

Reproduction of Kiai Authority in the Digital Era: A Study of Islamic Boarding School Leadership Transformation

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Abstrak

This study examines the reproduction of kiai authority in the digital era and the transformation of pesantren leadership within the context of modern educational bureaucracy, focusing on Pesantren Al-Khoirot Malang. The research aims to understand how kiai authority remains effective in maintaining the loyalty of students and the surrounding community despite increasing demands for digitalization, administrative standardization, and new communication patterns. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and analysis of digital documents. The findings reveal that kiai authority is reproduced through a combination of traditional charisma, curated digital communication, and delegated technical tasks to media teams and administrative staff. Pesantren leadership has transformed into a hybrid model that integrates traditional values with modern governance without diminishing the spiritual legitimacy of the kiai. The study concludes that strategic adaptation to digital media and bureaucratic systems strengthens the stability of kiai authority and enhances the pesantren's relevance amid contemporary social changes.

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INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has changed almost all aspects of social life, including the pattern of religious leadership in Indonesia's Muslim society. Pesantren as a traditional Islamic educational institution cannot be separated from this current of change, especially in terms of the authority of the kiai as a central figure. The authority of the kiai has been built through personal relationships, moral exemplary, and direct transmission of knowledge. However, the presence of digital media presents a new space for the production and distribution of religious authority that is no longer entirely dependent on physical presence. This phenomenon is important to study because it concerns the sustainability of pesantren values in the midst of a digital society. Studies show that religious authorities are now competing with new figures in the digital space that have legitimacy based on popularity and algorithms. Therefore, this research is important to understand how pesantren maintain, negotiate, and reproduce the authority of kiai so that it remains relevant and

influential in shaping public morality in the digital era. (Rois & Yazdani, 2026; Sulfikar & Yasmine, 2025; Wahid & Abdulloh, 2026)

The Indonesian Muslim community is currently facing the problem of fragmentation of religious authorities due to the digitization of information. Open access to online lectures, social media, and digital Islamic platforms has led to a shift in sources of religious reference from local scholars to virtual figures who do not necessarily have strong scientific legitimacy. This condition has the potential to weaken the traditional authority of pesantren and kiai as the guardians of moderate Islamic orthodoxy (Mustofa et al., 2023; Zalva, 2025). Previous research has shown that digital religion creates disruption in the structure of conventional religious authority (Abusharif, 2023; Andok, 2024; Cheong & Nord, 2026). In Indonesia, studies reveal that digital media has accelerated the birth of alternative religious authorities (Kholili et al., 2024; Mevorach, 2017; Rachman et al., 2025; Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2019a). However, there have not been many studies that specifically examine how pesantren respond to this problem institutionally. Therefore, this research is important to answer social challenges in the form of a crisis of legitimacy of kiai authority in the midst of an increasingly plural and fluid digital society.

Phenomena in the field show that pesantren are not completely passive in facing digitalization. At the Al-Khoirot Islamic Boarding School in Malang, for example, kiai began to use social media, YouTube channels, and other digital platforms as a means of da'wah and education. This transformation is not only technological, but also touches on aspects of leadership and power relations. Kiai is no longer only present as a charismatic figure in the physical space of the Islamic boarding school, but also as a digital actor who interacts with students and the wider community. However, this adaptation gave rise to new dynamics, such as changes in communication patterns, redefinition of charisma, and negotiation of authority between kiai, students, and digital audiences. Initial observations show that there is a conscious effort by pesantren to reproduce the authority of kiai through scientific narratives, religious symbols, and the legitimacy of traditions in the digital space. This phenomenon is interesting to study because it shows the hybridization process between the tradition of pesantren and digital modernity that has not been explored in depth.

A number of studies have discussed the relationship between religion and digital media. Campbell introduced the concept of digital religion which emphasizes the reciprocal interaction between religious practices and technology (Campbell, 2012). Hjarvard highlights the process of mediatization of religion that shifts religious authority to the logic of the media (Hjarvard, 2016). In the Indonesian context, Nisa and Slama examine the emergence of digital dai and new religious authorities on social media (Nisa, 2018; Slama, 2017). Another study by Azra explains the emphasis on the importance of pesantren in maintaining moderate Islam (Azra, 2017). However,

most of the research focuses more on individual actors or religious discourse in the digital space, rather than on Islamic boarding schools as complex social entities. In addition, the study of kiai leadership still tends to be studied in the traditional framework paradigm without seriously considering digital transformation.

