

Entrepreneurial Leadership of Kyai and Its Role in Shaping Santri Entrepreneurship

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to analyze Kyai's innovative leadership in fostering student entrepreneurship in Islamic boarding schools. This study uses a qualitative case study design. Data collection was conducted through interviews, observation, and documentation. Data analysis techniques include data condensation, data presentation, and drawing and verifying conclusions. The results show that Kyai's innovative leadership successfully fostered student entrepreneurship through various entrepreneurial projects and innovative learning models. This leadership also contributed to significant institutional development, including the establishment of collaborations with national and international partners. This study shows that innovative leadership can be an effective model in improving entrepreneurship and the quality of education in educational institutions. This study implies that educational institutions can adopt innovative leadership models to strengthen student independence. In addition, this study emphasizes the importance of external collaboration in improving the quality and reputation of educational institutions.

Keywords: *Innovative Leadership, Kyai, Entrepreneurship, External Collaboration*

Abstrak:

Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisis tentang kepemimpinan inovatif Kyai dalam menumbuhkan kewirausahaan santri di pondok pesantren. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui wawancara, observasi, dan dokumentasi. Teknik analisis data meliputi kondensasi data, penyajian data, serta penarikan dan verifikasi kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan inovatif Kyai berhasil menumbuhkan kewirausahaan santri melalui berbagai proyek kewirausahaan dan model pembelajaran inovatif. Kepemimpinan ini juga berkontribusi terhadap perkembangan kelembagaan yang signifikan, termasuk terjalannya kerja sama dengan mitra nasional dan internasional. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan inovatif dapat menjadi model yang efektif dalam meningkatkan kewirausahaan dan mutu pendidikan di lembaga pendidikan. Implikasi penelitian ini adalah bahwa lembaga pendidikan dapat mengadopsi model kepemimpinan inovatif untuk memperkuat kemandirian peserta didik. Selain itu, penelitian ini menegaskan pentingnya kolaborasi eksternal dalam meningkatkan kualitas dan reputasi lembaga pendidikan.

Kata Kunci: *Kepemimpinan Inovatif, Kyai, Kewirausahaan, Kolaborasi Eksternal*

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INTRODUCTION

Leadership is widely recognized as a decisive factor in shaping entrepreneurial capacity within educational institutions, including Islamic boarding schools. In theory, entrepreneurial leadership emphasizes innovation, empowerment, and strategic vision to foster independence and adaptability among learners. However, in practice, many pesantren still rely on traditional leadership models that prioritize religious authority while underutilizing entrepreneurship as a systematic educational strategy. This gap raises critical questions regarding how and why entrepreneurial leadership is not uniformly translated into entrepreneurial outcomes among santri. Socio-economic challenges, technological change, and increasing demands for graduate self-reliance further intensify this issue. Although leadership theories suggest that innovative and fair leadership enhances motivation and productivity (Gökalp & Soran, 2022; Ly, 2024; Yang & Li, 2023), empirical evidence shows that not all pesantren leaders successfully integrate these principles into entrepreneurial education. Consequently, there is a discrepancy between leadership theory and the social reality of entrepreneurship development in Islamic boarding schools. This gap underscores the need for context-specific studies that examine how entrepreneurial leadership is enacted in pesantren settings and how it shapes santri entrepreneurship.

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Previous studies have extensively examined leadership in educational organisations, highlighting its role in innovation, institutional coordination, and performance improvement. (Gökalp & Soran, 2022; Iqbal et al., 2023) emphasise that innovative leadership enables organisations to adapt to change and implement new practices effectively, while Alang et al. (2022) and Ly (2024) demonstrate that leadership style significantly affects individual achievement and productivity. Similarly, Shah & Soomro (2023) and Yang & Li (2023) argue that

leaders who exhibit fairness, responsibility, and support foster stronger motivation and goal attainment among followers. In the context of Islamic education, research has shown that the kyai functions as the central authority whose leadership determines institutional direction and sustainability (Arifin et al., 2024; Tantowi et al., 2022). However, most existing studies focus on leadership effectiveness in general educational outcomes rather than entrepreneurial development. As a result, the role of kyais' leadership in systematically fostering santri entrepreneurship remains underexplored. This study positions itself to extend prior research by shifting the analytical focus from general leadership effectiveness to entrepreneurial leadership within pesantren.

