

## CHARISM, CREDIBILITY, AND CREATIVITY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE LEADERSHIP STYLE OF KIAI-RECTOR IN BUILDING AN INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM IN ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOLS

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### ABSTRACT

*This study aims to analyze the role of charisma, credibility, and creativity in the leadership style of Kiai-Rectors in building an innovation ecosystem in Islamic boarding school universities. Using a qualitative case study approach, the study was conducted at KH. Mukhtar Syafaat University, Blokagung, Banyuwangi. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation study, with the main informants being university leaders and administrators, lecturers, and students as supporting informants. Data analysis followed Miles and Huberman's interactive model, namely reduction, presentation, and drawing conclusions from the data, while data validity was ensured through triangulation of sources, methods, and observers. The results of the study show that the charisma of the Kiai-Rector becomes social-intellectual capital that strengthens leadership legitimacy. Hybrid credibility integrates traditional and intellectual authority to create inclusive leadership. Creativity and collaboration are adaptive strategies for dealing with digital disruption through curriculum innovation and digital teaching media, such as multimedia and broadcasting campus services for producing broadcast programs, short films, campus event documentation, and other digital content. In addition, international collaboration in research and community service is strengthened by strengthening networks between researchers in different countries. This research contributes to enriching the concept of modern Islamic boarding school leadership by emphasizing that the charismatic, credible, and creative leadership style of the Kiai-Rector can serve as a transformative model for Islamic higher education institutions in the digital era.*

*Keywords: Charisma, Credibility, Creativity, Kiai Leadership, Innovation Ecosystem.*

### A. Introduction

In the context of Islamic Boarding Schools, the charisma of a Kiai-Rector is not just a personal attraction, but a real and tangible social force

(Robaeah et al., 2023). This charisma, which is rooted in deep-rooted spiritual authority, serves as an almost indisputable driving force for the entire innovation program (Mou, 2023). When the Kiai-Rector called for a new vision, whether it was the development of sharia technology or scientific research for the benefit of the people, the entire academic community moved on the basis of deep faith and loyalty. The support comes not solely because of rational consideration of a mature proposal, but rather because of a social "obligation" to respect and follow their spiritual leaders who are believed to be blessed. Thus, this charisma becomes a powerful adhesive and accelerator, creating a solid and confident innovation ecosystem, in contrast to the purely bureaucratic dynamics of public universities.

Credibility is a key foundation that supports the legitimacy of the leadership of the Kiai-Rector in Islamic Boarding Schools (Karim et al., 2025; Buanaputra et al., 2021). This foundation is built on a reputation that includes not only a deep capacity for religious scholarship, but also a mastery of modern educational management. The significance of credibility arises because the Islamic boarding school academic community demands a leader figure who shows consistency between words and actions, and is able to be a bridge that connects tradition with modernity (Hasan, 2025); Rosyid, 2022). Concrete evidence can be seen from the success in developing an integrative curriculum that marries the study of the yellow book with contemporary sciences in a harmonious manner, without triggering prolonged conflicts or debates. Thus, the credibility of the Kiai-Rector not only guarantees the sustainability of his leadership, but also strengthens the trust of all stakeholders in the direction of innovation development in Islamic Boarding Schools.

The creativity of the kiai-rector is one of the driving factors for the creation of an innovation ecosystem in Islamic boarding schools (Amin et

al., 2025; Dian et al., 2024). This creativity is seen in the ability to design academic and non-academic programs that are not only based on pesantren traditions, but also responsive to the needs of the times. The underlying reason is that Islamic boarding schools need to adapt to global demands without losing their Islamic identity (Faizin, 2024); Huda, 2024). The evidence seen is for example in the development of student business incubators, digitization of book studies, and the organization of international academic forums. In conclusion, the creativity of the kiai-rector serves as a catalyst for change that directs Islamic boarding schools towards an innovative and globally competitive ecosystem.

The leadership of the kiai-rector in Islamic boarding schools shows the social fact that there is harmony between traditional values and modernity. Islamic boarding schools have historically been synonymous with conservatism, while universities demand innovation (Huda, 2024); Malik, 2024). The reason for this combination is because the kiai-rectors are able to reinterpret pesantren values such as *tawadhu'* and sincere in the context of modern management. The evidence can be seen from the academic governance system that still upholds Islamic ethics but at the same time adopts digital technology for transparency and effectiveness. In conclusion, the combination of traditional values and modernity forms unique and relevant leadership, and is a characteristic of the innovation ecosystem in Islamic boarding schools.

