

The Reconstruction of the Kiai's Transformational Leadership Based on a Digital Mindset in the Quality Assurance of Salafiyah Islamic Boarding Schools

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Abstract

Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren salafiyah*), as the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, face an existential paradox in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Industry 4.0): preserving classical religious traditions while responding to the demands of increasingly digitalized educational quality. The charismatic-paternalistic and centralized leadership of the *kiai* has not yet been able to produce a structured and sustainable quality assurance system. This article aims to analyze the reconstruction of the *kiai*'s transformational leadership based on a digital mindset as an instrument for quality assurance in Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools. Using a qualitative approach with a systematic literature review method, this research answers three questions: the reality of leadership and quality in Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools, the need for reconstruction based on a digital mindset, and its impact on quality improvement. The findings indicate that the *kiai*'s leadership requires reconstruction due to global digital transformation, the digital divide among students (*santri*), regulatory demands, and the need for leadership regeneration. The prophetic transformational leadership model of the Five I's—idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individual consideration, and individual spiritual greatness—integrated with a digital mindset, produces a quality assurance system that is

adaptive, measurable, and sustainable without losing the Salafiyah identity. This reconstruction impacts the improvement of human resource capacity, digital literacy culture, curriculum relevance, and the competitiveness of Salafiyah Islamic boarding school graduates.

Keywords: *kiai's* transformational leadership, digital mindset, quality assurance, Salafiyah Islamic boarding school.

Introduction

In the midst of the acceleration of the Industry 4.0 revolution that is altering the entire fabric of human life, Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools—as the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia—face an existential paradox: they are required to maintain their classical religious traditions while simultaneously responding to the demands for increasingly digitalized educational quality. The main premise underlying this phenomenon is that the leadership of the *kiai* in these institutions, which has traditionally been charismatic-paternalistic and centered on a single authority, requires reconstruction toward a transformational leadership model integrated with a digital mindset to achieve sustainable quality assurance (Armila & Sopianingsih, 2022; Eriyanto, 2023).

Currently, Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools generally still conduct education conventionally, where *santri* solely study classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*) without incorporating the science, technology, or life skills necessary for societal integration. Consequently, empirical data indicates that the quality of Indonesia's national education, including boarding school education, remains below that of other Asian countries such as Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, and Vietnam (Indra, 2020). Meanwhile, the digital divide between Salafiyah *santri* and the broader society continues to widen (Oktaria et al., 2023). Sheninger asserts that digital leadership consists of a dynamic combination of mindset, behavior, and skills used to transform and improve school culture through the strategic use of technology (Armila & Sopianingsih, 2022), making the transformation of the *kiai's* leadership an undeniable necessity.

Previous studies regarding *kiai* leadership and Islamic boarding schools can be categorized into three main perspectives. First, studies focusing on the *kiai's* transformational leadership in institutional development. For example, Umiarso (2018) identifies five components

of the *kiai's* prophetic transformational leadership (idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individual consideration, and individual spiritual greatness) in developing institutions in Jember Regency, while Safi'i (2020) found visionary, transformative, and charismatic leadership styles in forming independent *santri* in the 4.0 era. Second, studies examining the role of Islamic boarding schools in responding to the digital era. Badi'ah et al. (2021) demonstrate that boarding schools answer changing times through digital literacy concepts, and Oktaria et al. (2023) emphasize reconstructing the curriculum to develop leadership competencies, IT literacy, and problem-solving skills. Third, studies discussing quality assurance, such as Arfandi (2019) on Total Quality Service, Bashith et al. (2022) on the Salafi Model Quality Management System, and Yusuf (2021) on Integrated Total Quality Management. The unaddressed gap among these three groups is the absence of integrative research linking the reconstruction of the *kiai's* transformational leadership with a digital mindset as a specific basis for quality assurance in Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools. This article positions itself at the intersection of these perspectives, arguing that the reconstruction of *kiai* leadership cannot merely be conventionally transformational; it must be grounded in a digital mindset so that quality assurance can operate systematically and sustainably in the contemporary era.

This article aims to comprehensively analyze how the reconstruction of the *kiai's* transformational leadership, based on a digital mindset, can serve as an instrument for quality assurance in Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools. From this objective, three research questions are derived: (a) Descriptive Question (What): What is the current reality of *kiai* leadership and the prevailing quality assurance systems in Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools? (b) Critical Question (Why): Why does *kiai* leadership in Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools require reconstruction based on a digital mindset in the context of quality assurance? (c) Transformative Question (So What): What is the impact and significance of reconstructing the *kiai's* transformational leadership based on a digital mindset on improving the quality of Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools? These three questions will be systematically addressed in the findings and discussion section.