Research on pesantren leadership generally emphasizes the charismatic, genealogical, and scientific aspects of kiai (Azro'i & Fuaidi, 2020). This study makes an important contribution in understanding the structure of pesantren authority, but has not yet integrated the digital dimension as the main analysis variable. Some recent research has begun to associate pesantren with technology (Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2019b; Zaid et al., 2022), but it is still limited to aspects of online learning or education management. Thus, there is a research gap in the form of a lack of studies that examine the reproduction of kiai authority in the context of digital transformation empirically and contextually. This research occupies a strategic position by combining the study of pesantren leadership, Weberian authority theory, and digital religious studies. This research contribution is expected to be able to enrich the treasures of pesantren studies with new perspectives that are relevant to the challenges of the times.

The novelty of this research lies in the analysis of the reproduction of kiai authority as a social process that takes place in digital and physical spaces simultaneously. In contrast to previous research that saw digitalization as a threat or just a tool, this study positions digital technology as a new arena for the negotiation and legitimacy of pesantren authorities. By taking a case study of the Al-Khoirot Islamic Boarding School in Malang, this study offers a contextual understanding of how kiai utilize digital media without losing its traditional base. This approach is important because it shows that pesantren not only survive, but also transform creatively. The state of the art of this research lies in the integration of authority theory, religious leadership, and digital religion in one comprehensive analytical framework. Thus, this research is relevant to answer the challenge of the sustainability of religious authorities in the digital era.

Based on the description above, the problem of this research is formulated as follows: how is the process of reproduction of kiai authority in the digital era and how does the transformation of pesantren leadership take place in this context? The initial argument of this study is that the authority of the kiai does not undergo erosion, but rather undergoes transformation through strategic adaptation to digital media. Kiai remains a center of religious legitimacy by combining traditional charisma and digital competence. This research contributes theoretically by expanding the concept of religious authority in a digital context, as well as practically providing reflection for pesantren in formulating relevant leadership strategies. Thus, this research not only answers academic problems, but also makes a real contribution to strengthening the role of Islamic boarding schools in the digital society.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design, because it aims to deeply understand the process of reproduction of kiai authority and the transformation of pesantren leadership in a digital context. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to interpret the meanings, values, and social practices inherent in religious leadership, which are contextual and cannot be quantitatively measured (Creswell, 2014). The case study design is used to explore the phenomenon holistically in one particular social context, namely pesantren, as a traditional Islamic educational institution that is experiencing the dynamics of change due to digitalization (Yin, 2018). The location of the research was determined at the Al-Khoirot Islamic Boarding School Malang, with the consideration that this pesantren represents a modern salaf-Islamic boarding school that actively utilizes digital media in da'wah activities, education, and institutional communication. In addition, the Al-Khoirot Islamic Boarding School has a kiai figure who plays a central role in the leadership of the Islamic boarding school as well as being adaptive to technological developments, so it is relevant to examine the transformation of religious authority in the digital era.

Data collection techniques were carried out through in-depth interviews with Islamic boarding school caregivers, administrators, and senior students to explore perceptions, strategies, and digital leadership practices; participatory observation of kiai leadership activities and pesantren interactions in offline and online spaces; as well as document and digital media analysis, including pesantren archives, social media content, and online da'wah materials. Data analysis is carried out in an interactive and continuous manner following the (Miles, MB, Huberman, AM dan Saldana, 2014) model, which includes data condensation (data reduction), data presentation (display data), and conclusion drawing and verification. To ensure the validity of the data, this study applies triangulation of sources and methods, member checks to key informants, and trail audits of the entire research process to ensure the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

In field findings, the reproduction of kiai authority in the digital era is defined as a series of practices that make the authority of the kiai still recognized and obeyed through a combination of traditional legitimacy (scientific sanad, exemplary, adab, and spiritual closeness) with digital legitimacy (online presence, message curation, and management of public interactions). Meanwhile, the transformation of pesantren leadership is understood as a change in the way the kiai lead from a dominant face-to-face and direct patronage relationship to hybrid leadership that utilizes media team structures, communication procedures, and narrative strategies to reach students and

the wider community. Operationally, these sub-findings are characterized by: (1) strengthening the symbols and narratives of kiai authorities on digital platforms, (2) the formation of institutional tools (media teams, content SOPs, official channels), (3) changes in communication patterns (more scheduled, documented, and curated), and (4) adab control mechanisms and message validation so that the authority remains "rooted" in the pesantren tradition.

