

BUILDING CULTURAL INDEPENDENCE THROUGH CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP IN ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the role of charismatic leadership in fostering cultural independence within Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), with a specific focus on Pondok Pesantren Nahdlatut Tholibin Blado Wetan in Probolinggo, Indonesia, under the leadership of KH. Ahsin Ahsanakallah. Islamic boarding schools are crucial in preserving cultural and religious values while adapting to modern challenges; however, their leadership often faces difficulties in balancing tradition and innovation. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with kiai, teachers, and students; participant observation; focus group discussions; and document analysis of pesantren archives and related literature. The data sources combine primary information from internal stakeholders and secondary materials from religious manuscripts and institutional documents. The analysis employed the Miles and Huberman model, consisting of data reduction, data display, and verification, complemented by triangulation to ensure validity. The research findings reveal that Kiai's leadership serves as a central figure in preserving the culture of the Islamic boarding school and guiding the students towards cultural independence. The study highlights that his leadership strategies, including internalising cultural values and mobilising community participation, strengthen the cultural autonomy of the Islamic boarding school. The Kiai acts as a "press agent" for the Islamic boarding school, using his public influence to enhance its visibility and reputation. This study contributes to the understanding of charismatic leadership in religious education and provides recommendations for enhancing leadership training in Islamic boarding schools, thereby preserving cultural heritage.

Keywords

Charismatic Leadership, Cultural Independence, Pesantren, Leadership Strategies.



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INTRODUCTION

The concept of cultural independence in the modern era has become increasingly relevant in educational institutions, particularly in Islamic boarding schools (Ardillah & Barizi, 2025; Hariadi & Sumardjoko, 2024; Nasith, 2024). However, the reality of cultural survival and adaptation in these institutions often reveals significant gaps between ideal theoretical frameworks and the actual practices on the ground (Asror et al., 2023; Karim et al., 2022). Pesantren are expected to preserve cultural and religious traditions while adapting to societal changes (Robaeah et al., 2023; Rohman & Muhtamiroh, 2022). In practice, however, many Islamic boarding schools face difficulties in maintaining this balance, resulting in a tension between modernisation and the preservation of cultural identity. The central issue lies in how Islamic boarding schools, particularly their leadership, can effectively cultivate cultural resilience without compromising traditional values (Khoiri & Aryati, 2021; Rahtikawatie et al., 2021). Therefore, Islamic boarding schools need to develop strategies that bridge the gap between preserving tradition and the demands of modernisation. Visionary leadership is key to maintaining cultural resilience while ensuring the relevance of Islamic boarding schools in the contemporary era.

Charismatic leadership, particularly in the context of religious institutions, has provided valuable insights into how leaders influence the cultural dynamics of their communities. Charismatic leadership is often described as a leader's ability to inspire and mobilise followers through personal qualities, moral authority, and a compelling vision (Queen, 2023; Sulaiman et al., 2024; Wivel & Grøn, 2021). In the context of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), kiai (Islamic teacher) have historically been regarded as pivotal figures in shaping the spiritual and cultural direction of their communities (Roqib, 2021; Said & Sharif, 2023). According to Weber's (1947) theory of charismatic authority (Kuswandi & Asmoni, 2025) Leaders with unique personal qualities can lead by example, thereby shaping the values and behaviour of their followers. The kiai's charismatic leadership is often considered crucial in shaping the spiritual and cultural direction of Islamic boarding schools (Akrim & Umiarso, 2023). Therefore, it is assumed that kiai can instil values that strengthen the identity and continuity of Islamic boarding school traditions through moral authority and personal example.