The main argument of this article is that reconstructing the *kiai's* transformational leadership by integrating it with a digital mindset will yield a quality assurance model that is more adaptive, measurable, and sustainable without stripping away the institution's Salafiyah identity.

This argument is theoretically supported by Bass and Avolio's transformational leadership concept, which emphasizes four dimensions—idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration (Hamid & Santosa, 2024)—which in the context of Islamic boarding schools is enriched with the dimension of individual spiritual greatness (Umiarso, 2018). It is also supported by the concept of digital leadership, which stresses that leaders must be capable of transforming organizational culture through the strategic use of technology (Armila & Sopianingsih, 2022). This argument will guide the flow of the article by first mapping the reality of leadership and quality, subsequently analyzing the need for reconstruction, and finally formulating the model and its impact on quality improvement.

Method

This research employs a qualitative approach with a systematic literature review method, enriched by phenomenological analysis (Badi'ah et al., 2021). A qualitative approach was selected for its ability to deeply describe the phenomenon of *kiai* leadership and the dynamics of quality assurance in Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools within the context of digitalization. The unit of analysis includes academic texts such as journal articles, books, and policy documents related to the *kiai*'s transformational leadership, digital mindsets, and quality assurance. The research focus is limited to three aspects: (1) the reality of *kiai* leadership in Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools, (2) the integration of a digital mindset into *kiai* leadership, and (3) the implications of this reconstruction for quality assurance.

The object of this research is academic literature published between 2017 and 2024 that discusses *kiai* leadership, Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools, transformational leadership, digital mindsets, and educational quality assurance. The selection of literature was conducted purposively with inclusion criteria requiring that: (1) the articles are published in accredited or reputable journals, (2) they substantively discuss one or more research variables, and (3) they are available in full text. Through a codification process using the Google Scholar database and related journal portals, articles were obtained and then selected based on relevance and methodological quality. Research ethics were fulfilled through accurate citation and respect for the intellectual property rights of each author.

The primary instrument used was a document analysis sheet containing analytical categories, including: source identity, research focus, theoretical framework, main findings, and relevance to the research variables. This instrument functions to map, classify, and synthesize findings from various sources systematically. The added value of this instrument compared to others is its ability to coherently integrate cross-disciplinary findings.

The research stages included: (1) identifying and collecting relevant literature, (2) selecting and classifying literature by theme, (3) extracting data from each piece of literature, (4) conducting content analysis to identify patterns, themes, and conceptual relationships, and (5) synthesizing the findings into a cohesive conceptual framework. The research was conducted over four months in the context of a literature review. Data were analyzed using interpretative content analysis techniques, allowing the researcher to not only describe the findings but also interpret their meaning and significance regarding the reconstruction of *kiai* leadership based on a digital mindset.

Results and Discussion

The Reality of Kiai Leadership and the Quality Assurance System in Salafiyah Islamic Boarding Schools

Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools, in accordance with their name which means "old" or "traditional," are boarding schools that organize learning with a traditional approach using *kitab kuning* and a teaching system entirely under the *kiai*'s authority (Arfandi, 2019; Indra, 2020). The core components include the dormitories (*pondok*), mosque, *santri*, the teaching of *kitab kuning*, and the presence of a *kiai* as the central figure (Hamidah & Chasannudin, 2021; Yusuf, 2021). The applied learning system relies heavily on classical methods such as *sorogan*, *bandongan*, and *wetonan*, where the *kiai* or their representative teaches classical texts directly to the *santri* (Badi'ah et al., 2021; Suharso & Sarbini, 2018; Syafiq & Rahardja, 2023).

Leadership in these institutions is highly personal and centralized. The *kiai* serves not only as a teacher and educator but also as the founder, caretaker, spiritual leader, and highest decision-maker across all aspects of boarding school life (Eriyanto, 2023; Khotijah & Mundiri, 2020). The institution's progress and decline depend heavily on the intellectual quality and charisma of the *kiai* (Syafiq & Rahardja, 2023). This

charismatic and independent leadership grants the institution a very high degree of autonomy in managing its education (Aisah et al., 2020).

