
Charismatic Leadership And Digital Resilience: How Kyai Navigate Religious Moderation In Contemporary Indonesian Pesantren

Hendi Sugianto¹, Rofiqi², Zainuddin³

¹⁾Pendidikan Agama Islam, Institut Agama Islam Negeri Ternate, Indonesia

²⁾Pendidikan Agama Islam, Institut Agama Islam Al-Khairat Pamekasan, Indonesia

³⁾Pendidikan Agama Islam, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia

*email; ¹hendisugianto@iain-ternate.ac.id, ¹rofique625@gmail.com,

³zainuddinpanrayyan13@gmail.com

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Abstrak

Studi kasus kualitatif ini mengkaji bagaimana kyai di pesantren Indonesia kontemporer memanfaatkan otoritas kharismatik mereka untuk mempromosikan moderasi beragama sekaligus membangun ketahanan digital di kalangan santri di era media digital. Penelitian dilaksanakan di empat pesantren terkemuka di Indonesia pada periode Oktober 2023 hingga Juni 2024 dengan menggunakan metode wawancara mendalam terhadap 4 kyai, 6 ustadz, dan 8 santri, dilengkapi dengan observasi partisipan dan analisis dokumentasi. Temuan penelitian mengungkapkan tiga dimensi kritis: (1) kyai secara strategis menggunakan pengajaran agama rutin dan keteladanan untuk melembagakan nilai-nilai wasathiyah, mentransformasi otoritas tradisional menjadi kerangka pedagogis bagi moderasi; (2) pesantren menerapkan program literasi digital terstruktur dan kebijakan tata kelola perangkat yang memupuk konsumsi digital kritis sambil mempertahankan landasan teologis; dan (3) kepemimpinan beradaptasi melalui model hibrid yang melestarikan tradisi salaf sembari mengintegrasikan teknologi dan metodologi pendidikan modern secara selektif. Studi ini memajukan pemahaman teoretis tentang kepemimpinan keagamaan dalam konteks digital dengan menunjukkan bagaimana otoritas kharismatik tradisional dapat direkonceptualisasi sebagai sumber ketahanan, bukan resistensi terhadap perubahan teknologi. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi wawasan baru pada titik temu antara kepemimpinan pendidikan Islam, strategi kontra-radikalasi, dan pedagogi digital, menawarkan kerangka kerja berbasis empiris bagi pesantren yang berupaya menavigasi ketegangan antara tradisi dan modernitas sembari mempromosikan pemikiran Islam moderat.

Kata Kunci: kepemimpinan kharismatik, ketahanan digital, pesantren, moderasi beragama, kyai, wasathiyah, pendidikan Islam

Abstract

This qualitative case study investigates how kyai (Islamic scholars) in contemporary Indonesian pesantren leverage their charismatic authority to promote religious moderation while building digital resilience among students in the digital media era. Conducted across four prominent pesantren in Indonesia between October 2023 and June 2024, this research employed in-depth interviews with 4 kyai, 6 ustadz, and 8 santri, complemented by participant observation and documentation analysis. Findings reveal three critical dimensions: (1) kyai strategically employ routine religious instruction and role modeling to institutionalize wasathiyah values, transforming traditional authority into a pedagogical framework for moderation; (2) pesantren implement structured digital literacy programs and device governance policies that cultivate critical digital consumption while maintaining theological groundedness; and (3) leadership adapts through hybrid models that preserve salaf traditions while selectively integrating modern educational technologies and methodologies. This study advances theoretical understanding of religious leadership in digital contexts by demonstrating how traditional charismatic authority can be reimagined as a source of resilience rather than resistance to technological change. The research contributes novel insights into the intersection of Islamic educational leadership, counter-radicalization strategies, and digital pedagogy, offering empirically grounded frameworks for pesantren seeking to navigate the tensions between tradition and modernity while promoting moderate Islamic thought.