The following are some related studies that suggest that the leadership style of kiai (Islamic scholars) in pesantren (pesantren) plays an important role in fostering innovation and creativity (Dian et al., 2024; Rosyid, 2022). Charismatic and transformational leadership approaches are highly effective in motivating stakeholders and inspiring positive change in education and institutional management (Habeeb & Eyupoglu, 2024; Owusu-Agyeman, 2021). Kiai leadership influences various aspects

of the pesantren, including marketing, curriculum development and teacher creativity (Nur et al., 2024). The kiai's charisma and leadership style can attract the interest of students and improve the reputation of the institution (Abdurrahman et al., 2022). In curriculum development, the kiai acts as the main decision-maker, integrating traditional Islamic education with formal education (Dian et al., 2024). To enhance teachers' creativity, kiai applies a variety of leadership styles, including an entrepreneurial, innovative, charismatic, and democratic approach, which involves providing mentorship, forming small study groups, and encouraging participation in the decision-making process (Ghafar, 2022).

This research offers novelty in highlighting the leadership dynamics of the kyai-rector by placing the leadership of the kiai not only as a traditional charismatic figure, but also as a rector who combines spiritual charisma, academic credibility, and managerial creativity in one leadership framework. If the previous research emphasized a lot on the influence of charisma and kiai transformation in the context of traditional pesantren schools, this research expands the focus on the more complex realm of pesantren universities, by involving marketing aspects, integrative curriculum development, increasing teacher creativity, and creating an institutional innovation ecosystem. Another novelty lies in the three-dimensional analysis of leadership charisma, credibility, and creativity that has never been comprehensively discussed in the context of the leadership of the kiai and rector. Thus, this study not only captures the leadership style of the kiai from the charismatic and transformational side, but also adds a strategic perspective on the role of the kiai-rector as a motor of innovation that is able to balance the value of tradition with the demands of modernity in Islamic boarding school higher education.

The urgency of this research lies in the urgent need for Islamic boarding schools to affirm their identity in the midst of the flow of global

education modernization. On the one hand, pesantren must maintain the values of Islamic tradition which is the main foundation, while on the other hand it is required to produce graduates who are adaptive, creative, and competitive. In this context, the leadership of the kiai-rector has a strategic role because it is able to combine charisma, credibility, and creativity as social and academic capital in building an innovation ecosystem. Without visionary and adaptive leadership, pesantren risk being left behind in facing the challenges of globalization, digitalization, and competition between universities. Therefore, this research is important to make a conceptual and practical contribution in formulating a leadership model for kiai-rectors that is relevant to the needs of the times, but still rooted in the noble values of Islamic boarding schools. The purpose of this research is to analyze the role of charisma, credibility, and creativity in the leadership style of kiai-rectors in building an innovation ecosystem in Islamic boarding schools.

### **B. Research Methodology**

The election of KH. Mukhtar Syafaat Blokagung Banyuwangi as the research location in this study is based on several strategic and academic considerations. This university is one of the unique Islamic boarding schools because it is under the auspices of the Darussalam Blokagung Banyuwangi Islamic Boarding School, so that the leadership of the kiai as well as the rector is a central factor in determining the direction of campus development. The combination of the traditional values of pesantren with the modern orientation of higher education makes this university an ideal laboratory to examine how the charisma, credibility, and creativity of a leader can shape an innovation ecosystem. In addition, the university is in a phase of growth and transformation towards a research and technology-based campus, which raises leadership dynamics that are interesting to

research. The factors of the proximity of the pesantren's culture, the involvement of kiai in decision-making, and the university's commitment to human resource development make this location very relevant to explore the typical leadership model of pesantren in the context of higher education.

A qualitative approach with a case study type was chosen in this study because it was able to explore in depth the dynamics of leadership that occur in a real context at KH University. Mukhtar Intercession Blokagung. This approach allows researchers to understand the meaning, values, and leadership practices of kiai-rectors through direct interaction with the research subjects, either through interviews, observations, and document analysis. The type of case study was chosen because the research focuses on one specific location with distinctive characteristics, namely pesantren-based universities, so that it can provide a comprehensive, in-depth, and contextual picture of how the charisma, credibility, and creativity of leaders affect the formation of an innovation ecosystem.

