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ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Leadership of Madrasah Principals in the Era of Artificial Intelligence

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ABSTRACT

The rapid advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has accelerated digital transformation in education, requiring madrasah principals to move beyond technology adoption toward leading innovative, adaptive, and value-based organizational change. Within Islamic educational institutions, digital leadership must not only improve organizational effectiveness but also preserve Islamic educational values. This study aimed to analyze the digital leadership practices of madrasah principals in the era of Artificial Intelligence and to develop a digital leadership model that reflects the characteristics of Islamic education. A qualitative multi-site case study design was employed in four State Islamic Senior High Schools (Madrasah Aliyah Negeri) in Lampung Province, Indonesia, namely MAN 1 Bandar Lampung, MAN 1 Metro, MAN 1 Lampung Selatan, and MAN 1 Pringsewu. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis involving madrasah principals, vice principals, teachers, administrative staff, and information technology personnel. Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The findings reveal that the digital leadership of madrasah principals plays a strategic role in facilitating digital transformation through the development of a digital vision, AI governance, teachers' digital capacity development, data-driven decision-making, collaborative digital organizational culture, and the integration of Islamic values into technology implementation.

Keywords: Digital Leadership; Madrasah Principal; Artificial Intelligence; Digital Transformation; Islamic Education.



ABSTRAK

Transformasi digital yang dipercepat oleh perkembangan Artificial Intelligence (AI) telah mengubah paradigma kepemimpinan pendidikan, termasuk di lingkungan madrasah. Kepala madrasah dituntut tidak hanya mampu mengadopsi teknologi digital, tetapi juga memimpin perubahan organisasi yang inovatif, adaptif, dan tetap berlandaskan nilai-nilai Islam. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis praktik kepemimpinan digital kepala madrasah pada era Artificial Intelligence serta mengembangkan model kepemimpinan digital yang relevan dengan konteks pendidikan Islam. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi multisitus yang dilaksanakan pada empat Madrasah Aliyah Negeri di Provinsi Lampung, yaitu MAN 1 Bandar Lampung, MAN 1 Metro, MAN 1 Lampung Selatan, dan MAN 1 Pringsewu. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan studi dokumentasi terhadap kepala madrasah, wakil kepala madrasah, guru, tenaga kependidikan, dan operator teknologi informasi. Analisis data dilakukan menggunakan model interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña yang meliputi kondensasi data, penyajian data, serta penarikan dan verifikasi kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan digital kepala madrasah berperan penting dalam mendorong transformasi digital melalui penyusunan visi digital, penguatan tata kelola Artificial Intelligence, pengembangan kompetensi digital guru, pengambilan keputusan berbasis data, pembentukan budaya organisasi digital yang kolaboratif, serta integrasi nilai-nilai Islam dalam implementasi teknologi. Berdasarkan temuan tersebut, penelitian ini mengembangkan Model Kepemimpinan Digital Kepala Madrasah pada Era Artificial Intelligence yang terdiri atas enam dimensi utama, yaitu visi digital, tata kelola AI, pengembangan kompetensi digital guru, pengambilan keputusan berbasis data, budaya organisasi digital yang kolaboratif, dan kepemimpinan berbasis nilai-nilai Islam.

Kata Kunci: Kepemimpinan Digital; Kepala Madrasah; Artificial Intelligence; Transformasi Digital; Pendidikan Islam.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has significantly transformed various sectors, including education. Digital transformation has evolved beyond the adoption of information and communication technologies toward the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into educational systems. AI has changed how educational institutions manage administration, deliver instruction, assess learning outcomes, and make data-driven decisions. Consequently, educational institutions are required to adapt to technological changes in order to remain relevant and competitive in the twenty-first century (Renol HS & Eviana Purba, 2025).

Madrasah, as Islamic educational institutions, have a unique responsibility to develop students' academic competencies while fostering moral values and Islamic character. Therefore, madrasah principals play a strategic role in directing digital transformation in ways that align with the mission and values of Islamic education. Leadership in madrasahs is no longer limited to managerial and administrative competencies but increasingly requires digital leadership capabilities that enable principals to integrate technology, empower human resources, and cultivate innovative organizational cultures.

Artificial Intelligence provides considerable opportunities for improving institutional effectiveness. AI applications can support lesson planning, automate administrative tasks, analyze student achievement, generate institutional reports, and facilitate evidence-based decision-making. These technologies have the potential to enhance efficiency, transparency, accountability, and educational quality. Nevertheless, AI implementation also presents several challenges, including limited digital literacy among educators, inadequate technological infrastructure, concerns regarding data privacy and ethics, and organizational readiness for sustainable digital transformation (Sirat et al., 2025).