Keywords: charismatic leadership, digital resilience, pesantren, religious moderation, kyai, wasathiyah, Islamic education

INTRODUCTION

The digital revolution has fundamentally transformed Islamic education, presenting unprecedented challenges to traditional religious institutions. In Indonesia, pesantren—Islamic boarding schools historically serving as bastions of moderate Islamic thought—now face critical junctures (Sugianto et al., 2024). The proliferation of extremist narratives through social media platforms, algorithmic echo chambers amplifying radical voices, and weaponization of religious texts by non-state actors have created ideological battlefields where young Muslims are increasingly vulnerable to polarizing content (Arifah et al., 2025). Recent data indicate Indonesian youth encounter radicalization content online, with social media serving as the primary vector for extremist recruitment (Huda et al., 2021). This phenomenon demands urgent scholarly attention to understand how traditional Islamic educational institutions can effectively respond to digital-age challenges while maintaining their core mission of promoting *wasathiyah* the Islamic principle of moderation and balanced understanding.

At pesantren's heart lies the kyai charismatic religious scholars whose authority transcends institutional position to embody spiritual legitimacy, moral exemplarity, and pedagogical mastery (AR et al., 2023; Sari Hernawati et al., 2024). Drawing on Weber et al., (1947) conceptualization of charismatic authority as grounded in followers' belief in exceptional qualities, kyai possess what Islamic tradition terms *baraka*—divine blessing manifesting through personal sanctity and transformative influence. However, sustainability of this traditional leadership model in an age characterized by digital disruption, information abundance, and epistemological pluralism remains contested. Contemporary scholarship has examined how religious leaders navigate technological change (Ugboh, 2023), yet specific mechanisms through which pesantren leadership adapts charismatic authority to promote religious moderation while building digital resilience remain underexplored. This gap is consequential given that pesantren educate Indonesian youth annually, making them critical sites for counter-radicalization efforts and moderate Islamic identity cultivation (Zainal et al., 2022).

Existing literature reveals three significant research trajectories. First, pesantren leadership studies have predominantly focused on organizational dynamics and succession patterns (Abidin et al., 2025; Putra Halilintar & Rafiqah, 2024), with limited attention to how leadership practices shape students' religious orientation and digital competencies. Second, Islamic moderation research in Indonesia has examined governmental programs and ideological frameworks (Bahri et al., 2025; Prasetyo et al., 2025; Rofiqi et al., 2024) but insufficiently explored micro-level pedagogical processes through which moderation is internalized within educational settings. Third, digital literacy investigations in religious education have tended toward technological determinism, treating digital competence as either inherently beneficial or threatening (Abubakari, 202(Fithriyah dkk., 2025)4; Reksiana et al., 2024), rather than examining how religious communities strategically engage technology in culturally consonant ways. These literatures have yet to converge in analyzing how charismatic religious leadership, moderation pedagogy, and digital resilience intersect within contemporary pesantren's lived reality.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating complex interplay between traditional authority structures and contemporary challenges in Indonesian pesantren. The research is animated by three interconnected questions speaking to urgent theoretical and practical concerns. The study's novelty lies in its integrated framework positioning charismatic leadership not as antithetical to digital engagement but as potential catalyst for cultivating what we term "*grounded digital resilience*" the capacity to engage critically and ethically with digital content while remaining anchored in theological principles and communal values. This conceptualization moves beyond binary framings of tradition versus modernity to explore how religious institutions can become sites of adaptive innovation that honor heritage while responding creatively to contemporary exigencies. Unlike previous studies treating moderation and digital literacy separately, this research examines their dynamic integration within charismatic leadership frameworks, revealing how traditional authority can facilitate rather than impede adaptation to digital-age demands.