In an in-depth interview (Kiai/Caregiver) emphasized: "The media is a will. What matters is not the number of people, but the truth and the truth. If the students and the community receive it from official channels, it is safer than the wild pieces." This data interprets as a strategy of relegitimizing the kiai not rejecting digital, but subjecting digital to the logic of pesantren: manners, the authority of knowledge, and the control of meaning. The phrase "official channel" indicates an important shift: authority is attached not only to figures, but also to institutionalized communication infrastructure. Thus, the reproduction of authority occurs through two channels at once: the traditional charisma channel (kiai as a source of reference) and the institutional-digital channel (the official channel as the guardian of authenticity). Here comes a leadership transformation: kiai plays the role of determinant of normative direction (values and boundaries), while technical execution is managed through organizational tools making leadership more systemic without losing the center of legitimacy.

The Coordinator of the Islamic Boarding School Media Team said: "Every content must be permitted. We had a theme meeting, then the script was checked. Sometimes kiai ask to be cut if it's too 'viral', for fear of misunderstanding. The important thing is to get the message right, but still authoritative." Researchers read this as evidence that the authority of the kiai is reproduced through curation and gatekeeping, the kiai present as the "editors of values" that define the limits of propriety, accuracy, and social impact. Interestingly, the term "too viral" indicates the pesantren is aware of the logic of algorithms that can shift the orientation of da'wah from truth to visibility. The leadership transformation is seen in the division of roles: the media team masters the technicalities of production and distribution, while the kiai controls legitimacy and moral direction. This pattern shows hybrid leadership: authority remains centralized in the kiai, but is carried out through modern organizational mechanisms (theme meetings, scripts, approvals), so that pesantren are able to be present in the digital space without losing their traditional identity.

Another informant (senior student/administrator) said: "In the past, we waited for dawuh at the ndalem or recitation. Now there are groups and channels, but still: if it is not from the kiai or the appointed, we consider it uncertain. Students get directions faster, but also more careful." Researchers interpret this as a change in compliance patterns: from compliance based on physical proximity to compliance based on source authorization. The speed of information increases, but the validation

mechanism also strengthens students to build an "authority filter" to distinguish between official messages and wild messages. This shows that the reproduction of kiai authority does not only maintain influence, but forms the literacy of authority among students: who has the right to speak, through what channels, and with what restrictions. Leadership transformation occurs at the level of communication governance: kiai directions become more documented, archived, and re-accessible, so that leadership moves from sporadic charismatic moments to a more continuous and structured system of direction.

The researcher's observations show that there is a scheduled content production routine: taking video recitations, cutting clips, writing captions with manneric nuances, and linking to pesantren activities (nigaji schedules, solemn agendas, and social programs). The researchers also observed that traditional symbols of authority were retained in digital representations: the use of respectful language, the emphasis on sanad/kitab, visuals that display the simplicity of the prayer space, and the avoidance of sensational styles. At the same time, pesantren adopt modern practices: admins respond to public questions with polite templates, certain comments are filtered, and clarifications are quickly made when potential misunderstandings arise. The researcher's interpretation: the reproduction of authority occurs through performative consistency – kiai and pesantren display the continuity of values (adab, science, tawadhu') while utilizing digital devices to expand their reach. Leadership transformation appears to be a shift from "present-and-distributed leadership" to "present-and-distributed leadership" through teams, SOPs, and official channels.

In summary, the interview and observation data show that the authority of the kiai is not weakened, but is reproduced through three main mechanisms: (1) channel authorization (affirmation of official sources), (2) message curation (control of content, style, and impact), and (3) digital institutionalization (media teams, theme meetings, SOPs, interaction moderation). The pattern that emerges is a pattern of directed hybridization: pesantren accept technology as a will, but reject algorithmic logic as a determinant of value. Kiai leadership is transformed into strategic normative leadership. kiai set direction, boundaries, and legitimacy; the team runs technical; Students internalize authority literacy to validate information. Thus, the reproduction of authority in the digital era takes place not through "popularity", but through strengthening the authenticity of traditions packaged in modern communication governance. This pattern explains why pesantren remain stable: changes occur in the medium and management, not in the center of legitimacy.