Based on field observations and in-depth interviews conducted with KH. Ahsin Ahsanakallah, teachers, and senior santri, the charismatic leadership of Kiai at the Nahdlatut Tholibin Blado Wetan Islamic boarding school displays distinctive characteristics rooted in moral

and spiritual strength and personal exemplarity. Kiai KH. Ahsin Ahsanakallah not only serves as a caregiver and teacher but also as a central figure who integrates traditional Islamic values and local wisdom into the daily life of the boarding school. His leadership style combines firmness in principle with gentleness in guidance, giving each of his teachings and actions a symbolic power that is capable of mobilizing the collective consciousness of the santri. The Kiai's charisma stems from his consistency in practicing Islamic values, his simple lifestyle, and his commitment to education based on morals and pesantren culture. Through this approach, he has succeeded in maintaining a warm paternalistic relationship between the Kiai and the santri, where obedience is not built through formal authority, but through moral and spiritual exemplary behavior that fosters respect and voluntary obedience.

In a socio-religious context, charismatic leadership acts as a symbolic and cultural force that enlivens the ethos of independence among students and the pesantren community. The Kiai serves as a source of inspiration that motivates santri to not only master religious knowledge but also develop critical thinking and competitiveness amid social change. Through the internalization of the values of independence, hard work, and responsibility, the Kiai instills the belief that a simple and independent life is a form of devotion to Allah and society. On the other hand, the social role of the Kiai also expands the influence of the pesantren in the community through activities of preaching, education, and community-based economic empowerment. Thus, the charisma of the Kiai becomes a cultural energy that maintains the continuity of the pesantren tradition while encouraging constructive adaptation to the dynamics of modernity, so that the pesantren remains a center of Islamic values, morality, and cultural identity at the local level.

However, this pesantren has not been immune to challenges. The main challenges faced by pesantren in maintaining cultural independence in the era of globalization include the penetration of modern values that tend to be materialistic, the commercialization of education, and the declining interest of the younger generation in religious traditions. In facing these challenges, the charismatic leadership of the Kiai has been key in maintaining a balance between preserving tradition and innovation. The strategies employed include adapting the curriculum to combine religious and general knowledge, strengthening the pesantren's economy through independent business units, and developing social networks with the community and alumni. Through his moral authority and personal charm, Kiai is able to guide change without sacrificing the basic values of the pesantren. His charisma, built on the basis of knowledge, sincerity, and exemplary behavior, makes Kiai a

transformational figure who is able to modernize the education system without abandoning the cultural roots and traditional Islamic spirituality. Thus, the charismatic leadership at the Nahdlatut Tholibin Islamic Boarding School serves as a model of visionary leadership that not only preserves cultural independence but also reinforces the boarding school as a moral bulwark against the tide of globalization.

The concept of charismatic leadership and its impact on educational and religious institutions has been extensively researched by scholars. The study by Wahab & Umar (2024) shows that the charismatic leadership of *kiai* plays a vital role in shaping students' behavior in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), where their leadership effectively preserves the religious and cultural values of the institution. Tanzeh et al. (2021) found that the principal's leadership style significantly influences students' independence and critical thinking skills, demonstrating that charismatic leaders are able to create a learning environment that nurtures moral and intellectual responsibility. Studies conducted by Bierbaum & Sunderman (2021) and Faiz et al. (2023) highlight the importance of leaders serving as role models who guide students not only in academic learning but also in developing character, ethics, and social values. Similarly, Sanjani (2024) emphasizes that charismatic school leadership shapes graduates' character and quality through value-based education and personal example.

Furthermore, Askarpoor & Razmjoo (2025) show that charismatic leadership in Islamic educational institutions plays a significant role in maintaining teacher motivation and preserving organizational culture, thereby fostering collective enthusiasm and institutional loyalty. Meanwhile, Fischer & Sitkin (2023) argue that charismatic leadership has a transformative power to build social cohesion and sustain cultural traditions within value-based organizations. ElKaleh (2023) also finds that charismatic leadership acts as a bridge between tradition and adaptation, particularly within Islamic education, both formal and informal, by balancing the preservation of spiritual values with the demands of modernization.