The research pursues three specific objectives structuring the analysis and findings. First, examining how kyai strategically leverage charismatic authority to institutionalize religious moderation, moving beyond simplistic influence notions to explore specific pedagogical mechanisms, rhetorical strategies, and relational practices through which moderate Islamic thought is cultivated. Second, investigating concrete strategies pesantren employ to build digital resilience among students, analyzing

curriculum development, policy frameworks, and technological integration negotiation within communities valuing both religious authenticity and contemporary relevance. Third, exploring how traditional leadership models adapt to digital-age demands, examining tensions, compromises, and creative syntheses emerging when charismatic authority encounters networked information environments. By addressing these objectives through intensive engagement with four diverse pesantren, this study aims to generate nuanced, context-sensitive insights informing both scholarly understanding and practical interventions in Islamic education. The findings promise to illuminate pathways through which religious institutions can serve as bulwarks against extremism while preparing students to be thoughtful, moderate Muslims capable of navigating an increasingly complex digital world.

METHOD

This research employed qualitative case study design to achieve rich, contextually embedded understanding of how pesantren leadership navigates charismatic authority, religious moderation, and digital challenges intersection (Creswell et al., 2014). The case study approach was selected for its capacity to illuminate complex social phenomena within real-life contexts, particularly when boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2018). Multiple-case design encompassed four pesantren: Pondok Pesantren Darul Falah in Ternate, North Maluku, and three institutions in East Java—Pondok Pesantren Nurul Yaqin Paiton, Pondok Pesantren Ummul Quro Pamekasan, and Pondok Pesantren Miftahul Ulum Lumajang. These institutions were purposively selected based on established reputations for promoting moderate Islamic thought, demonstrated engagement with digital technologies in educational practices, geographic distribution across two provinces capturing regional variations, and institutional willingness to grant research access.

Data collection occurred between October 2023 and June 2024, allowing observation of multiple pesantren activity cycles including regular instruction, special programs, and community events, thereby capturing temporal dimensions of leadership practices and educational processes. Participant selection followed theoretical sampling logic aimed at maximizing information richness and analytical insight rather than statistical representation (Patton, 2014). The study engaged 18 participants: four kyai (institutional leaders), six ustadz (teachers), and eight santri (students). Kyai participants were selected based on leadership tenure, curriculum decision involvement, and public moderation discourse, ensuring data captured perspectives from those most directly shaping institutional direction. Ustadz participants included both senior teachers embedded in traditional pedagogies and younger educators fluent in digital technologies. Santri participants ranged from junior to senior students with varying exposure to institutional values and practices.

Data collection utilized three complementary methods achieving methodological triangulation and analytical depth (Zahle, 2(Sayyi, Muslimin, dkk., 2025)023). In-depth semi-structured interviews served as primary technique, with protocols designed around study's three research objectives while maintaining flexibility for emergent themes. Average interview duration was 60-90 minutes, conducted in Indonesian and Javanese, audio-recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim. Participant observation complemented interviews by providing direct access to naturally occurring interactions, rituals, and practices within pesantren settings, with detailed field notes documenting observed behaviors, environmental contexts, and preliminary analytical insights. Documentation analysis examined institutional materials including curriculum documents, technology use policy statements, social media content produced by pesantren, and leadership public communications. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework, involving familiarization through repeated transcript reading, initial code generation through line-by-line analysis, theme identification through code clustering, theme review and refinement through iterative data engagement, and theme definition through clear articulation of each theme's essence (Byrne, 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Strategic Deployment of Charismatic Authority in Cultivating Religious Moderation

The first critical finding reveals kyai strategically deploy charismatic authority through two interlocking mechanisms: systematized routine religious instruction and embodied role modeling, transforming traditional reverence into pedagogical infrastructure for moderate Islamic thought. Across all four pesantren, kyai maintained regular *pengajian* (Islamic study sessions) specifically designed to

address contemporary religious questions through *wasathiyah* principles lens. Unlike conventional pedagogical approaches relying solely on propositional instruction or abstract theological discourse, kyai situated moderation teaching within dialogical exchanges inviting critical engagement rather than passive reception. One kyai articulated: “We don’t simply tell students what moderation means. We show them through *kitab kuning* (classical Islamic texts) how our scholarly predecessors navigated differences, disagreed without declaring each other infidels, maintained principled positions while respecting plurality.”