Research on entrepreneurship education highlights the importance of leadership in equipping students with life skills, independence, and socio-economic resilience. Studies indicate that entrepreneurial leadership supports institutional sustainability by fostering innovation, external collaboration, and community engagement (Ataei et al., 2024; Taleb et al., 2023). In pesantren contexts, Coffeng et al. (2023) and Or & Berkovich (2023) note that leadership transformation from individual-centred to collective models can enhance participation and democratic practices. Nevertheless, these studies often treat entrepreneurship as a supplementary program rather than a core leadership-driven process. Furthermore, empirical investigations rarely examine how kyai leadership directly shapes santri entrepreneurial mindsets and practices through daily institutional mechanisms. Therefore, despite growing attention to leadership and entrepreneurship separately, their intersection within Islamic boarding schools remains insufficiently theorised. This study fills that gap by offering an in-depth case analysis of how entrepreneurial leadership is practised by a kyai and experienced by santri.

Given the theoretical and empirical gaps identified, this study seeks to examine entrepreneurial leadership within the specific context of an Islamic boarding school. The central research question guiding this study is: How does the entrepreneurial leadership of the Kyai shape santri entrepreneurship at Jawahirul Hikmah Islamic Boarding School, Tulungagung? This question addresses not only leadership practices but also the mechanisms through which entrepreneurial values are cultivated among santri. By focusing on leadership strategies, entrepreneurial programs, and santri responses, the study aims to uncover how leadership functions as a driving force for entrepreneurial development. The selection of Jawahirul Hikmah Islamic Boarding School is based on its documented institutional growth, student achievements, and strong entrepreneurial orientation under the Kyai's leadership. Thus, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of entrepreneurial leadership in pesantren as both a pedagogical and institutional phenomenon.

This study is grounded in the argument that the kyais' entrepreneurial leadership plays a critical role in fostering santri entrepreneurship by integrating innovation, role-modeling, and institutional collaboration. It is hypothesised that when a kyai adopts entrepreneurial leadership practices—such as initiating entrepreneurial projects, supporting santri independence, and building national and international partnerships—santri are more likely to develop entrepreneurial

mindsets and skills. This leadership approach not only enhances individual self-reliance but also contributes to institutional development and educational quality. The argument aligns with leadership theories that emphasise innovation and empowerment, while extending them into the pesantren context. Therefore, entrepreneurial leadership is expected to function as both a catalyst for santri entrepreneurship and a strategic model for strengthening Islamic educational institutions. By empirically examining this argument, the study contributes theoretical and practical insights into leadership and entrepreneurship education.

RESEARCH METHODS

From its unit of analysis, this study is categorised as field research, as it directly examines social phenomena in their natural settings to obtain actual and contextual data while cross-checking existing sources (Fitri & Haryanti, 2020; Zaenul Fitri, 2020). The material object of this research is Jawahirul Hikmah Islamic Boarding School as an educational institution, with a specific focus on leadership practices, entrepreneurial programs, institutional activities, and events related to santri entrepreneurship. The case under investigation concerns the innovative leadership of the kyais in shaping santri entrepreneurial behaviour and independence. This study employs a qualitative research design using a case study approach, as the research setting reflects distinctive characteristics relevant to the dimensions of kyai leadership and entrepreneurship development. The case study design allows for an in-depth exploration of leadership processes, experiences, and meanings within a specific institutional context.

The sources of information in this study consist of human and textual data. Human sources include key informants and participants who are directly involved in or experience the leadership practices under study. The kyais and boarding school administrators serve as key informants due to their strategic roles in policy-making and program implementation, while santri function as research participants who experience and respond to entrepreneurial leadership practices. Textual sources include institutional documents, reports, archives, and other written materials relevant to leadership and entrepreneurship programs within the pesantren. These multiple sources enable data triangulation, enhancing the credibility and validity of the findings.