Table 1. The ideal influence of kiai authority in the digital practice of Islamic boarding schools

Informant Position	Interview Excerpts	Indicator
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Guard	"The media is a wasilah... Keeping Up With The Kardashians and the Truth... official channels are safer."	Channel authorization; digital submission to adab; Normative legitimacy
Media Team Coordinator	"Content must be through permission... Manuscript checked... Cut off if it's too viral... remain authoritative."	Curation/gatekeeping; framing control; Resistance to viral logic
Senior Students/ Administrators	"If it is not from the kiai or the appointed, we consider it uncertain... faster but more careful."	Authority literacy; source validation; Authorization-based compliance

The table shows that the "ideal influence" of kiai in the digital space works through the legitimacy of values (manners and truth) which is then translated into organizational mechanisms (official channels, permissions, manuscript checking). This signifies that authority no longer only relies on physical presence and spontaneous charisma, but also on the ability of pesantren to build an architecture of authority over who is allowed to speak, through what medium, and by what standards. Kiai becomes the center of legitimacy that determines normative boundaries, while the media team becomes an extension of the institutional arm that maintains the consistency of the message.

The indicator of "viral logic resistance" indicates a mature leadership transformation: pesantren are aware that algorithms can shift the orientation of da'wah, so that kiai directs communication strategies to remain authoritative and minimize misunderstandings. Meanwhile, the indicator of "authority literacy" in students confirms the internal effect: the reproduction of authority is successful when the community has the habit of verifying sources and prioritizing official channels. The overall pattern is the centralization of decentralized legitimacy of execution: legitimacy remains on the kiai, execution spreads through team structures and channels, and community acceptance is guided by a culture of validation.

The authority of the kiai in the digital space appears to work through three interconnected patterns. The official channels of the pesantren function as a kind of "signature" of authority, because it is there that the values, decisions, and attitudes of the kiai are published clearly and verified. Every upload that appears through the channel is automatically understood as a legitimate representation of the leadership of the Islamic boarding school. Behind that, the media team carried out a strict curation process, selecting and packaging messages to remain in harmony with the manners, ethics, and scientific vision set by the kiai. This curation is not just a technical content management, but a form of moral leadership that ensures that the message of kiai does not shift or be misinterpreted when entering the very fast and fluid digital space.

At the same time, students and the public build a new habit of checking sources before trusting or disseminating information. They learned to distinguish between what came from official channels and what did not, thus forming a culture of validation that strengthened the stability of the kiai authority. These three patterns move in a series of sequences, kiai sets values, the media team processes and distributes them in a controlled manner, then students and the public respond with source discipline. Through this mechanism, the kiai authority not only survives, but also transforms to be more structured, documented, and adaptive to digital developments without losing the roots of pesantren traditions.

