organization. According to Senge, a learning organization is characterized by its adaptive capacity to respond to change through the continuous use of knowledge and technology (Senge, 1990). By adopting digital information systems and learning management systems, *pesantren* demonstrate the characteristics of a learning organization, where administrative processes, communication, and leadership training are no longer confined to traditional patterns but move toward more open, measurable, and data-driven systems. This shift creates opportunities for students to develop leadership skills that are increasingly relevant to the demands of the digital era, while still preserving the religious values that constitute the core identity of the *pesantren*.

Furthermore, the practice of digitalization in *pesantren* is also in line with transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes vision, inspiration, and active participation in decision-making. Bass and Riggio affirm that transformational leaders encourage their followers to transcend personal interests for the sake of collective goals (Bass R. E., 2006). Through student deliberation forums integrated with online communication applications, kiai and *pesantren* administrators not only reinforce their role as moral exemplars but also create participatory spaces where students can contribute to managerial processes. This integration produces a synergy between religious value-based leadership traditions and technological innovation, which in turn strengthens students' self-confidence, collective responsibility, and adaptive leadership capacity.

In this regard, this study not only supports previous findings on the role of *pesantren* as centers for leadership development but also adds a new perspective that digital management and the utilization of Learning Management Systems (LMS) serve as strategic instruments reinforcing the characteristics of *pesantren* as learning organizations. Zaenal Abidin emphasized that *pesantren* digitalization through e-learning accelerates managerial efficiency while simultaneously expanding access to technology-based leadership (Abidin, 2020). Meanwhile, the study by Wahrudin demonstrated that transformational leadership styles in *pesantren* are capable of fostering managerial innovation and instilling participatory leadership values among students (Wahrudin B.,

2023). These findings enrich the understanding of transformational leadership in the context of Islamic education, illustrating how religious value-based leadership can undergo modern transformation without losing its authenticity.

Furthermore, other studies have found that external partnerships with local governments, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector serve as strategic elements in expanding opportunities for students to strengthen their leadership capacity. Such collaborations are not limited to organizing leadership camps but also include activities in social entrepreneurship, digital literacy training, and internship programs designed in cooperation with external partners. Through these initiatives, students gain practical experiences beyond the religious scope of the *pesantren* while also being equipped with managerial and leadership skills that are applicable and aligned with the needs of contemporary society (based on the interviews and observations result in 2024 at the Pondok Pesantren Al-Amien Prenduan Sumenep).

In-depth interviews with *pesantren* administrators (2024) further emphasized that cross-sector collaborations provide students with opportunities to expand their social networks, enhance self-confidence, and develop communication skills with multiple stakeholders. This phenomenon demonstrates that *pesantren*, which were previously more closely associated with relatively closed educational models, are now becoming more open and adaptive through synergy with diverse partners. Consequently, *pesantren* are no longer functioning solely as religious-based educational institutions but also as centers for leadership development that are responsive to modern social and economic dynamics.

These findings are consistent with Badiah's study, which asserts that partnerships between *pesantren*, the government, and society can strengthen *pesantren*'s role as an agent of social change (Badi'ah et al., 2021). Similarly, Ma'arif's research reveals that collaborations between *pesantren*, businesses, and NGOs make significant contributions in providing students with access to non-academic skills, particularly in leadership and entrepreneurship (Maskuri et al., 2020). In other words, external collaboration serves as a catalyst that accelerates the transformation of *pesantren* into institutions that are more inclusive, adaptive, and relevant to global challenges. The results of this research can be summarized as presented in table 1.

Table 1. Integration of Tradition, Innovation, and Collaboration in the Development of *Pesantren* Leadership

| No. | Aspect | Findings |
|-----|-------------------------------|--|
| 1 | Tradition & Leadership Values | The <i>kiai</i> as a role model, student deliberation forums, internalization of honesty & responsibility values |
| 2 | Management Innovation | Digital administration, e-learning for leadership, ICT-based coordination |
| 3 | External Collaboration | Partnerships with NGOs, government, and the private sector for leadership training |

In general, the integration of tradition, innovation, and collaboration reflects a paradigm shift in *pesantren* leadership education that is increasingly aligned with contemporary social and economic dynamics. Tradition continues to serve as a fundamental moral foundation, with the *kiai* playing a central role as a spiritual exemplar and ethical mentor for students. The presence of deliberation forums also serves as a medium for democratic learning that instills values of honesty, responsibility, and togetherness. These values form a solid ethical foundation for students in developing religious and authentic leadership.