From these studies, it can be concluded that research on charismatic leadership has been widely conducted in the context of educational and religious institutions. However, most of these studies focus on the influence of leadership on individual behavior, character, and motivation in general, without specifically examining the distinctive role of the *kiai* as a charismatic figure within the *pesantren* system in Indonesia. Thus, there remains a research gap concerning how charismatic leadership among *kiai* contributes to *cultural independence* within *pesantren* and how this model of

leadership maintains the balance between preserving tradition and adapting to modernization.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on positioning the charismatic leadership of *kiai* not merely as a spiritual force but also as a strategic and symbolic instrument for fostering cultural independence in Islamic boarding schools. Specifically, this study examines the leadership strategies of KH. Ahsin Ahsanakallah at Pondok Pesantren Nahdlatut Tholibin Blado Wetan, Probolinggo, integrates religious values, independence, and local culture into his charismatic leadership practices. Through this approach, the study contributes new empirical insights to the theory of charismatic leadership in Islamic education and enriches the understanding of the *kiai*'s role as a cultural actor in addressing the challenges of modernization within Indonesia's religious education landscape.

This study aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the role of charismatic leadership among *kiai* in realizing cultural independence at Pondok Pesantren Nahdlatut Tholibin Blado Wetan, Probolinggo. Specifically, the research examines the leadership strategies of KH. Ahsin Ahsanakallah is a charismatic figure who functions not only as a spiritual guide but also as a cultural leader capable of internalizing the values of independence, mobilizing the pesantren community, and adapting traditional practices to modern contexts. The primary objective of this study is to explain how the charismatic leadership of *kiai* serves as a strategic instrument in maintaining the cultural resilience and relevance of pesantren amid the current wave of globalization. From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to the enrichment of studies on charismatic leadership within Islamic education by offering a new perspective on the relationship between charisma, moral authority, and the cultural independence of faith-based educational institutions. The findings are expected to broaden the understanding of value-based leadership models that strengthen cultural identity while remaining adaptive to social change. From a practical standpoint, this study holds significance for the development of leadership practices within Islamic boarding schools, particularly in designing training programs and policy frameworks to enhance the capacity of *kiai* as both cultural preservers and agents of modernization in Islamic education.

METHOD

This research is a qualitative study using a case study approach conducted at the Nahdlatut Tholibin Blado Wetan Islamic Boarding School, Tegalsiwalan District, Probolinggo Regency, East Java (Taherdoost, 2022). The data in this study consists of in-depth descriptions of the forms, characteristics, and strategies of charismatic leadership of the *kiai* in building and maintaining the

cultural independence of the pesantren amid the tide of modernization. The data sources consist of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources were obtained from direct interviews with kiai, ustaz, and santri who are part of the pesantren community, while secondary sources were obtained from pesantren documents, activity archives, academic literature, and various written records relevant to the research focus (Mulisa, 2022).

Data collection techniques were carried out through observation, interviews, and documentation. Participatory observation was conducted in the Nahdlatut Tholibin Islamic boarding school environment for three months, from February to April 2024, to directly observe leadership activities, learning processes, and social interactions between Kiai, ustaz, and santri. In-depth interviews were conducted with KH. Ahsin Ahsanakallah, as the head of the pesantren, three ustaz, and five senior santri to explore their views and experiences regarding leadership styles, instilled values, and the implementation of pesantren cultural independence. Documentation was carried out by examining various pesantren documents, such as activity archives, photographs, student diaries, recitation manuscripts, and da'wah activity brochures that reflect leadership practices and cultural activities in the pesantren environment.

Data analysis in this study used the Miles and Huberman model, which consists of three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification. In the data reduction stage, the researchers selected and simplified the data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation to focus on the main themes of charismatic leadership and cultural independence. In the data presentation stage, the researcher compiled the findings in a descriptive narrative form that described the patterns of Kiai leadership, the dynamics of social relations in Islamic boarding schools, and the mechanisms for instilling cultural independence values. Next, in the data analysis stage, the researcher conducted a critical analysis of the field findings using relevant charismatic leadership and cultural independence theories. The results of this analysis were then compared with several previous studies to strengthen the validity and depth of interpretation of the findings of this study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The results of this study illustrate the charismatic leadership of KH. Ahsin Ahsanakallah at the Nahdlatut Tholibin Islamic Boarding School in Blado Wetan, Probolinggo, plays a significant role in building and maintaining the cultural independence of the boarding school. His leadership

not only functions as a spiritual motivator, but also as a cultural force that is able to internalize the values of independence, mobilize students and the surrounding community, and adapt pesantren traditions to the dynamics of modern life. Through observation, interviews, and documentation, it was found that the Kiai's charismatic leadership was manifested through exemplary behavior, persuasive communication, and the ability to establish emotional and social relationships with all elements of the pesantren. In addition, the Kiai also played an important role as a press agent, using his moral influence and charisma to strengthen the image and sustainability of the pesantren in the community.

