



KIAI LEADERSHIP STRATEGY IN DEVELOPING STUDENTS' LOYALTY AND DISCIPLINE

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Abstract:

This study aims to examine the leadership strategies of Islamic scholars (kiai) in fostering the loyalty and discipline of students at the Darul Khairat Islamic Boarding School in Pontianak. Islamic boarding schools, as Islamic educational institutions, have unique characteristics with a development system that emphasizes moral, spiritual, and disciplinary aspects, where the kiai plays a role as a leader, educator, and director of the students' lives. Given the influence of globalization and digital culture, challenges to student loyalty and discipline are increasingly complex, so that adaptive leadership strategies are needed that remain rooted in Islamic boarding school values. The study used a descriptive qualitative approach with data collection through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Data analysis was carried out through reduction, presentation, and drawing conclusions with source triangulation to ensure data validity. The results show that kiai implement leadership strategies through several aspects, namely personal example, routine habits, emotional closeness, and adaptation to social and digital developments. The kiai's exemplary role model becomes a moral example that motivates students internally, routine habits form discipline, while emotional closeness strengthens students' loyalty and inner connection. This strategy demonstrates the integration of modern managerial principles and spiritual values, developing students who are disciplined, loyal, and have character. The research findings contribute to the development of Islamic educational management theory and practice, particularly in the effective leadership of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in facing the challenges of the times without sacrificing tradition and moral values.

Keywords: *Kyai Leadership, Loyalty, Discipline*

INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) are Islamic educational institutions with unique characteristics, with a development system that emphasizes moral, spiritual, and disciplinary aspects (Imanuddin & Yunus, 2025). Within this structure, the kiai (Islamic cleric) occupies a central position as a leader, educator, and director of the pesantren's life (Ruhdiyanto et al., 2021). The kiai not only serves as a spiritual leader who instills Islamic values, but also as an educational institution manager, regulating organizational dynamics and shaping the character of the students (Sari et al., 2025). However, with the changing times and the rapid flow of globalization, pesantren face various social challenges that influence the behavior of students (Samino & Mahmudah, 2023). Phenomena such as declining levels of obedience to pesantren regulations, diminishing respect for the kiai, and the increasing influence of digital culture on students' lifestyles indicate a shift in the values of loyalty and

discipline within the pesantren environment (Holid & Rozi, 2025).

This situation demands an appropriate leadership strategy from the kiai to maintain the core values of the pesantren (Ataman et al., 2024). In this regard, this study seeks to identify and analyze the leadership strategies of kiai (Islamic boarding school) in fostering student loyalty and discipline, through exemplary approaches, habituation, and a development system rooted in Islamic spiritual values (Khofi & Furqon, 2024).

Leadership plays a significant role in creating effective and character-based educational institution governance (Loso Judijanto et al., 2024). This study also seeks to integrate traditional, values-based leadership principles in Islamic boarding schools with modern management approaches that emphasize the effectiveness and sustainability of the institution. The limitations of this study are focused on kiai leadership strategies in fostering student loyalty and discipline, without addressing the overall organizational structure of the Islamic boarding school (Qushwa, 2024).

Previous studies have demonstrated diverse kiai leadership patterns in fostering student development. (Arifin, 2023) emphasizes that the kiai's exemplary role is the primary foundation for developing student character and discipline. Participatory leadership that involves students in Islamic boarding school activities can foster a sense of belonging and loyalty to the institution. Furqon (2021) highlights the charismatic leadership of kiai, who are able to build emotional bonds between leaders and students as a form of spiritual loyalty. Meanwhile, Zufadli et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of adaptive leadership that can adapt to social change without eliminating the traditional values of Islamic boarding schools.

From these findings, it appears that the majority of previous studies have focused on moral and spiritual aspects, but few have concretely explained the operational strategies of kiai leadership in building student loyalty and discipline amidst modern social change (Tohet, 2024). Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap.

The main objective of this study is to uncover and analyze kiai leadership strategies in fostering student loyalty and discipline in Islamic boarding schools. Specifically, this study aims to describe the forms of leadership strategies used, analyze the influence of these strategies on student character formation, and identify the managerial and spiritual values contained within them. The results of this study are expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of Islamic education management studies, as well as practical benefits for Islamic boarding schools in strengthening student development systems based on exemplary leadership.

The kiai's leadership strategy, based on exemplary behavior, emotional closeness, and spiritual cultivation, is a key factor in fostering loyalty and discipline among students (Hasyudi et al., 2025). The kiai's exemplary behavior serves as a behavioral model that inspires obedience among students, while emotional closeness fosters respect and moral responsibility toward the Islamic boarding school (Wahid & Prasetya, 2024).

Furthermore, spiritual cultivation and ongoing supervision are effective mechanisms for maintaining student discipline and order. This research is expected to provide a deeper understanding of the distinctive leadership model of Islamic boarding schools that is relevant for strengthening character education management in the modern era, which is full of value and cultural challenges.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach, seeking to deeply understand how kiai leadership strategies are applied to foster student loyalty and discipline within Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). This approach was chosen to explore the meanings, values, and social practices that naturally occur in Islamic boarding schools without manipulating the research variables. The researcher acted as the primary instrument, directly involved in the data collection process in the field.