The *kiai's* leadership style tends to be paternalistic-authoritarian, where the *kiai* acts as a "father" providing direction and making final decisions (Armila & Sopianingsih, 2022; Eriyanto, 2023). In this model, the leader acts passively as a father who allows room for creativity but retains the ultimate say. The *santri* firmly believe the *kiai* will not teach anything incorrect, and the contents of the studied texts are considered absolutely true (Taufikin, 2021).

In the context of quality assurance, Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools generally lack a structured and measurable system. Educational quality refers to input, process, output, and impact, yet its implementation remains informal and reliant on the *kiai's* personal policies (Arfandi, 2019; Yusuf, 2021). While the *kiai* can gauge the *santri's* absorption of material through the *sorogan* and *wetonan* models, this control is personal and not systematically documented (Syafiq & Rahardja, 2023).

Consequently, these institutions face serious challenges regarding educational quality. *Santri* generally do not study science or acquire the life skills needed for societal integration (Indra, 2020). The curriculum depends entirely on the *kiai* without clear standardization (Taufikin, 2021). This often renders graduates functionally unprepared for contemporary societal life.

Despite this, Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools possess a unique strength: a deeply rooted literacy tradition emphasizing humanization. This culture of literacy involves reading, writing, and listening to classical Arabic texts to understand the Qur'an and Sunnah, acting not just as a literary tradition but as an idealization and historical characteristic (Suharso & Sarbini, 2018).

In terms of institutional governance, modern management has generally not been adopted. While organizational structures exist involving administrators and local figures, the highest decision-making authority remains with the *kiai* (Bashith et al., 2022). This makes the institution highly vulnerable to stagnation if the leader fails to adapt to changing times.

These findings confirm Weber's traditional leadership theory, emphasizing charismatic dominance as the basis of the *kiai's* authority (Eriyanto, 2023). While effective for maintaining social cohesion and *santri* obedience (Armila & Sopianingsih, 2022), this model is fundamentally limited for quality assurance, which demands measurable,

documented, and sustainable systems. Total Quality Management requires a commitment to align vision, mission, and goals among components, alongside coordinated quality planning, organizing, actuating, and controlling processes (Yusuf, 2021).

The lack of a structured quality assurance system is not merely due to inability but stems from a leadership paradigm placing the *kiai* as the sole personal quality guarantor. From a Total Quality Service perspective, educational quality should be evaluated based on the comprehensive involvement of all elements (process) and the competencies of the graduates (results) (Arfandi, 2019). Reality shows that both aspects are currently suboptimal in Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools.

Reconstruction of Kiai Leadership in Salafiyah Islamic Boarding Schools Based on a Digital Mindset

The first factor necessitating reconstruction is the global digital transformation altering human life. Digital transformation involves organizational change through digital technology and business models to improve performance (Armila & Sopianingsih, 2022). This era, marked by the central role of cyber technology, gives rise to "Education 4.0," requiring every educational institution to adapt (Manan, 2019).

The second factor is the digital divide experienced by Salafiyah *santri*. This gap is exacerbated by institutional policies restricting technology access. While global education shifts toward technology-based learning, Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools maintain conventional methods reliant entirely on face-to-face interactions (Badi'ah et al., 2021; Indra, 2020; Oktaria et al., 2023).

The third factor involves national regulatory demands. Law Number 18 of 2019 concerning Islamic Boarding Schools mandates standardized quality assurance systems to foster institutional independence and contemporary relevance (Syafiq & Rahardja, 2023). This is unattainable without adopting digital technology in institutional governance.

The fourth factor is the paradigm shift in leadership during the era of disruption. There is a need for "disruptive leaders" who operate with a proactive, corporate, and disruptive mindset, consciously creating change through new methods and internet utilization (Aisah et al., 2020).

The fifth factor is the need for program diversification. Institutions must provide diverse academic and vocational programs to equip *santri* with both religious knowledge and practical workforce skills (Asror et

al., 2023). This diversification necessitates digital information and management systems.

The sixth factor is global educational competition. Graduates must be able to compete in the ASEAN Economic Community and global markets, demanding mastery of soft skills, technology, and entrepreneurship (Prabowo et al., 2022). Without a digital mindset, Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools will fall further behind.

The seventh factor is the necessity of leadership regeneration. Young *kiais* hold a strategic position in responding to social changes due to their technological knowledge (Badi'ah et al., 2021). However, transitioning leadership requires a clear framework to ensure adequate systemic transformation (Fauzi, 2018).