In more detail, the results of the study on the charismatic leadership strategies of the Kiai and his role in building cultural independence at the Nahdlatut Tholibin Blado Wetan Islamic Boarding School are presented in the following table.

Table 1. Building Cultural Independence Through Charismatic Leadership
at the Nahdlatut Tholibin Islamic Boarding School in Blado Wetan Probolinggo

No	Figure Kiai	Leadership Strategy	Role as a Press Agent
1.	KH. Ahsin Ahsanakallah as a central figure in Islamic boarding schools	Instilling values of independence through role modeling, habit formation, and character building among students	Becoming a moral and spiritual symbol of Islamic boarding schools that builds a positive image in society
2.	Kiai as spiritual and cultural guides	Integrating religious teachings with local culture into the curriculum and daily activities of Islamic boarding schools	Memperkuat identitas budaya pesantren melalui dakwah, ceramah, dan kegiatan sosial
3.	Kiai as transformational leaders	Mobilizing the participation of teachers, students, and the community in educational and social activities	Communicating the vision of Islamic boarding schools through alumni networks and media outlets
4.	Kiai as social role models	Establishing harmonious relations between Islamic boarding schools and the wider community through community activities	Increasing public trust in Islamic boarding schools as educational and moral institutions
5.	Kiai as agents of change	Adapting traditional values to the modern context without losing the cultural roots of Islamic boarding schools	Becoming representative figures of Islamic boarding schools who carry messages of peace, independence, and progress

Source: Data Processed (2025)

Kiai as a Central Figure

The figure of Kiai plays a central role in the life of the pesantren, holding both moral and spiritual authority: the Kiai, particularly KH. Ahsin Ahsanakallah is seen as a guide whose actions

and character directly influence the behaviour and mindset of the santri (students). His charisma and leadership abilities shape the daily life and educational direction of the pesantren, ensuring a strong bond between the Kiai, the santri, and the broader community. As a charismatic figure, he has become both a mentor and a symbol of faith, encouraging students to uphold the traditions and principles of Islamic teachings while adapting to contemporary challenges.

The observations conducted at Pondok Pesantren Nahdlatut Tholibin Blado Wetan revealed that the Kiai's influence extends beyond teaching academic knowledge. His ability to embody the teachings of Islam through personal example helped build emotional ties with the students. The Kiai's personal interactions, such as mentoring and leading religious practices, solidified his position as the spiritual leader. His consistent moral and ethical stance also earned him respect from the surrounding community.

Table 2. Interactions Aspect of Kiai

Aspect	Description	Impact
Leadership Role	KH. Ahsin Ahsanakallah as the central figure of the pesantren	Emotional connection with students and the wider community
Moral & Spiritual Guidance	Exemplifying Islamic teachings through personal conduct	Establishing a model for students to emulate
Social Influence	Building trust with local society and alumni	Strengthening the pesantren's reputation and influence

Source: Data Processed (2025)

Table 2 affirms that Kiai's role is vital in creating a cohesive and values-driven environment within the pesantren. The Kiai's ability to lead with both authority and empathy makes him an essential figure in shaping the institution's culture and guiding the future leaders within the pesantren. Kiai's leadership style is critical to the moral and spiritual development of the santri and the greater community. The Kiai's presence strengthens the pesantren's role in preserving religious and cultural traditions while fostering a sense of belonging and purpose.