On the other hand, management innovation brings a dimension of modernization that cannot be overlooked. The implementation of digital-based administration, the use of e-learning, and coordination through information technology demonstrate that *pesantren* have moved beyond their

traditional functions. *Pesantren* are now also preparing students to acquire adaptive skills in managing modern organizations. This transformation positions students not only as heirs of tradition but also as agents of change who master technology as a strategic instrument of leadership.

In addition, external collaboration with the government, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector opens wider opportunities for strengthening students' leadership capacity. Through programs in leadership training, social entrepreneurship, and digital literacy, students not only gain contextual experiences but also develop applicable managerial skills. Such synergy encourages *pesantren* to become more inclusive and open, thereby enhancing their role as educational institutions that contribute tangibly to community development.

As a consequence, the integration of tradition, innovation, and collaboration produces a *pesantren* model with a dual character. On one hand, *pesantren* continue to safeguard the authenticity of the religious values that form their identity; on the other, they evolve as modern, responsive, and visionary institutions. The classical scholarly tradition rooted in the *kitab kuning*, *musyawarah*, and the exemplary role of the kiai remains preserved as the moral and spiritual foundation. At the same time, however, the dynamics of modernity encourage *pesantren* to innovate, resulting in a form of leadership that is not only grounded in religiosity but also adaptive to social, economic, and technological changes (Dhofier, 2011).

Furthermore, *pesantren* no longer function solely as centers for producing ulama, but also as strategic institutions preparing future leaders with multidimensional capacities: spiritual, intellectual, social, and technological mastery. Recent studies affirm that the integration of digital technologies, such as the use of learning management systems and online-based administration, has expanded students' participation in managerial processes and enhanced leadership skills relevant to the demands of the 21st century (Haris, 2023). This indicates that *pesantren* are no longer confined to traditional educational patterns but have transformed into progressive and contextual learning organizations.

This condition underscores that *pesantren* occupy a vital position as one of the main pillars in producing leaders of integrity who are adaptive and ready to face global challenges in the digital era. Cross-sector collaborations with the government, NGOs, and the business sector provide evidence that *pesantren* are open to external synergies as part of their strategy to strengthen students' leadership capacity. Thus, *pesantren* stand not only as fortresses of religious tradition but also as inclusive and innovative agents of social change (Badi'ah et al., 2021). This new paradigm enriches the literature on Islamic leadership while also demonstrating that *pesantren* hold great potential to serve as a global educational model that integrates spirituality, modernity, and collaboration.

Integrating Tradition, Technology, and Collaboration: A Strategic Framework for Strengthening Santri Leadership Capacity in the Digital Era

The findings of this study not only confirm but also expand the horizons of previous research on strengthening leadership in *pesantren*. Zaini, emphasized that students' participation in decision-making processes significantly contributes to enhancing their self-confidence, independence, and leadership capacity (Zaini, 2023). Within the context of this study, those findings remain relevant; however, a new dimension emerges that has been less explored namely, the utilization of digital technology as an instrument to strengthen the role of students in *pesantren* managerial processes. With the integration of digital systems, student deliberation forums are no longer limited to face-to-face interactions but are also extended through online communication applications and digital collaboration platforms, thereby creating broader, faster, and more efficient opportunities for participation.

Furthermore, this study demonstrates that the digitalization of *pesantren* management functions not merely as an administrative tool but also as a pedagogical medium that equips students to confront the realities of leadership in the modern era (Haris, 2023). The integration of technology with the tradition of deliberation illustrates that *pesantren* are capable of undertaking

strategic adaptation without compromising their religious identity. This indicates a cultural transformation in which classical *pesantren* values are interwoven with contemporary innovations to produce leadership models that are more responsive to the demands of the times.

In addition, the study by Munayah and Ratnaningsih, on Pondok Pesantren Al-Amien Prenduan highlighted that since 1952 the *pesantren* has successfully produced leadership cadres (*munzirul qaum*) through the integration of religious traditions and modern management approaches (Mahrus & Ratnaningsih, 2024). The present study enriches this perspective by adding a new dimension: the integration currently being undertaken by *pesantren* is not only structural and cultural but also technological, through the use of digital platforms, information systems, and learning management systems. Consequently, *pesantren* today do not rely solely on conventional approaches to develop leadership capacity but also optimize technological instruments that enhance both the efficiency and accessibility of leadership education processes.

Therefore, the principal contribution of this research lies in its assertion that *pesantren* digitalization represents a critical evolutionary phase in tradition-based leadership practices. While earlier studies primarily emphasized aspects of participation, value internalization, or structural modernization, this study introduces a strategic dimension: the use of digital technology as a catalyst that strengthens *pesantren* leadership traditions. These findings affirm that *pesantren* are not only able to preserve the authenticity of their religious values but also transform into Islamic educational institutions that are adaptive, innovative, and relevant to the leadership challenges of the global era (Abdullah & Muawaroh, 2024).