Analyzing these seven factors reveals that reconstructing *kiai* leadership based on a digital mindset is an existential necessity. The *kiai*, as the first agent of change, must formulate a responsive vision and transform into a digital-era leader without losing the essence of boarding school traditions (Armila & Sopianingsih, 2022; Umiarso, 2018).

The principle of *al-muhafazhah 'ala al-qadim al-shalih wa al-akhdzu bi al-jadid al-ashlah* (preserving good old traditions while adopting better new ones) provides theological and cultural legitimacy for this reconstruction (Umiarso, 2018). This does not mean replacing traditions with modernity, but synergistically integrating the two. Just as modern Islamic boarding schools have digitalized management and built digital libraries (Apud & Akrom, 2020), Salafiyah institutions must adopt similar steps with contextual adjustments.

The Impact and Significance of Reconstructing the Kiai's Transformational Leadership Based on a Digital Mindset

The first impact is the formation of a structured and measurable quality assurance system. By adopting a digital mindset, the *kiai* can systematically implement quality planning, organizing, actuating, and controlling via digital platforms, enabling real-time, data-driven monitoring and evaluation (Yusuf, 2021).

The second impact is increased human resource capacity. Transformational leadership's intellectual stimulation, when integrated with a digital mindset, encourages the *kiai* to facilitate programmed digital competency development for *ustadz*, administrators, and *santri* (Armila & Sopianingsih, 2022; Umiarso, 2018).

The third impact is the creation of a digital literacy culture. Utilizing digital literacy to support learning and resource access can be

adopted without eliminating classical literacy traditions, allowing the institution to navigate digital spaces wisely (Badi'ah et al., 2021; Oktaria et al., 2023).

The fourth impact is improved curriculum relevance. Revitalizing the curriculum to include IT literacy, problem-solving, critical thinking, and leadership ensures *santri* acquire both religious knowledge and practical societal skills (Indra, 2020; Oktaria et al., 2023).

The fifth impact is strengthened institutional governance. A digital mindset enables the *kiai* to distribute leadership to administrators without losing their central role as a tradition guardian, empowering units to take initiative (Apud & Akrom, 2020; Armila & Sopianingsih, 2022).

The sixth impact is enhanced graduate competitiveness. Graduates will not only "know" but also be able to "do," "be," and "live together" independently and competitively in the digital era (Apud & Akrom, 2020; Indra, 2020). The seventh impact is institutional sustainability. Transformational leadership strongly correlates with institutional progress. Enhanced by a digital mindset, Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools can dynamically evolve with the times while preserving their identity (Armila & Sopianingsih, 2022).

The significance of these impacts can be analyzed through Umiarso's (2018) prophetic transformational leadership theory. The Five I's model (idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individual consideration, and individual spiritual greatness), integrated with a digital mindset, builds an adaptive quality assurance system. The dimension of individual spiritual greatness ensures digital adoption does not compromise spiritual values.

Through a Total Quality Service perspective, this allows institutions to effectively implement five focus areas: customer focus, total involvement, digital data-driven measurement, systematic support, and continuous improvement (Arfandi, 2019). This counters criticisms regarding the lack of standardized quality assurance while preserving the institution's unique religious roots.

Furthermore, this serves as a transformative benchmark for broader Islamic educational ecosystems to navigate 21st-century challenges through distributive and transformational practices (Asror et al., 2023). It aligns with the spirit of the Islamic Boarding School Law to be independent and high-quality (Syafiq & Rahardja, 2023) and affirms the immense potential of Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools in developing national education (Indra, 2020).

Conclusion

Kiai leadership in Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools is currently still dominated by a centralized charismatic-paternalistic model. As a result, the quality assurance system in boarding schools is often informal, undocumented, and heavily dependent on the *kiai*'s individual capacity.

In this era of disruption, the reconstruction of *kiai* leadership to become transformational with a digital mindset is highly urgent. This transition is driven by the challenges of digital transformation, national regulations, the technological divide among *santri*, and global competition. This step continues to gain cultural legitimacy through the boarding school principle of preserving good old traditions while adopting more relevant new ones.

This leadership reconstruction has a significant impact on creating structured quality assurance, improving human resource capacity, digital literacy culture, and enhancing graduate competitiveness. Integrating prophetic transformational leadership theory (the Five I's model), digital leadership, and integrated quality service has proven to be a coherent conceptual framework.

Nevertheless, this literature-based study has limitations as it has not been empirically validated. Therefore, future research is recommended to conduct multi-site field studies using a participatory action research approach. The goal is to test, refine, and directly measure the impact of implementing this leadership model on quality improvement in Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools.

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