Figure 1. Kiai as the Central Figure in Social Activities

KH. Ahsin Ahsanakallah's position as a central figure in Pondok Pesantren Nahdlatut Tholibin is paramount to its cultural survival and success (see Figure 1). Kiai leadership serves as a model for students to follow, fostering a sense of community and a deep connection to the pesantren's core values. His ability to inspire both students and the broader community ensures the continuity of the pesantren's mission in promoting cultural independence.

Leadership Strategy as Cultural Independence

The findings of this research suggest that charismatic leadership plays a significant role in shaping cultural independence within Pondok Pesantren Nahdlatut Tholibin. KH. Ahsin Ahsanakallah, as the Kiai, employs his charismatic authority to embed values of independence through both the formal curriculum and daily practices of the pesantren. Thus, the pesantren not only becomes a place of religious learning but also a medium for developing cultural resilience and autonomy.

Based on interviews with three teachers, the role of the Kiai was described as highly influential in shaping the students' attitudes. One teacher stated, "Kiai teaches us that independence is not only about economy but also about thinking and culture." Another teacher emphasised, "Through daily routines, the Kiai guides the students to live modestly and responsibly." The third teacher added, "We feel that his leadership gives us a strong foundation to face cultural changes in society." These testimonies confirm that the Kiai's charisma is internalised in both teachers and students as a model of cultural independence.

The strategies identified can be summarised into four main points: (a) internalisation of values, where students absorb cultural independence as part of their religious education; (b) social mobilisation, where students are actively involved in communal and social activities; (c) cultural adaptation, where pesantren life is adjusted to modern contexts without losing traditional values; and (d) cultural resistance, where pesantren maintains its identity against external cultural

pressures. These points form the framework for a chart that visualises the leadership strategies of the Kiai.

The findings consistently highlight the leadership of KH. Ahsin Ahsanakallah goes beyond administrative management. The charisma manifests in moral guidance, personal example, and cultural orientation that shape the worldview of the santri. Both the curriculum and informal interactions between the Kiai and the santri contribute to strengthening cultural independence (see Figure 2), which then becomes the hallmark of Pondok Pesantren Nahdlatut Tholibin.

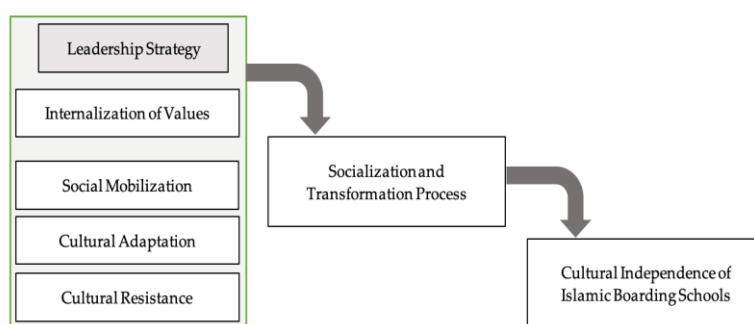


Figure 2. Charismatic Leadership Strategy Concept

Charismatic leadership is not merely symbolic but practical in building a sustainable cultural identity. The strategies of internalization, mobilization, adaptation, and resistance serve as mechanisms through which pesantren life remains relevant and resilient. This suggests that the Kiai's role extends to preparing santri not only for religious devotion but also for active cultural participation in society. The research shows that charismatic leadership is a key factor in realizing cultural independence within Islamic boarding schools. The case of KH. Ahsin Ahsanakallah demonstrates how a Kiai can inspire, guide, and transform the pesantren community toward self-reliance in both spiritual and cultural dimensions. This general finding implies that pesantren, through charismatic leadership, can serve as a model for preserving tradition while empowering communities to face contemporary challenges.

Role as Press Agency

The findings reveal that KH. Ahsin Ahsanakallah serves as a press agent for *Pondok Pesantren Nahdlatut Tholibin*, utilising his charisma and social influence to promote the *pesantren*. His role extends beyond internal leadership, as he becomes the public face of the institution through sermons, public lectures, and alumni networks. In this way, the Kiai functions as the "brand identity" of the pesantren, shaping how it is perceived by society at large.