In this context, madrasah principals are expected to demonstrate strong digital leadership by developing a clear digital vision, promoting innovation, enhancing teachers' digital competencies, utilizing educational data strategically, and ensuring the ethical implementation of AI in accordance with Islamic educational values. Digital leadership has therefore become a critical determinant of successful educational transformation in the AI era. Previous studies have demonstrated that digital leadership positively contributes to educational innovation and institutional effectiveness. However, most studies have focused on general schools or higher education institutions, while research specifically examining digital leadership among madrasah principals remains limited (Suratman et al., 2024). Furthermore, previous research has primarily addressed digital transformation in general rather than investigating the implications of Artificial Intelligence for educational leadership in Islamic schools. These limitations highlight the need for further investigation into digital leadership practices among madrasah principals within the context of AI-driven educational transformation.

Although digital leadership has received increasing scholarly attention, significant research gaps remain. Existing studies predominantly investigate digital leadership in general educational settings, with limited attention to Islamic educational institutions (Ridani et al., 2026). Moreover, previous research has mainly focused on digital learning and administrative transformation without comprehensively examining how Artificial Intelligence reshapes the leadership practices of madrasah principals. Most studies also employ quantitative approaches, providing limited understanding of principals' experiences, leadership strategies, and organizational adaptation processes. Therefore, qualitative research is needed to explore digital leadership practices within the unique context of madrasahs.

The novelty of this study lies in its specific focus on the digital leadership of madrasah principals in the era of Artificial Intelligence. Unlike previous studies that primarily examine digital transformation broadly, this research explores how principals develop digital vision, foster innovation, improve teachers' digital competencies, manage organizational change, and implement AI ethically while preserving Islamic educational values. The study is expected to propose a conceptual framework of digital leadership suitable for Islamic educational institutions facing AI-driven transformation.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a multiple case study design to investigate the digital leadership practices of madrasah principals in the era of Artificial Intelligence (AI) (Umah et al., 2023). A qualitative approach was selected because it enables researchers to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and leadership practices in depth within their natural settings. This approach is particularly appropriate for understanding how madrasah principals formulate digital leadership strategies, integrate AI into educational management, promote organizational change, and respond to the challenges of digital transformation while maintaining Islamic educational values. A multiple case study design was adopted to compare leadership practices across several madrasahs in Lampung Province. This design allows researchers to identify common patterns and contextual differences in implementing digital leadership and AI-based educational management (Rahayu, 2026).

The study was conducted in four state Islamic senior high schools (Madrasah Aliyah Negeri) in Lampung Province, Indonesia, namely MAN 1 Bandar Lampung, MAN 2 Bandar Lampung, MAN 1 Metro, and MAN 1 Lampung Barat. These madrasahs were purposively selected because they have actively implemented digital technologies in school administration, learning management, and educational services. Several of these institutions have also introduced digital learning platforms, computer-based assessments, and AI-assisted applications to support educational activities and institutional management. Furthermore, these madrasahs have demonstrated continuous efforts to strengthen digital transformation through infrastructure development, teacher capacity building, and technology-based governance.

Lampung Province was selected as the research setting because it has experienced significant progress in educational digitalization, particularly within Islamic educational institutions under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The diversity of institutional characteristics among the selected madrasahs provides a comprehensive context for examining digital leadership practices in different organizational environments. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on their direct involvement in digital transformation initiatives within their respective madrasahs.

The participants consisted of: four madrasah principals, eight vice principals responsible for curriculum, student affairs, and infrastructure, twelve teachers actively involved in digital learning implementation and four Information Technology (IT) coordinators or digital transformation coordinators. A total of 28 participants participated in this study. Their varied professional roles enabled the researcher to obtain comprehensive insights into leadership practices, AI implementation, organizational culture, and digital innovation within the participating madrasahs.

Data were collected over a four-month period through three complementary techniques: semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants, lasting approximately 45–90 minutes each (Mudiono, 2025). The interviews explored participants' experiences regarding digital leadership, AI utilization, digital transformation policies, organizational challenges, leadership strategies, and future expectations for AI integration. Non-participant observations were undertaken during leadership meetings, classroom learning activities, teacher professional

development programs, computer-based assessments, and administrative processes involving digital technologies. Detailed field notes were recorded to capture leadership behaviors, organizational interactions, and the implementation of AI-supported educational practices. Document analysis included reviewing school strategic plans, digital transformation policies, annual work programs, curriculum documents, meeting reports, teacher training records, digital governance guidelines, and institutional reports related to technology implementation. The use of multiple data sources strengthened data triangulation and enhanced the comprehensiveness of the findings.