The use of primary and secondary data sources in this study was chosen to obtain comprehensive and valid data. Primary data was obtained through in-depth interviews and direct observation of key informants, namely the Vice-Chancellor and university leaders, because they have direct authority and experience in implementing leadership and building an innovation ecosystem. Supporting informants such as lecturers, education staff, and students were also involved to provide additional perspectives and enrich the data with the reality of the field. Meanwhile, secondary data in the form of official documents, archives, policy reports, and academic publications are used to strengthen, verify, and complement primary findings. The combination of the two allows researchers to present a more holistic, in-depth, and measurable analysis of the leadership style of the Kiai-Rector in Islamic boarding schools. The following are the informants consisting of leaders, managers, ustadz and students totaling 15 people.

Table 1. Informs

| Yes | Report             | Gender |       | Code/Quantity |
|-----|--------------------|--------|-------|---------------|
|     |                    | Man    | Woman |               |
| 1   | University Leaders | 1      | 1     | Pim./2        |
| 2   | University Manager | 3      | 2     | Peng./5       |
| 3   | Lecturer           | 3      | 3     | Dsn. /6       |
| 4   | Student            | 1      | 1     | Mhs./2        |
| Sum |                    |        |       | 15            |

The use of in-depth interviews, participant observations, and documentation studies as data collection techniques is based on the need to obtain rich, valid, and contextual data. In-depth interviews were chosen to explore the personal experiences, thoughts, and leadership strategies of the kiai-rector in more detail and reflectively. Participant observations were used so that researchers could see firsthand interactions, communication patterns, and leadership practices in daily life in the pesantren campus environment. Meanwhile, documentation studies are used to trace policies, official archives, activity reports, and other supporting documents that can strengthen primary data. These three techniques complement each other, so that they are able to provide a holistic picture of how the charisma, credibility, and creativity of the kiai-rector play a role in building an innovation ecosystem in Islamic boarding schools.

Miles and Huberman's interactive model is used as a data analysis technique because it allows researchers to analyze data in a systematic, in-depth, and continuous manner. The analysis process consisting of data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions or verification is very relevant to understand the complex and meaningful leadership dynamics of kiai-rector. Data reduction helps filter important information from interviews, observations, and documentation to focus on key issues, while

data presentation provides a structured picture of research findings in the form of narratives and matrices. The conclusion stage then ensures that the interpretation of the data is carried out in a reflective and logical manner. The advantage of this model is its interactive and cyclical nature, so that researchers can continue to review the data repeatedly to produce a credible and contextual understanding of the role of charisma, credibility, and creativity in building an innovation ecosystem in Islamic boarding schools.

Triangulation of sources, methods, and observers is used to ensure the validity and increase the credibility of the data obtained. Source triangulation is carried out by utilizing information from various parties, such as chancellors, lecturers, staff, and students, so that the data obtained is more diverse and does not only rely on one perspective. The triangulation method was carried out by combining in-depth interviews, participant observations, and documentation studies to make the data richer and more complementary. Meanwhile, observer triangulation is carried out by involving more than one researcher or supervisor in the analysis process to reduce subjectivity and interpretation bias. With the application of the three forms of triangulation, the results of the research become more valid, objective, and comprehensive in describing the leadership style of the kiai-rector in building an innovation ecosystem in Islamic boarding schools.

### **C. Results And Discussion**

#### **Kharisma Kiai-Rector as Social-Intellectual Capital**

The Kharisma of the Vice-Chancellor at the university serves as a significant socio-intellectual capital in sustaining institutional dynamics (Abbas et al., 2024; Del Gesso et al., 2024). This charisma becomes academic legitimacy because every university policy has gained wide acceptance from the academic community thanks to the moral authority inherent in the kiai figure. In addition, the kiai charisma strengthens the

university's social network through collaboration with the community, Islamic boarding schools, government institutions, and industry partners that have an impact on the effectiveness of service programs and external cooperation (Aziz & Huda, 2024; Faizin, 2024). Students are also encouraged to innovate because they make the figure of kiai a source of creative inspiration, as evidenced by the birth of the initiative Start-up Islamic boarding schools, technology research, and social entrepreneurship. Furthermore, kiai charisma becomes an integrative bridge between pesantren traditions and academic modernity, so that digital transformation runs without losing the scientific identity of the pesantren (Aimah et al., 2024). In fact, the reputation of kcharisma kiai extends to the international level, opening up opportunities for global cooperation that strengthens the university's position in the realm of Islamic boarding school higher education. This is in accordance with the results of an interview with a senior lecturer at KH Mukhtar Syafaat University Blokagung Banyuwangi