Observation shows that Kiai's presence consistently attracts attention and builds trust within the community. In public gatherings, his charisma draws large audiences who associate the *pesantren's* reputation with his personal image. During religious lectures, for example, the Kiai emphasises both spiritual and educational messages while indirectly promoting the vision of the *pesantren*. Furthermore, the alum network serves as an extension of his influence, reinforcing the *pesantren's* image through their respect and loyalty to the Kiai. These observations suggest that the *pesantren's* visibility is directly tied to the Kiai's personal communication style.

Table 3. Kiai's Communication Role

No	Indicator	Description
1	Public Sermons & Lectures	The Kiai delivers religious talks that promote <i>pesantren</i> values indirectly.
2	Community Engagement	The Kiai participates in local and regional events, boosting the <i>pesantren's</i> image.
3	Alumni Network Utilization	Alumni spread positive narratives about the <i>pesantren</i> , guided by the Kiai.
4	Charismatic Branding	The Kiai himself is seen as the symbolic "brand identity" of the <i>pesantren</i> .

Source: Data Processed (2025)

Table 3 clearly shows that Kiai's communication role extends beyond religious teaching into the realm of public relations. Through sermons, community participation, and alumni mobilisation, the *pesantren* gains visibility and recognition. His charisma transforms personal influence into institutional reputation, thereby consolidating the *pesantren's* identity in the broader social landscape.

The Kiai's press agency role aligns with modern concepts of branding, where a leader personifies the values of an institution. This indicates that *pesantren* leadership does not only rely on internal educational processes but also requires external communication strategies to ensure sustainability and growth of the role of KH. Ahsin Ahsanakallah, as a press agent, illustrates how charismatic leadership contributes to the cultural and institutional promotion of *pesantren*. By acting as both a religious leader and a symbolic representative, the Kiai strengthens the *pesantren's* position in society as a trusted and respected institution. This general finding suggests that *pesantren* leaders who effectively embody press agency roles can sustain their institutions' visibility and relevance in an increasingly competitive cultural and educational environment.

Discussion

The central role of KH. Ahsin Ahsanakallah, as a spiritual guide, has profound implications for the *pesantren* environment. His moral and spiritual leadership fosters a profound emotional

connection with the students, directly shaping their behaviour and worldview. This aligns with findings from other studies, such as those by Darmawan et al. (2024), which emphasises the impact of charismatic leadership in educational institutions, where the leader's behaviour serves as a moral example for students. Kiai's actions extend beyond academic instruction, influencing the spiritual development of the santri. The moral guidance plays a critical role in preserving religious values, as it cultivates a nurturing environment where students not only learn about Islam but also live by its principles. The Kiai's leadership sustains the pesantren's educational mission by integrating faith into every aspect of life, ensuring that religious values are preserved across generations.

The underlying structure of Kiai's leadership style is critical in shaping the attitudes and behaviours of the students. As demonstrated by the teachers' testimonies, Kiai's leadership fosters a sense of cultural and intellectual independence among the students. This concept is supported by the argument that effective educational leaders provide not only academic instruction but also promote self-reliance and critical thinking (Nwoko et al., 2024; Utama & Akbar, 2023). Kiai leadership strategy extends beyond traditional teaching methods, involving the cultivation of an environment that fosters the development of resilience and autonomy in students. This model of leadership highlights a key correlation between personal example and student outcomes, wherein the character and example set by the Kiai influence the way students internalise cultural independence. The causal link between strong leadership and the development of an independent mindset in students reinforces the function of the Kiai as both a guide and a role model.

The implication of charismatic leadership on the cultural independence of Pondok Pesantren is profound. Kiai's ability to internalise values of independence within the pesantren's culture strengthens the community's ability to adapt while retaining traditional values. This finding aligns with the notion that charismatic leadership can empower communities to maintain their cultural heritage while embracing change (Marzuki, 2023; Tavares et al., 2021). The internalisation of cultural independence enables students to become agents of change, equipped with the tools to navigate societal challenges while upholding their traditional beliefs. The practical implication of this leadership strategy is that it enables the pesantren to maintain its cultural identity, even as it adapts to contemporary demands. The leadership approach Kiai provides, therefore, an effective framework for other educational institutions seeking to foster cultural resilience and autonomy among students.