Data were collected through several complementary techniques. First, participant observation was conducted to systematically observe leadership practices, entrepreneurial activities, and daily interactions within the pesantren. In this process, the researcher actively engaged in institutional activities while recording naturally occurring phenomena related to the research focus. Second, in-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide to obtain detailed, reflective information from key informants and santri. This interview technique enabled the exploration of perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of kyai leadership in fostering entrepreneurship. In addition, a desk review of institutional documents and archival materials was undertaken to support and verify field data.

Data analysis was conducted through a systematic and iterative process involving data condensation, data display, verification, and conclusion drawing,

following the qualitative analysis framework proposed by Bingham (2023) and Salmona & Kaczynski (2024). During data condensation, relevant information from interviews, observations, and documents was selected, simplified, and coded. The condensed data were then organized and presented in narrative and thematic forms to facilitate interpretation. Finally, verification and conclusion drawing were performed through continuous comparison across data sources to identify patterns, meanings, and relationships. The primary analytical method employed was interpretive content analysis, enabling the researcher to understand how entrepreneurial leadership is constructed, practiced, and experienced within the pesantren context.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Kyai Zakki, as the founder of the Islamic boarding school, makes decisions regarding the innovations introduced by Gus Zaldi, who serves as a change agent, reform initiator, and implementer of innovations in accordance with his qualifications and prior experience in managing the pesantren. His efforts are further supported and assisted by all internal stakeholders of the pesantren, including the santri.

The kyais directed the formation of small study groups for the santri. For Grade XII students preparing for the national examination, a quarantine model was implemented, while Grades X and XI also formed small groups, but without quarantine. The quarantine model provided special rooms and tailored programs, including meals, prayers, study sessions, and a focus on subjects tested in the national examination. The quarantine curriculum did not fully align with the national curriculum, as the learning schedule was largely concentrated on the examination subjects. As stated by the Head of Jawahirul Hikmah Senior High School and the Head of the Islamic Boarding School, "the school established small groups using the quarantine model for Grade XII in preparation for the national examination. These groups are guided by creative and professional teachers to enhance student achievement." Similarly, the boarding school administrators affirmed that "these small groups help students absorb lessons more effectively and achieve optimal results. The main goal is to cultivate students who are morally upright (akhlaqul karimah), academically excellent, and independent".

The kyais introduced innovations by requiring teachers to establish outdoor classes organised into small learning groups. The Head of Jawahirul Hikmah Senior High School stated that the school formed small groups using the quarantine model for Grade XII students in preparation for the national examination. Similarly, the Head of the Islamic Boarding School emphasised that the kyais implemented innovations, including outdoor classes and small learning groups. The boarding school administrator, Mr Imam Musaini, further noted that a developing school embraces innovation and that the principal has undertaken several initiatives to manage the educational institution.

The kyais introduced innovations by requiring teachers to create outdoor classes organised into small learning groups. In addition, a multilingual program has been implemented since 1995, even before the establishment of the junior and senior high schools. Initially, the program was challenging, beginning with five vocabulary words per week that students were required to memorise, and it has since developed further. Today, the santri have become more creative; for instance, during a walk to Sidem Beach, every 200 meters, they are given 10 vocabulary words, so that by the time they reach the finish point, they have accumulated a substantial set of words. Another method involves placing the santri in a room with 100 vocabulary words to memorise before they are allowed to leave. Moreover, the kyais emphasised the importance of not always studying in the classroom, as this helps prevent boredom and fatigue.

The implementation of entrepreneurial leadership, fostered through teachers' creativity, has shaped students into independent individuals with an entrepreneurial spirit, as reflected in their engagement across various business fields, including music training, garment production, printing, photography, event organising, and more. The kyai established entrepreneurial organisations to further enhance teachers' creativity, including ventures in marble mining, gourami and catfish farming, freshwater lobster cultivation, and the AQUAQY water factory. These initiatives have maximised the development of teachers' creativity. The progress or decline of the pesantren ultimately depends on the leadership capacity of the kyais in managing the institution and implementing education through the establishment of entrepreneurial organisations.