"The university policy issued by the Kiai-Rector has always been widely accepted, because he is not only an academic leader, but also has moral authority that we respect as Kiai." (Banyuwangi, August 12, 2025)

The above information indicates that the policy issued by the Kiai-Rector has received wide acceptance from the academic community. This happens because the kiai figure is not only seen as an academic leader, but also as a figure with strong and respected moral authority (Abdullah & Kusaeri, 2024). The charisma of the kiai-rector is an important capital that gives legitimacy to the direction of university policies, so that the decisions taken are not only seen from the administrative aspect, but also have a spiritual and ethical foundation that strengthens the trust of all

elements of the campus. For more details related to the charisma of the kiai-rector as socio-intellectual capital in the following figure:

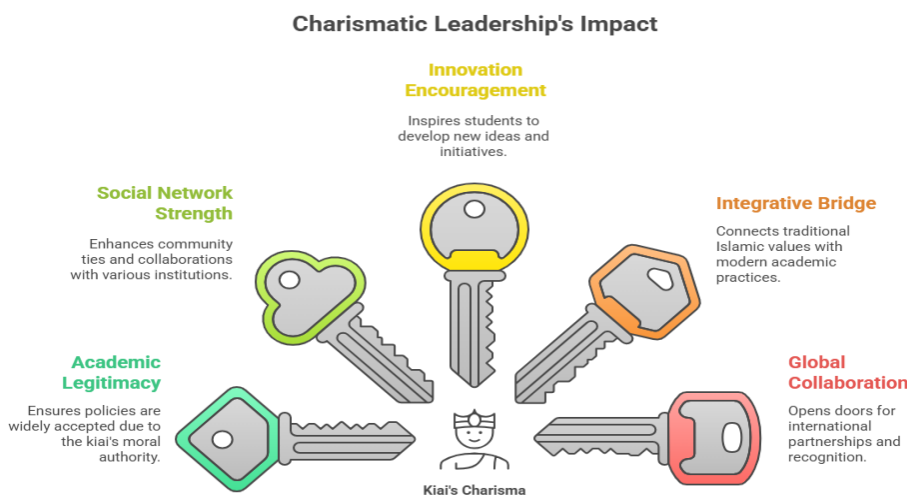


Figure 1. The Impact of the Charismatic Leadership of Kiai-Rector

The image depicts the impact of Kiai's charismatic leadership which is likened to the main key in opening up various opportunities for the advancement of educational institutions. Kiai's charisma serves as academic legitimacy, so that university policies are more acceptable because they are based on strong moral authority (Fitriani et al., 2024; Muzakki et al., 2024). In addition, this charisma strengthens social networks with various parties, ranging from the community, government agencies, to industry partners, so that collaboration can be established more widely (Aguado, 2022). From the student side, charismatic leadership encourages the birth of innovations and new initiatives, both in the fields of academics, technology, and social entrepreneurship (Maghdid et al., 2025; Al Doghan et al., 2023). Kiai also acts as an integrative bridge that is able to connect traditional Islamic values with modern academic practices, so that digital transformation and educational developments do not eliminate the identity of pesantren

(Rochim et al., 2025). Furthermore, Kiai's charisma opens access to global collaboration through international cooperation that enhances the reputation of Islamic boarding schools in the world of higher education (Dian et al., 2024). Thus, charismatic leadership has an impact not only internally, but also strategically externally.

#### Hybrid Credibility: Integration of Traditional Authority and Intellectual Authority

The hybrid credibility that integrates traditional authority and intellectual authority reflects the social fact that leadership in the contemporary era no longer stands on a single source of legitimacy, but rather is formed through the blending of traditional heritage values with modern academic recognition. Leaders who have strong roots in spiritual-cultural traditions, such as kiai or religious figures, but are also equipped with formal knowledge and intellectual achievements, are able to answer the challenges of the complex times (Halimah et al., 2024). The presence of this figure with double credibility provides a strong reason for the public to put their trust, because he is considered not only to maintain the continuity of noble values but also to be able to bring science-based updates (Ophir et al., 2023). This is evident in the leadership model of Islamic boarding schools and universities, where a kiai-rector obtains dual legitimacy from tradition as well as academics, so that it is widely accepted by various circles (Abidin et al., 2024). Thus, hybrid credibility is the foundation for the birth of inclusive and relevant leadership, which is able to bridge the needs of society between maintaining traditional roots and responding to global dynamics. As shown in the following table:

#### Table 2. Integration of Traditional Authority and Intellectual Authority

| Yes | Indicator   | Result   |
|-----|---|--|
| 1   | Leaders have strong roots in spiritual-cultural traditions such as kiai or religious figures.                   | Traditional legitimacy is maintained that fosters trust from the community based on noble values.                      |
| 2   | Leaders are equipped with formal knowledge and academic achievements.   | Able to present knowledge-based innovations and updates that are relevant to the needs of the times.                   |
| 3   | Integration of traditional and intellectual authorities in the leadership of Islamic boarding schools/campuses. | Dual legitimacy was obtained, so it was widely accepted by both traditionalists and modernists.                        |
| 4   | Leader figures act as a bridge between traditional values and global developments.                              | An inclusive leadership that is adaptive to social change and contemporary challenges is realized.                     |
| 5   | Hybrid credibility is used as the basis for building the direction of educational transformation.               | Islamic education is able to maintain the roots of tradition while responding to global dynamics in a balanced manner. |

The table above shows that hybrid credibility in Islamic educational leadership is born from a blend of traditional authority and intellectual authority (Ruhullah & Ushama, 2024). Leaders who are rooted in spiritual-cultural traditions, such as kiai or religious leaders, are able to maintain traditional legitimacy and maintain community beliefs that uphold noble values (Ruslan & Irham, 2022). On the other hand, the provision of formal knowledge and academic achievement makes leaders more adaptive and able to present innovations in accordance with the demands of the times (Halabi, 2024). The integration of the two results in a dual legitimacy that makes the leader widely accepted, both by traditionalists and modernists. This role shows the leader as an effective bridge between traditional values and global dynamics, thus giving birth to leadership that is inclusive and relevant to social development (Fujimoto et al., 2024; Fujimoto & Uddin, 2022). Thus, hybrid credibility not only strengthens the leader's position in the eyes of society, but also becomes an important foundation for a balanced transformation of

Islamic education between preserving the roots of tradition and responding to modern challenges. For more details on the integration of traditional authority and intellectual authority in the following figure:

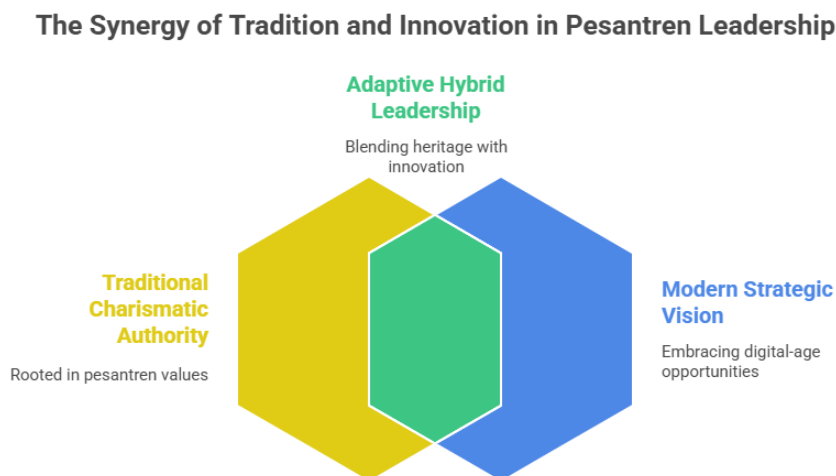


Figure 2. The Concept of Adaptive Hybrid Leadership in Islamic Boarding School Leadership

The image illustrates the synergy between tradition and innovation in the leadership of Islamic boarding schools through the concept of Adaptive Hybrid Leadership. On the left side, Traditional Charismatic Authority reflects the strength of leadership that comes from charisma and pesantren values such as example, sincerity, and respect for teachers (Karim et al., 2025; Abdurrahman et al., 2022). While on the right side, Modern Strategic Vision demonstrating the ability of Islamic boarding school leaders to respond to the challenges of the digital era through modern strategies, educational innovation, and global collaboration (Faizin, 2024); Salim et al., 2024). The two blend in the middle into an adaptive hybrid leadership model, where spiritual heritage and modern vision come together to create an educational ecosystem that is competitive, relevant, and still rooted in Islamic values.