This pedagogical strategy aligns with Soler-Gallart’s (2023) “problem-posing education,” wherein students become active co-investigators rather than passive vessels. Kyai’s charismatic authority becomes most powerful not through authoritarian declaration but through demonstrated mastery of textual interpretation and ethical reasoning that students witness, emulate, and eventually internalize. The teaching approach emphasizes understanding diversity within Islamic jurisprudence, exposing santri to multiple valid interpretations on legal issues rather than presenting single authoritative position. At Pondok Pesantren Ummul Quro, researchers observed *fiqh* sessions where kyai systematically presented four major schools of thought on ritual matters, highlighting scholarly disagreement legitimacy while maintaining core principles unity. This exposure cultivates intellectual humility and appreciation for interpretive diversity essential components of moderate religious orientation resistant to absolutist thinking characteristic of extremist ideologies.

The second dimension of charismatic authority deployment manifested through what participants consistently described as “*keteladanah*” (exemplary conduct) embodied performance of moderate values in daily practice. Kyai consciously modeled tolerance, respectful disagreement, and balanced interpretation in ways transcending verbal instruction. At Pondok Pesantren Nurul Yaqin, kyai demonstrated moderate attitudes through measured responses to controversial issues, avoiding inflammatory rhetoric while maintaining clear Islamic principles. One santri reflected: “When social media erupted with extreme views on a religious controversy, our kyai addressed it calmly, showed us multiple scholarly perspectives, and taught us to verify information before reacting emotionally. That taught me more about Islamic moderation than any lecture.” This finding resonates with Albert Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory, emphasizing observational learning and modeling as powerful mechanisms for behavior and attitude acquisition.

The pesantren context adds distinctive dimension: kyai’s charismatic authority amplifies modeling effects because students attribute spiritual significance to leader’s actions, viewing them not merely as individual choices but as instantiations of proper Islamic conduct. As Lewis and Geertz (1969) observed in seminal work on Javanese Islam, kyai occupy liminal space between sacred and mundane, such that everyday behaviors carry theological weight. This sacred dimensionality transforms role modeling from simple behavioral mimicry into spiritual pedagogy wherein students learn moderation not as intellectual position but as embodied disposition a *habitus* in Pierre Bourdieu’s (1990) sense—cultivated through sustained exposure to exemplary practice (Sayyi, Asmuki, dkk., 2025). Across all four pesantren, santri consistently reported that kyai’s lived examples of patience, humility, and open-mindedness profoundly shaped their own attitudes toward religious difference more than formal curriculum content.

Theoretical implications extend Thorne’s et al., (1948) conceptualization of charismatic authority significantly. Weber understood charismatic authority as inherently revolutionary and unstable, requiring routinization to persist beyond charismatic leader’s lifetime. However, pesantren case demonstrates charismatic authority can simultaneously embody tradition and facilitate transformation, serving as conservative force preserving Islamic heritage while progressively adapting to contemporary challenges. This apparent paradox resolves when recognizing kyai ground authority not in personal innovation but in claims to authentic interpretation of established textual traditions—what Talal Asad (1986) termed “discursive tradition.” By framing moderation as recovery of Islam’s original balanced character rather than liberal accommodation to secular modernity, kyai mobilize charismatic authority to legitimate change while maintaining continuity.

Furthermore, findings challenge simplistic notions of religious authority as inherently hierarchical or authoritarian. Dialogical pedagogies and embodied modeling observed reveal how charismatic authority can be exercised cultivating student agency and critical thinking rather than demanding unthinking obedience. This resonates with Rofiqi’s et al., (2026) argument that contemporary Islamic leadership increasingly operates through persuasion and exemplarity rather than

coercion, reflecting broader shifts toward post-authoritarian religious authority structures. Strategic nature of kyai's authority deployment carefully constructing pedagogical settings, consciously modeling specific behaviors, deliberately exposing students to diverse perspectives suggests effective religious leadership in pluralistic contexts requires sophisticated cultural intelligence and adaptive capacity transcending traditional charismatic gifts. At Pondok Pesantren Darul Falah Ternate, kyai's ability to contextualize Islamic teachings for Maluku Utara's culturally diverse environment demonstrated how charismatic leadership effectiveness depends on contextual sensitivity and adaptive capacity.