This research was conducted at the Darul Khairat Islamic Boarding School in Pontianak, as this institution has a strong leadership system and still adheres to the tradition of the kiai as a central figure in the development of students. The research subjects consisted of the kiai as the central leadership figure, several administrators, and the students who directly experience the influence of this leadership. Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, selecting informants based on certain considerations deemed to have the best understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Data for this study were obtained through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted to directly observe the kiai's leadership practices and the students' behavior in daily life at the Islamic boarding school. Interviews were conducted with informants to gain a comprehensive understanding of the leadership strategies, approaches, and values implemented by the kiai. Documentation was used to collect data in the form of archives, pesantren regulations, and activity records relevant to the research focus.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study found that the leadership of the kiai (Islamic boarding school) has a distinctive pattern and is integrated into the lives of the students. The kiai's leadership not only functions structurally as an institution manager, but also has cultural and spiritual dimensions, rooted in the traditions of the Islamic boarding school.

Exemplary Behavior and Discipline as Centers for Student Loyalty and Discipline

The study showed that exemplary behavior is the most powerful aspect in building student loyalty to the kiai and the Islamic boarding school (Sakdiyah, 2022). The kiai appears as a figure consistent between words and actions (Hakiki et al., 2024). He always exemplifies disciplined behavior, such as being punctual for activities, maintaining a simple lifestyle, and demonstrating a strong passion for knowledge. Students reported that the kiai was always the first to attend religious study groups and congregational prayers, and the last to leave.

This kind of exemplary behavior has a significant influence on the students' awareness. They feel ashamed if they neglect their responsibilities because they have witnessed the kiai's sincerity firsthand. In the context of Islamic educational management, this pattern reflects a form of transformational leadership, in which leaders transform the behavior and motivation of followers through moral example. Loyalty arises not merely from orders, but from an inner drive to follow a respected figure. The exemplary leadership in Islamic boarding schools is an effective instrument in instilling moral values and discipline in students. In other words, exemplary behavior forms the foundation of the entire character education process within the

Islamic boarding school environment. It is not merely a method, but rather a living value system that binds all members of the boarding school community.

Islamic boarding schools implement a strictly scheduled and repetitive lifestyle, from waking up to retiring at night. Routine activities such as congregational prayer, reading the Koran, maintaining a clean environment, and studying at the madrasah are part of the process of developing disciplined character. This habituation is not achieved through pressure, but through a consistent and educational system. Students are trained to be disciplined without constant supervision. For example, if a student is late for congregational prayer, they are given religious duties such as additional Quran reading or helping clean the mosque. Conversely, students who demonstrate exemplary behavior and responsibility are entrusted with positions as room administrators or activity leaders.

Interviews revealed that these practices gradually foster a sense of self-awareness and a desire to obey the rules, not out of fear of punishment, but because they view discipline as a form of worship. This demonstrates that the practice strategy serves as a mechanism for internalizing disciplinary values.

Emotional Closeness and Humanistic Leadership

One characteristic characteristic of leadership is emotional closeness with students.

The kiai (Islamic leader) does not position himself as a distant and authoritarian figure, but rather as a loving and caring parent. On various occasions, the kiai frequently greets students directly, inquires about their families, and even offers personal advice with a gentle and empathetic approach.

This closeness fosters a sense of security and a spiritual bond between the kiai and students. Students feel valued, cared for, and involved in the life of the pesantren.

Loyalty naturally grows out of this sense of respect and love. Students perceive that obeying the kiai's commands is tantamount to upholding the honor of the pesantren and their religion. This approach illustrates a charismatic and humanistic leadership model, where the leader's strength lies in their personality and spiritual influence, rather than their formal position.

In this regard, this pattern demonstrates that the kiai performs a multi-layered leadership function: as a motivator, guide, and spiritual figure who serves as a source of moral inspiration. This type of leadership is difficult to replace because it relies on bonds of values and emotions, not simply a formal system.

Adapting to Modern Challenges and Digital Culture and Spiritual Managerialism

The following findings demonstrate that kiai possess adaptive capabilities to modern social dynamics. In facing the challenges of globalization and digital culture that are beginning to influence the behavior of students (santri), kiai do not adopt a stance of complete rejection, but instead make adjustments with the principle of caution.

Kiai establish policies limiting the use of gadgets in the pesantren environment, while still opening up a space for digital education in a targeted manner. For example, kiai encourage the use of social media for preaching and publicizing pesantren activities, while providing guidance on media ethics. In this way, kiai maintain the values of politeness, obedience, and simplicity typical of pesantren, while adapting to current developments. This approach proves that the leadership of the kiai is not static, but rather dynamic and contextual.

CONCLUSION

The leadership of the kiai plays a crucial role in fostering loyalty and discipline among students through exemplary behavior, habituation, emotional closeness, and adaptation to changing times. The kiai's exemplary behavior serves as a source of moral inspiration that fosters obedience among students, while the habituation system fosters conscious and sustainable discipline. An emotional approach builds spiritual loyalty between the kiai and students, while an adaptive attitude toward digital culture demonstrates dynamic and contextual leadership. Thus, the kiai's leadership strategy is a blend of Islamic spiritual values and modern managerial principles that are effective in shaping the character of students in the era of globalization.

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