The progress or decline of a pesantren depends on the leadership capacity of the kyai in managing the institution and implementing education, particularly through the establishment of entrepreneurial organisations such as: (1) marble mining, (2) gourami and catfish farming, (3) freshwater lobster cultivation, and (4) the AQUAQY water factory. The kyai has also developed the pesantren's economy through home industries, including the production of drum band uniforms, fashion apparel, and screen-printed T-shirts. In addition, he established the Aquaky bottled water factory, whose products are marketed as far as Surabaya. All these initiatives were undertaken to strengthen the pesantren's economy and foster the santri's self-reliance.

Jawahirul Hikmah Islamic Boarding School prioritises the education and intellectual development of its santri. The pesantren is also well known for its numerous business ventures that support institutional growth, such as lobster farming, marble mining, and a mineral water company. Over time, these

enterprises have expanded through collaborations with domestic and international partners. As stated in an interview with the Head of Jawahirul Hikmah Senior High School: "Jawahirul Hikmah Islamic Boarding School is also renowned for its many business ventures, including lobster farming, marble mining, and a mineral water company, which have facilitated numerous national and international collaborations." Similarly, the Head of the pesantren emphasised that the development of Jawahirul Hikmah Islamic Boarding School involves extensive cooperation with multiple parties, both within and outside the country, including partnerships in lobster cultivation.

The development of Jawahirul Hikmah Islamic Boarding School has involved collaborations with various partners, both domestically and internationally. One of the main areas of cooperation is lobster farming. The lobsters cultivated by Jawahirul Hikmah are the result of crossbreeding between Papuan and Australian lobsters, producing superior strains. In fact, a restaurant in the United States recognised Jawahirul Hikmah's lobster stock as Grade A. This recognition led to numerous national-scale partnerships beginning in 2007, with the pesantren supplying lobsters to various regions across Indonesia. Several renowned hotels have also ordered lobsters from Jawahirul Hikmah due to their exceptional quality. At the international level, partnerships were also established in 2007 to export lobsters to meet market demand in the United States and Japan.

The impact of the kyai's leadership at Jawahirul Hikmah Islamic Boarding School, Tulungagung, is evident in the many visits the institution receives from government officials, including ministers, the U.S. Consul General, and representatives from provincial and district governments. As stated in an interview with the Head of Jawahirul Hikmah Senior High School: "Jawahirul Hikmah Islamic Boarding School has welcomed numerous visits from bureaucratic officials, including ministers, the U.S. Consul General, and provincial and district representatives. Visitors typically offer congratulations and high appreciation, as the programs available are highly beneficial and responsive to community needs. They also acknowledge the remarkable achievements attained by Jawahirul Hikmah." Similarly, the Head of the pesantren affirmed: "It is indeed true that due to the uniqueness of this pesantren, it has received many visits, the most notable of which was the visit from the Consul General of the United States".

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that Kyai Zakki, as the founder of the Islamic boarding school, has played a crucial role in institutional development through various educational and entrepreneurial innovations. These innovations include a quarantine-based model for national exam preparation, outdoor learning classes, a multilingual program, and the establishment of entrepreneurial organisations such as marble mining, fish farming, and lobster cultivation. Through these initiatives, Kyai Zakki has successfully shaped students into morally upright (akhlaqul karimah) individuals, academically accomplished, and economically independent. This confirms that entrepreneurial leadership within pesantren does not merely focus on economic outcomes but also integrates moral and intellectual development. The leadership practices observed demonstrate how innovation-oriented decision-making can translate institutional vision into

concrete programs that foster holistic student development.

These findings are consistent with previous studies that emphasise that innovation involves implementing new ideas to improve products, processes, or services (Jaya et al., 2024; Junaidi & Mildawati, 2022). Innovative leaders are characterised by their ability to transform creative concepts into practical applications that generate value (Ataei et al., 2024; Taleb et al., 2023). Innovation may take the form of ideas, goods, events, techniques, or practices that are perceived as new by individuals or groups (Liu et al., 2024; Pizzolitto et al., 2022). In this study, the innovative leadership of the kyai, together with teachers (asatidz) and administrators, is reflected in programs aligned with the pesantren's vision and mission, which serve as institutional targets within an academic period. As stated by Al-Mamary & Alshallaqi (2022) and Okręglicka et al. (2023), innovation implies a transition from unfavourable or unstable conditions to improved, more positive states. Thus, innovative leadership aims at transforming low-quality or negatively perceived conditions into better institutional realities.