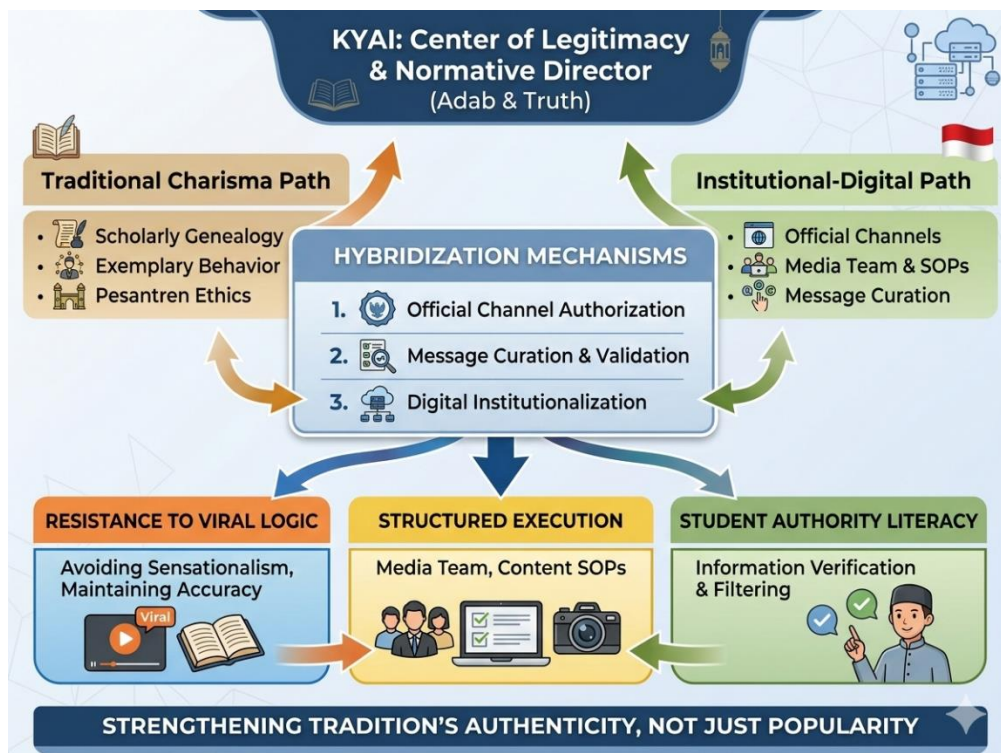


Figure 1. A Directed Hybrid Leadership Model at Al-Khoirot Islamic Boarding School

The image above illustrates the Directed Hybrid Leadership model at Al-Khoirot Islamic Boarding School, which shows how traditional authority is being reproduced through modern digital infrastructure. Visually, this chart divides the leadership process into three main levels: the legitimacy center, the hybridization mechanism, and the impact output.

1. **Kiai as a Center of Legitimacy (Top Level)** At the top of the chart, Kiai remains the "Center of Legitimacy and Normative Direction". Based on the data of the first interview, the kiai is in control of the fundamental values, namely Adab and Truth. This position affirms that the digital transformation in Al-Khoirot is not completely de-centralized, but remains rooted in the figure of the kiai as the ultimate source of truth. All forms of digital communication are subject to the logic of the pesantren, not to the logic of the market or social media algorithms.

2. **Dual Path and Hybridization Mechanism (Middle Level)** The chart shows two mutually reinforcing paths to support the authority of the kiai:
 - Traditional Charisma Path:** Encompasses the scientific sanad, physical example, and manners that have been the foundation of pesantren for centuries.
 - Institutional-Digital Pathway:** Includes official channels, media teams, and content SOPs.
 - Hybridization Mechanism:** In the middle of the chart, there is an Authorization, Curation, and Institutionalization process. As revealed by the Media Team Coordinator, kiai functions as a "value editor" (gatekeeping). The results of the study show that digital content is not just "entertainment", but a representation of the authority of the kiai who has gone through the filter of theme meetings and script checks to avoid superficial "viral logic".
3. **Impact Output: Stabilization of Authority (Bottom Level)** At the bottom of the chart, three tangible results of this leadership transformation can be seen:
 - Viral Logic Resistance:** The ability of pesantren to reject sensations in order to maintain the accuracy of da'wah.
 - Islamic boarding schools** prioritize "authoritative" over "famous".
 - Structured Execution:** Transformation from sporadic personal leadership to well-documented and archived systemic leadership through the Media Team.
 - Santri Authority Literacy:** The most significant impact on constituents is the formation of a culture of verification. Students are no longer just blindly obedient, but have the ability to distinguish between "official messages" and "wild messages", which strengthens the system of filtering authority among the grassroots.

Overall, the patterns shown in the Figure are Centralization of Legitimacy and Decentralization of Execution. Kiai sets moral and spiritual boundaries (Central), while the media team manages technical reach and distribution (Decentral). This explains why in the disruptive digital era, Kiai Al-Khoirot's authority has not weakened; In fact, it is even stronger because it succeeds in wrapping the authenticity of tradition in professional communication governance. This pattern proves that the stability of pesantren lies in its ability to make changes to the "medium and management", without shifting the "center of legitimacy" to the kiai figure.