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive analysis model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of four interrelated stages: data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During the data condensation stage, interview transcripts, observation records, and institutional documents were transcribed, coded, categorized, and organized into emerging themes (Mizwar et al., 2026). Open coding was initially employed to identify meaningful concepts, followed by axial coding to establish relationships among categories and selective coding to develop overarching themes concerning digital leadership and AI implementation. The data display stage involved organizing the findings into thematic matrices, comparison tables, and conceptual frameworks to facilitate cross-case analysis among the participating madrasahs (Hariyati, 2026). Finally, conclusions were continuously verified by comparing evidence obtained from interviews, observations, and institutional documents to ensure consistency and credibility throughout the research process.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that digital leadership has become a fundamental competency for madrasah principals in responding to the rapid development of Artificial Intelligence. The role of the principal has shifted beyond traditional administrative responsibilities toward becoming a transformational leader capable of creating a digital vision, promoting innovation, empowering teachers, and managing organizational change. These findings support the argument that successful digital transformation depends more on leadership capacity than on technological availability alone.

This study also indicates that Artificial Intelligence has evolved from being merely an instructional innovation into a strategic instrument for institutional governance. AI is increasingly utilized to support lesson planning, administrative management, educational data analysis, communication, and evidence-based decision-making. Unlike previous studies that primarily conceptualized AI as a classroom technology, the present research demonstrates that AI has become an essential component of organizational leadership and educational management within Islamic educational institutions. Another important finding concerns teacher professional development. Continuous training, mentoring, and collaborative learning emerged as critical strategies for improving teachers' digital literacy and AI competencies. These findings suggest that organizational learning plays a central role in sustaining digital transformation and that educational innovation requires long-term leadership commitment to human resource development.

Nevertheless, the implementation of AI continues to face several significant challenges, including unequal digital competencies, inadequate technological infrastructure, financial limitations, and ethical concerns regarding AI utilization. These findings imply that educational digitalization requires comprehensive institutional policies encompassing infrastructure development, continuous professional learning, ethical AI governance, and systematic leadership support.

The most significant contribution of this study lies in revealing the distinctive characteristics of digital leadership within Islamic educational institutions. Unlike leadership models developed in general educational contexts, madrasah principals integrate technological innovation with Islamic educational values. Artificial Intelligence is viewed not as a replacement for teachers but as a strategic instrument that supports educational quality while reinforcing moral responsibility, academic integrity, and character education. This balance between technological advancement and Islamic values represents an important contribution to the development of educational leadership theory

This model extends existing Digital Leadership Theory by integrating two dimensions that have received limited attention in previous studies, namely AI Governance and Islamic Ethical Leadership. AI Governance emphasizes responsible AI implementation through ethical regulation, transparency, privacy protection, and institutional accountability, while Islamic Ethical Leadership ensures that technological innovation remains grounded in Islamic educational values and character formation.



figure 1: Digital Leadership Model for Madrasah Principals in The Era of Artificial Intelligence

3.1. Digital Vision

Digital vision refers to the principal's ability to formulate a clear strategic direction for integrating digital technology and Artificial Intelligence into the management and development of the

madrasah. A strong digital vision enables school leaders to anticipate technological change, establish long-term institutional goals, and communicate a shared vision to teachers, staff, students, and other stakeholders.

In this study, digital vision was reflected in the principals' commitment to developing strategic plans for digital transformation, improving technological infrastructure, encouraging digital innovation, and promoting technology-supported teaching and learning. Rather than viewing technology as an end in itself, principals positioned digital transformation as a means to improve educational quality, institutional competitiveness, and organizational sustainability. For examples: Developing a five-year madrasah digital transformation roadmap, integrating digital transformation programs into the Madrasah Strategic Plan and Annual Budget, setting institutional targets for all teachers to integrate AI-supported learning tools into classroom instruction, establishing "Digital Madrasah" as one of the school's strategic development priorities.

3.2. AI Governance

AI Governance refers to the policies, strategies, and ethical mechanisms established by madrasah principals to ensure the responsible, transparent, and accountable implementation of Artificial Intelligence. Since AI introduces new opportunities as well as ethical challenges, school leaders must regulate its utilization to prevent misuse while maximizing its educational benefits.