## Creativity and Collaboration as an adaptive strategy to face digital disruption

In the context of pesantren-based higher education, creativity and collaboration have emerged as effective adaptive strategies in facing the challenges of digital disruption. Rapid technological change requires educational institutions to not only innovate learning methods, but also strengthen cross-disciplinary and institutional cooperation (Jakubakynov et al., 2024; Christiansen et al., 2023). The leadership of the kyai-rector plays a central role in directing this transformation through policies that integrate the values of the pesantren with modern technology (Halimah et al., 2024; Nur et al., 2024). This can be seen from the development of a digital curriculum, technology literacy training for students and lecturers, and strategic collaboration with external institutions. This effort proves that a combination of creativity and collaboration is able to create an educational ecosystem that is adaptive, innovative, and still rooted in the spiritual values of pesantren (Amin et al., 2025; Salim et al., 2024). Thus, digital disruption is no longer seen as a threat, but an opportunity to strengthen the character and competitiveness of Islamic boarding schools in the modern era. This is as the result of an interview with the Dean of the Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training of KH Mukhtar Syafaat Blokagung Banyuwangi.

"The policy of the kyai-rector really encourages us to innovate. Each lecturer is given space to be creative in learning, for example creating pesantren-based digital teaching media and working together across study programs to produce collaborative projects that are relevant to the needs of the times." (Banyuwangi, August 25, 2025)

Based on this statement, it shows that the leadership of the kyai-

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rector has a strong role in creating an innovative and collaborative academic culture in the pesantren-based university environment. The policy support provided opens up space for lecturers to be creative and adapt to technological developments through the development of digital teaching media and collaboration across study programs. This indicates that visionary leadership policies are able to drive learning transformation towards a more dynamic, relevant, and responsive model to the demands of digital disruption without abandoning the identity of pesantren values (Halimah et al., 2024). The following is an image that shows the use of digital as a form of creativity for leaders in answering the challenges of digital disruption:



Figure 3. Audio and Video Production Studio for College Students

Existence of Campus Service Unit Multimedia and Broadcasting at KH Mukhtar Syafaat University is concrete evidence of creativity as an adaptive strategy. This unit is not just a facility, but a production center that transforms the values of the pesantren into a modern digital format. Through content creation such as animated videos of the Yellow Book, study podcasts, and religious broadcasts, they creatively answer the

challenge of disruption by seizing digital space (Kholili et al., 2024). This initiative shows a smart adaptation, where the campus is no longer a passive consumer of technology, but an active producer that uses media creativity to strengthen Islamic identity in the digital era, while building a relevant learning ecosystem for the younger generation (Muslim, 2024). Here is a picture that presents international collaboration activities in the field of research and community service:



Figure 4. International Collaboration in the Field of Research and Community Service

Collaboration international carried out by KH. Mukhtar Syafaat Banyuwangi in the field of community service reflects the real application of creativity and collaboration as an adaptive strategy to face digital disruption. Through cross-border cooperation, this university is able to present technology-based service program innovations that are relevant to global needs. The involvement of various parties from abroad strengthens knowledge networks and enriches local practices with an

international perspective. This initiative shows that collaboration not only increases academic capacity, but also becomes a creative forum to transform community service towards a more digital, inclusive, and globally competitive direction (Ul Hassan et al., 2025). Thus, international collaboration is not just a form of cooperation, but a manifestation of a leadership style that encourages the transformation of the innovation ecosystem of Islamic boarding schools to be more responsive to the challenges of digital disruption and global needs.

#### **D. Conclusion**

The leadership of the kiai-rector plays a central role in building an innovation ecosystem in Islamic boarding schools through a combination of charisma, credibility, and creativity. Kharisma kiai functions as a socio-intellectual capital that strengthens the legitimacy of leadership and fosters the trust and loyalty of the academic community to every university policy. The credibility of the kiai-rector is reflected in his ability to integrate traditional and intellectual authority, so as to be able to bridge the values of the pesantren with modern academic demands. Meanwhile, creativity is the driving force for innovation by encouraging lecturers, students, and campus units to adapt digitally, such as through the development of Islamic boarding school-based teaching media, the establishment of Multimedia and Broadcasting Units, and international collaboration in the field of community service. Overall, the leadership style of the kiai-rector who is charismatic, credible, and creative has succeeded in creating an adaptive, collaborative, and globally competitive educational ecosystem without losing the spiritual identity of the pesantren.

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