The process of social mobilisation and cultural adaptation described in the findings reveals the flexibility and forward-thinking nature of Kiai leadership. Kiai facilitates the integration of modern practices into the pesantren's traditional structure while still maintaining its cultural integrity. This adaptive leadership style aligns with the concepts presented, which suggest that successful educational leaders can incorporate contemporary methods while preserving core values (McKimm et al., 2023; Odeh et al., 2023; Rohmad et al., 2024). In the context of Pondok Pesantren, this dynamic leadership strategy enables students to engage with the outside world while maintaining a connection to their cultural roots. The adaptation of daily routines and the integration of modern education practices are essential for the survival and relevance of the pesantren in a rapidly changing society. The leadership structure, therefore, facilitates a balanced approach to cultural preservation and adaptation.

Kiai's role as a press agent for Pondok Pesantren extends his influence beyond the walls of the pesantren, using his personal charisma to enhance the pesantren's visibility in the public sphere. This phenomenon highlights the importance of leaders serving as "brand ambassadors" in promoting organisational values (Jalees et al., 2024; Jones et al., 2021). Kiai's public sermons, lectures, and participation in community events create a powerful narrative around the pesantren, positioning it as a beacon of Islamic values. The role of the Kiai as a press agent is crucial in attracting new students and supporters, demonstrating the essential connection between leadership charisma and institutional branding.

The connection between Kiai's personal branding and the success of Pondok Pesantren Nahdlatut Tholibin is evident in the way he leverages his influence to enhance the pesantren's reputation. This form of branding, where the leader becomes synonymous with the institution's values, is supported by research from Anastasiou and Garametsi (2021), who discuss the role of leadership in shaping an organisation's public perception. Kiai embodies the pesantren's mission and values, and his presence in public forums and religious gatherings enhances the institution's visibility and appeal. Reputation as a moral and spiritual leader significantly contributes to the Islamic institute's image, creating a positive feedback loop where his leadership fosters greater community support (Ataman et al., 2024; Ridlo & Yanti, 2024; Shodiq & Hefniy, 2022). The process of charismatic branding underscores the importance of leadership in maintaining institutional relevance in a competitive educational landscape.

The findings from this research provide both practical and theoretical insights into the role of charismatic leadership in educational institutions. Practically, the research demonstrates how leaders Kiai can strengthen cultural independence and institutional identity through a combination of moral guidance, social mobilisation, and public engagement. This suggests that other pesantren or educational institutions could benefit from adopting similar leadership strategies to foster cultural resilience and visibility. Theoretically, the research contributes to the understanding of charismatic leadership as a dynamic and multifaceted force that goes beyond traditional notions of leadership, incorporating branding and community engagement as key components. This framework enriches the literature on educational leadership, offering a comprehensive model for integrating personal charisma into institutional growth and sustainability. Ultimately, this research highlights the importance of leadership in shaping both the internal culture and external perception of educational institutions.

CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study is the central role of the Kiai in shaping the cultural and moral independence of students at the Nahdlatut Thalibin Islamic Boarding School. As charismatic figures, Kiai play a role not only in the realm of religious teaching, but also as character builders and leaders who internalise the values of independence in everyday life. This study demonstrates that charismatic leadership can enhance the cultural identity of Islamic boarding schools, thereby maintaining the sustainability of Islamic traditions while navigating the challenges of modern development. The strength of this paper lies in its contribution to scholarship, especially in updating perspectives on charismatic leadership in the context of religious education. The limitations of this study lie in its limited scope, focusing on a single Islamic boarding school and the figure of the Kiai alone, and it does not take into account gender and age factors that may contribute to varying views. Therefore, further research that accommodates survey methods, wider variations in gender, age, and location is needed to provide a more comprehensive picture, and can form the basis for more appropriate policies in the development of Islamic boarding schools in the future.

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