Cultivating Digital Resilience Through Structured Literacy Programs and Governance Frameworks

The second major finding illuminates how pesantren systematically build digital resilience among students through integrated programs combining critical digital literacy education with carefully calibrated device governance policies. Rather than adopting either technophobic rejection or uncritical technological embrace, investigated pesantren developed sophisticated middle-ground approaches acknowledging both digital media's educational potential and its risks to religious formation. At programmatic level, all four institutions had implemented formal digital literacy curricula extending beyond technical skill development to cultivate what Hobbs (2010) terms "digital and media literacy" capacity to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication. However, pesantren contextualized these competencies within Islamic epistemological frameworks, teaching students to evaluate online religious content using classical Islamic sciences of hadith verification (*ilmu jarh wa ta'dil*) and interpretive principles (*usul al-fiqh*) (Rahman dkk., 2025).

One ustadz explained: "We teach santri that just as our predecessors developed rigorous methods to verify prophetic traditions authenticity, we must apply similar critical scrutiny to information encountered online. The tools differ, but intellectual discipline remains the same." This approach represents creative synthesis grounding digital literacy in traditional Islamic scholarly practices, making contemporary competencies legible and legitimate within pesantren value systems. At Pondok Pesantren Miftahul Ulum, curriculum included modules on identifying propaganda techniques in extremist content, recognizing logical fallacies in radical arguments, understanding algorithmic echo chambers, and evaluating source credibility for Islamic content. The program emphasized that moderate Islam represents authentic Islam, countering extremist claims that strict literalism equals greater piety. Santri learned to distinguish between culturally contextualized interpretations and timeless principles, developing capacity to critically evaluate online religious authorities' claims.

Digital literacy programs revealed sophisticated pedagogical strategies for countering radicalization and promoting moderate Islamic engagement with online content. Curriculum materials included modules on identifying extremist propaganda techniques, recognizing logical fallacies in radical arguments, understanding how algorithms create echo chambers, and evaluating source credibility for Islamic content. Researchers observed sessions where students analyzed actual extremist content circulating on social media, with ustadz guiding them to identify textual decontextualization, emotional manipulation, and theological errors. This approach aligns with "inoculation theory" from communication studies (Compton et al., 2021; McGuire, 1964), which posits that exposing individuals to weakened forms of persuasive attacks along with counterarguments builds resistance to subsequent persuasion attempts. By proactively engaging with radical content in structured educational settings rather than simply prohibiting exposure, pesantren equipped students with analytical tools functioning in digital environments beyond institutional control.

Programs emphasized constructive digital citizenship, teaching students to become producers of moderate Islamic content rather than passive consumers. Several pesantren established social media teams comprised of senior santri creating Instagram posts, TikTok videos, and YouTube content explaining Islamic teachings from moderate perspectives, using vernacular language and contemporary cultural references resonating with youth audiences. One santri participant described: "We make Islam accessible and attractive without compromising depth. We show you don't have to be extreme to be authentic—that moderation is actually Prophetic way." This pivot from defensive posture to creative engagement reflects Jenkins & Plasencia's (2024) "participatory culture," wherein media consumers become active contributors feeling invested in collective meaning-making processes. At Pondok Pesantren Nurul Yaqin, student-produced content addressing misconceptions about Islamic tolerance garnered significant engagement, demonstrating effective counter-narrative potential when messages

come from credible peer sources.