Table 2. Comparison of Previous Studies and Current Research Findings

| No | Study | Focus of Inquiry | Findings from Previous Studies | Contribution of the Current Research |
|----|------------------------------|--|---|--|
| 1 | Zaini (2023) | Student participation in decision-making | Empowerment of students through deliberation forums strengthened self-confidence and leadership | Adds a new dimension: participation is reinforced through digital technology (online communication apps & collaboration platforms) |
| 2 | Mahrus & Ratnaningsih (2024) | Integration of tradition and modern management at <i>Pesantren</i> Al-Amien Prenduan | Since 1952, <i>pesantren</i> have successfully produced leadership cadres through a combination of religious values & modern management | Integration now extends to technological aspects (digital platforms, information systems, LMS) as a strategic innovation |
| 3 | Haris (2023) | The Urgency of Digitizing Islamic Boarding School in the Society 5.0 Era | Technology enhanced administrative efficiency and leadership learning patterns | This study affirms that digitalization also strengthens transformational and participatory leadership |
| 4 | Badiyah (2021) | <i>Pesantren</i> as an agent of social change | <i>Pesantren</i> play a vital role in social transformation grounded in religious values | This study adds evidence that <i>pesantren</i> can become adaptive learning organizations through management digitalization |

External collaboration identified in this study also provides tangible evidence that *pesantren* are no longer insular institutions but are actively building strategic networks with diverse

stakeholders. This aligns with the notion that modern *pesantren* function as *learning organizations* that adapt to social change. The findings highlight a paradigm shift in which *pesantren* position themselves as agents of social transformation through cross-sectoral collaboration.

Theoretically, this research supports transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes vision, inspiration, and role modeling, while simultaneously expanding the scope of participatory leadership within the *pesantren* context. By involving students in decision-making processes, *pesantren* have instilled democratic skills and collective responsibility—both of which are essential for leadership in the modern era.

The novelty of this research lies in its finding that digital management innovation and external collaboration play pivotal roles in strengthening students' leadership capacity within *pesantren*. Whereas previous studies largely focused on religious traditions, classical educational models, or moral value internalization in leadership, this study broadens the scope by demonstrating that administrative digitalization, the use of learning management systems, and online communication applications can serve as transformational instruments fostering participatory and adaptive leadership patterns. Furthermore, this study contributes a new dimension by analyzing the role of *pesantren* partnerships with government, NGOs, and the private sector, which demonstrably create wider opportunities for students to gain practical leadership experiences beyond the religious context.

As an implication, this research offers a new perspective that *pesantren* are not only spiritual value-based educational centers but can also transform into modern institutions functioning as adaptive learning organizations in the digital era. This finding is significant because it marks a paradigm shift: *pesantren* maintain the authenticity of their traditions while simultaneously asserting themselves as inclusive, innovative, and visionary agents of social change. Therefore, this study can be regarded as a significant contribution to the enrichment of *pesantren* leadership literature while also opening new avenues of discussion on Islamic leadership models that are responsive to contemporary global dynamics.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that the integration of tradition, digital management innovation, and external collaboration constitutes a strategic factor in strengthening students' leadership capacity within *pesantren*. Tradition continues to serve as the moral and spiritual foundation that instills values of honesty, responsibility, and the exemplary role of the *kiai*, while technology-based managerial innovation introduces new transformations through digital administration, learning management systems, and online communication applications that foster participatory and adaptive leadership patterns. Collaboration with government, NGOs, and the private sector further enriches students' experiences through practical training beyond the religious sphere. This study highlights that *pesantren* now function as inclusive and visionary learning organizations, combining the preservation of traditional religious values with responsiveness to global challenges. The study's primary theoretical contribution lies in providing a more comprehensive understanding of how traditional educational institutions can serve as laboratories for leadership development, integrating moral values, collective practices, and 21st-century adaptive capabilities. From a practical perspective, the findings underscore the importance of strengthening digital infrastructure, developing technology-based leadership programs, and enhancing strategic partnership networks to prepare *santri* capable of leading in a visionary and adaptive manner. Looking ahead, it is recommended that *pesantren* further develop systematic digital leadership programs, including digital literacy modules, cross-disciplinary collaborative projects, and project-based leadership training, ensuring that *pesantren* remain relevant as both centers of Islamic education and incubators of future leaders.

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