DISCUSSION

This discussion shows that the research findings are in line with the literature that confirms that religious authorities do not necessarily undergo erosion due to digitalization but rather undergo a transformation of form and medium (Campbell, 2012; Hjarvard, 2016). The findings at the Al-Khoirot Islamic Boarding School show that kiai remains the center of religious legitimacy through strengthening official channels, curating messages, and integrating adab values in digital practices. This confirms the findings (Nisa, 2018) that religious authorities in Indonesia are adaptive and able to take advantage of new media without losing their traditional base.

However, in contrast to studies (Slama, 2017) that highlight the individualization of digital dai authority, this study found that pesantren actually strengthen the institutional authority of kiai through controlled internal organizational and bureaucratic mechanisms.

The transformation of pesantren leadership found also enriched the discourse on religious leadership. The classic literature on pesantren emphasizes charisma and personal patronage of kiai (Azro'i & Fuaidi, 2020), while the findings of this study suggest a shift towards hybrid leadership that blends charisma with organizational rationalization. The kiai at the Al-Khoirot Islamic Boarding School did not lose its authority when delegating technical affairs to the media and administrative teams, but instead expanded its range of influence. These findings are in line with (Weber, 1978) the transformation of charismatic authority that can be institutionalized without losing legitimacy and support the argument that pesantren are able to integrate modernity selectively (Zaini et al., 2024).

In terms of the dynamics of student and community loyalty, the findings of this study show that loyalty is not built through administrative compliance, but through moral and spiritual trust in the kiai. This corroborates the findings (Azra, 2017; Mujahid, 2021) about the role of pesantren as guardians of moderate Islamic authority based on example. However, this study adds a new dimension by showing that authority literacy, namely the ability of students to distinguish between official and unofficial sources, is an important mechanism in maintaining loyalty in the digital era. Thus, the reproduction of authority is not only top-down, but also involves the internalization of values by the pesantren community.

The theoretical implication of this research is the expansion of the concept of religious authority in a digital context. Kiai authority can no longer be understood solely as personal charisma, but as the result of interactions between figures, institutions, and technology. These findings enrich the study of digital religion with the institutional perspective of Islamic boarding schools, which have received less attention so far (Campbell, 2012). Practically, this research provides implications for pesantren managers that adaptation to the educational bureaucracy and digital media does not have to sacrifice traditional values, as long as kiai remains the center of legitimacy and pesantren values are consistently integrated in modern governance.

Overall, this discussion emphasizes that the process of reproduction of kiai authority in the digital era and the transformation of pesantren leadership at Al-Khoirot Islamic Boarding School takes place through a pattern of directed hybridization. The findings of this study not only confirm most of the existing literature, but also show an important difference, pesantren are able to make digitalization and bureaucracy a means of strengthening, not weakening, the authority of kiai. Thus, this research contributes to the development of religious

leadership theory and provides practical reference for Islamic boarding schools in facing the challenges of contemporary digital society.

CONCLUSION

The conclusions of the study can be summarized into three main interrelated parts. The most important findings show that the kiai authority at Al-Khoirot Islamic Boarding School remains effective even though Islamic boarding schools face digitalization and bureaucratization of modern education. Kiai is able to maintain the loyalty of students and the community through a combination of traditional charisma, moral exemplary, and strategic adaptation to digital media and administrative governance. The main lesson from this research is that religious authorities that are rooted in values and manners have strong adaptive abilities, so they are not easily eroded by technological changes or regulatory demands.

The strength of this paper lies in its contribution to the development of the study of religious leadership and religious authority in the digital age. This research expands the understanding of how pesantren manage transformation without losing their traditional identity, as well as introduces the concept of hybrid leadership that combines kiai charisma with bureaucratic rationalization and the use of digital media. Theoretically, this study enriches the literature on *digital religion* and religious authority, while practically providing guidance for Islamic boarding schools in responding to modern demands without sacrificing core values.

The limitation of this research mainly lies in the scope that only focuses on one pesantren, so that the variation of leadership models in other pesantren has not been comprehensively depicted. In addition, this study has not explored in depth the dynamics of internal resistance to digitalization and bureaucratization. For further research, comparative studies between Islamic boarding schools, longitudinal analysis, and studies on digital public perception of kiai authority can be promising research directions to enrich understanding of the transformation of Islamic boarding school leadership in the modern era.

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