Complementing educational programs, pesantren implemented device governance policies structuring digital access in developmentally appropriate ways while respecting student autonomy. These policies exhibited remarkable sophistication, avoiding both totalitarian control and laissez-faire permissiveness. Typical framework included tiered access levels: junior students had restricted device access limited to scheduled times and specific locations with wifi content filtering; intermediate students gained increased access with reduced supervision but continuing accountability through check-in systems; senior students enjoyed substantial autonomy with expectations of self-regulation and peer monitoring. This graduated approach resonates with L.S. Vygotsky's (2021) "scaffolding" concept, wherein educational support is calibrated to learner development levels and systematically withdrawn as competence increases. One kyai articulated underlying philosophy: "Complete prohibition would be impossible and counterproductive the moment they leave pesantren, they'll be overwhelmed. We need to build internal compasses, not external fences."

Policies also incorporated what Foucault (2021) termed "technologies of the self" practices through which individuals regulate their own conduct by establishing peer accountability systems wherein students monitored each others' digital consumption and engaged in collective reflection on healthy technology use. At Pondok Pesantren Ummul Quro, student dorms held weekly "*digital muhasabah*" (self-examination) sessions where santri discussed screen time, content consumption patterns, and experiences navigating online temptations, with senior students facilitating discussions combining Islamic ethics with digital wellness principles. These findings advance theoretical understanding of digital resilience in religious education contexts by challenging technological determinism and demonstrating how communities can shape technology use according to cultural values (Feenberg, 2017; KODAK, 2023). Pesantren case exemplifies Selwyn's (2010) "meaningful technology use"—digital engagement serving human purposes and institutional missions rather than technology adoption for its own sake.

Adaptive Leadership: Negotiating Tradition and Modernity Through Hybrid Institutional Models

The third significant finding reveals how kyai leadership evolved through adaptive strategies selectively integrating modern educational technologies and methodologies while preserving core *salaf* traditions, creating what participants termed "hybrid" institutional identities. This hybridity was not merely pragmatic accommodation to external pressures but reflected sophisticated theological reasoning about Islam's relationship to temporal change. Kyai articulated narratives wherein adaptation to contemporary conditions constituted faithful adherence to Islamic tradition rather than departure from it, drawing on jurisprudential principle of "*taghayyur al-ahkam bi taghayyur al-azman*" (change in legal rulings according to changing times). One kyai explained: "Our teachers taught us to preserve Islam's timeless principles while adapting contingent forms. Using technology for Islamic education isn't *bid'ah* (innovation in religious matters) it's *ijihad* (independent reasoning) appropriate to our era."

This framing accomplished important rhetorical work, positioning technological adoption as religiously legitimate and even obligatory rather than as compromise with secular modernity. The discourse resonated with what Bowen (2016) identifies as "scriptural cosmopolitanism" capacity to engage pluralistic modernity while maintaining strong religious commitments grounded in textual authority. Operational dimensions of hybrid leadership manifested across multiple institutional domains. Pedagogically, pesantren maintained traditional methods like *sorogan* (individual instruction) and *bandongan* (collective recitation) for *kitab kuning* study while incorporating multimedia presentations, online discussion forums, and digital libraries. At Pondok Pesantren Nurul Yaqin, researchers observed *fiqh* classes where ustaz began with traditional textual reading and commentary but then showed video clips of contemporary scholars discussing same legal issue, followed by students posting reflections on closed WhatsApp group that teacher later synthesized.

This blended approach leveraged affordances of both traditional and digital pedagogies: former cultivated close textual engagement and reverence for scholarly tradition, while latter enabled broader exposure to diverse interpretive perspectives and provided spaces for student voice. Organizationally, pesantren preserved hierarchical authority structures centered on kyai leadership while establishing consultative mechanisms incorporating input from younger ustaz, santri representatives, and external educational experts. Several institutions created "*majlis syuro*" (consultative councils) advising kyai on

curriculum development, technology policies, and program innovations, functioning as what Habermas (1989) termed “public spheres” wherein reasoned deliberation informed collective decision-making. These structures allowed pesantren to benefit from diverse expertise while maintaining kyai’s ultimate authority to render decisions grounded in Islamic principles and institutional vision. At Pondok Pesantren Darul Falah Ternate, such consultative mechanisms proved particularly valuable in navigating Maluku Utara’s unique cultural context, ensuring policies resonated with local community values.