The entrepreneurial leadership style implemented by the kyai is further evident in the establishment of business units such as marble mining, gourami and catfish farming, freshwater lobster cultivation, and the AQUAQY factory, which also maximises teachers' creativity. This finding supports those of Supratno et al. (2020) and Zakso et al. (2022), who argue that entrepreneurship in Islamic boarding schools involves empowering students and alumni to develop institutional business units. Entrepreneurship education equips students with competencies essential for future life sustainability (Adeel et al., 2023; Korosteleva et al., 2024). It encompasses pedagogical processes that foster entrepreneurial attitudes, skills, and personal qualities (Mikl et al., 2021; Sakas et al., 2023), as well as efforts to internalise entrepreneurial mindsets through formal and non-formal education (Lee, 2023; Schneider et al., 2025). Moreover, entrepreneurship education facilitates the development and transmission of entrepreneurial knowledge and skills, enabling students to identify, evaluate, and exploit business opportunities, while also contributing to economic growth by equipping individuals with the capacity to establish and manage sustainable, profitable enterprises.

Entrepreneurship is also understood as a process of educating individuals to comprehend entrepreneurial theory (to know), develop entrepreneurial skills (to do), and cultivate confidence in entrepreneurship as a profession (Adijaya, 2023; Simba et al., 2025). Entrepreneurs combine factors of production to generate added value and act as agents of change through innovation (Darmawanti et al., 2020; Hasmiwati et al., 2025). Entrepreneurs are characterised by strong commitment, persistence, resilience, calculated risk-taking, and continuous opportunity-seeking until success is achieved. In this study, Kyai Zakki holds final decision-making authority over innovations proposed by Gus Zaldi, who serves as a change agent and reformer drawing on his experience in pesantren management. This leadership process is supported by internal stakeholders, including students, enabling the implementation of innovative programs that foster student independence and entrepreneurial engagement in areas such as music training, garment production, printing, photography, and event organising.

The findings of this study align with those of Terán-Bustamante et al. (2022, 2025), who state that innovation is the process of applying new ideas to improve or create products, processes, and services, with leaders playing a central role in translating creativity into practical solutions. The kyais' innovative leadership is implemented through programs aligned with the pesantren's vision and mission, reflecting targeted institutional transformation. Innovation involves transitioning from less favourable conditions to better ones (Kim et al., 2024; Sebaka & Zhao, 2023), aiming to improve unstable or stigmatised situations into higher-quality, more stable states (Aman-Ullah et al., 2024; Flori et al., 2025). In Islamic boarding schools, innovative leadership is realised through collaborative support from internal stakeholders and practical strategies such as small learning groups and outdoor classes. These practices have successfully fostered students' independence and entrepreneurial spirit, reinforcing the idea that innovative leadership fundamentally emphasises positive transformation and institutional improvement.

CONCLUSION

The findings show that the Kyai's innovative leadership at Pondok Pesantren Jawahirul Hikmah provides an important lesson on how pesantren can simultaneously function as religious and entrepreneurship-oriented institutions. Through the establishment of diverse entrepreneurial units, quarantine-based small-group mentoring, outdoor learning, and strategic collaborations with domestic and international partners, the pesantren successfully cultivated students' independence, creativity, and entrepreneurial competence while strengthening institutional reputation and economic sustainability. This study contributes to the academic field by offering a renewed perspective on innovative leadership in Islamic boarding schools, highlighting the integration of leadership, entrepreneurship education, and institutional networking as a holistic model. In doing so, it expands the discourse on leadership in pesantren by positioning entrepreneurial development as a central outcome of innovative leadership practices.

However, this study is limited to a single-case context at one pesantren, which restricts the generalizability of the findings across different institutional settings, demographic characteristics, and methodological approaches. Future research is therefore needed to involve multiple pesantren with broader variations in gender, age groups, and socio-cultural contexts, and to incorporate survey-based and mixed-method designs to obtain more comprehensive data. Such studies would provide stronger empirical foundations for policy-making and support the development of more inclusive and scalable models of innovative leadership and entrepreneurship in educational institutions.

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