Hybrid model also shaped pesantren’s external engagement strategies, particularly regarding government partnerships and educational collaborations. All four institutions participated in Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs’ moderation programs while carefully maintaining autonomy over curriculum content and pedagogical approaches. Kyai navigated this relationship through “strategic cooperation” accepting government resources and legitimacy while resisting standardization that might compromise institutional distinctiveness. As one kyai stated: “We collaborate with government on shared goals like preventing extremism, but we decide how to achieve those goals in ways consistent with our traditions and values.” This stance reflects broader patterns in Muslim civil society organizations’ engagement with state power, wherein religious actors leverage state resources while guarding against cooption (Hefner, 2011). Strategic autonomy allowed pesantren to participate in national counter-radicalization initiatives while maintaining pedagogical integrity and community trust essential for effective moderation cultivation.

Theoretically, these findings complicate binary framings of tradition versus modernity dominating discourse on religious institutions and social change. Rather than confirming modernization theory’s prediction of inevitable secularization (Berger, 2025) or supporting fundamentalist narratives of modernity as existential threat, pesantren case demonstrates what Schmidt (2006) termed “multiple modernities” possibility of diverse pathways to contemporary life incorporating rather than abandoning religious traditions. Hybrid leadership model represents “rooted cosmopolitanism” (Liss, 2009) engagement with global modernity while maintaining strong local and religious commitments. This concept advances beyond Giddens’s (1991) notion of “disembedding” mechanisms that lift social relations out of local contexts, suggesting instead that globalization can involve “re-embedding” wherein actors selectively appropriate global resources to strengthen rather than dissolve local communities and traditions. Adaptive strategies employed by kyai exemplify what organizational theory terms “ambidextrous leadership” (O’Reilly & Tushman, 2004) capacity to simultaneously exploit existing competencies and explore new opportunities while pursuing transcendent mission of faithfully transmitting Islamic

CONCLUSION

This study illuminated complex dynamics through which contemporary Indonesian pesantren navigate traditional religious authority, educational mission, and digital-age challenges intersection, revealing sophisticated strategies challenging simplistic narratives about religious institutions and technological change. Research demonstrates kyai charismatic authority, rather than being antithetical to critical thinking and adaptive innovation, can serve as powerful pedagogical resource for cultivating religious moderation and digital resilience when strategically deployed through dialogical instruction and embodied role modeling. Institutionalization of digital literacy programs grounded in Islamic epistemological frameworks, combined with developmentally calibrated device governance policies, exemplifies how religious educational communities can shape technology use according to cultural values rather than passively accepting technological determinism. Furthermore, emergence of hybrid institutional models selectively integrating modern methodologies while preserving salaf traditions reveals pathways for religious institutions to achieve “rooted cosmopolitanism” engagement with global modernity while maintaining strong theological commitments and community bonds.

Study’s contributions extend across theoretical, methodological, and practical domains, offering insights relevant to multiple scholarly conversations and stakeholder communities. Theoretically, research advances understanding of religious leadership in digital contexts by demonstrating how charismatic authority can be reimagined as source of adaptive capacity rather than conservative resistance, contributing to leadership studies, religious education scholarship, and digital religion literature. “Grounded digital resilience” concept provides analytical framework for examining how communities cultivate critical digital engagement while maintaining cultural and religious grounding, applicable beyond pesantren to other faith-based educational settings navigating similar tensions.

Practically, findings offer empirically grounded recommendations for pesantren seeking to strengthen moderation education and digital literacy programs, for policymakers designing counter-radicalization initiatives respecting religious communities' autonomy and expertise, and for development organizations supporting Islamic educational reform. Study suggests effective interventions should build on rather than displace existing institutional strengths, support rather than supplant community leadership, and facilitate rather than mandate organizational change processes.

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