The findings indicate that principals developed institutional guidelines concerning responsible AI use, academic integrity, data privacy, information verification, and cybersecurity. AI governance also includes monitoring AI implementation, evaluating its effectiveness, and ensuring that technological innovation remains aligned with educational objectives and Islamic ethical principles.

3.3. Teachers' Digital Capacity Development

Teachers' Digital Capacity Development emphasizes the continuous improvement of teachers' digital competencies, AI literacy, and technological pedagogical skills. Successful digital transformation depends not only on technological infrastructure but also on teachers' readiness to integrate digital innovation into instructional practice.

Madrasah principals strengthened teachers' competencies through workshops, in-house training, mentoring programs, professional learning communities, and collaboration with external institutions. These initiatives enhanced teachers' confidence in utilizing Learning Management Systems (LMS), digital assessment tools, generative AI applications, and other educational technologies. Continuous professional development also fostered a culture of lifelong learning and innovation within the school community.

3.4. Data-Driven Decision-Making

Data-Driven Decision-Making refers to the principal's ability to utilize educational data and AI-supported analytics to formulate strategic and evidence-based decisions. Rather than relying solely on intuition or personal experience, digital leaders employ quantitative and qualitative information to improve organizational effectiveness.

In the participating madrasahs, educational data such as student achievement, attendance records, teacher performance, learning outcomes, and institutional evaluations were increasingly utilized to support planning, policy formulation, resource allocation, and school improvement initiatives. AI-assisted analytical tools enabled school leaders to identify trends, predict institutional needs, and develop more informed educational strategies.

3.5. Collaborative Digital Organizational Culture

Collaborative Digital Organizational Culture refers to the establishment of an organizational environment that encourages collaboration, innovation, knowledge sharing, and continuous improvement through digital technologies. Digital transformation is not an individual effort but a collective organizational process requiring active participation from all stakeholders.

The findings demonstrate that madrasah principals promoted collaborative leadership by encouraging teamwork among teachers, administrators, IT coordinators, students, and external partners. Digital communication platforms facilitated information sharing, collaborative planning, and collective problem-solving. This culture enhanced organizational adaptability and strengthened institutional resilience in responding to technological change.

3.6. Islamic Ethical Leadership

Islamic Ethical Leadership represents the distinctive dimension of this proposed model. It emphasizes that digital transformation and Artificial Intelligence should always be guided by Islamic ethical principles and educational values. Technology is viewed as an instrument to support educational excellence rather than replace human responsibility and moral judgment. Madrasah principals consistently integrated the principles of amanah (trustworthiness), mas'uliyah (responsibility), 'adl (justice), ihsan (excellence), and maslahah (public benefit) into AI implementation. Teachers were encouraged to verify AI-generated information, uphold academic integrity, protect students' privacy, and utilize AI responsibly. Consequently, technological innovation was balanced with character education and spiritual development, ensuring that digital transformation remained consistent with the philosophical foundations of Islamic education.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that the digital leadership of madrasah principals in the era of Artificial Intelligence (AI) extends beyond the adoption of digital technologies. Instead, it represents a comprehensive leadership model that integrates digital vision, AI governance, teachers' digital capacity development, data-driven decision-making, collaborative digital organizational culture, and Islamic ethical leadership. This finding suggests that digital transformation in Islamic educational institutions is a multidimensional process requiring leaders who are capable of managing technological innovation, organizational change, and ethical responsibility simultaneously.

The proposed model confirms the Digital Leadership Theory introduced by Sheninger (2019), which emphasizes that effective educational leaders should establish a clear digital vision, foster innovation, empower stakeholders, and utilize technology to improve educational quality. Similar

to Sheninger's framework, the madrasah principals in this study demonstrated their ability to formulate strategic digital policies, strengthen technological infrastructure, and promote innovation within their institutions. However, this study extends Sheninger's theory by demonstrating that digital leadership in the AI era requires not only technology integration but also systematic AI governance and ethical leadership. Therefore, digital leadership should be viewed as a strategic capability that combines technological innovation with responsible institutional management.

The findings also support the Transformational Leadership Theory proposed by Bass and Avolio (1994). According to this theory, transformational leaders inspire organizational members through a shared vision, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and continuous motivation. The principals participating in this study exhibited these characteristics by encouraging teachers to adopt digital innovation, providing professional development opportunities, facilitating mentoring programs, and creating collaborative learning environments. These leadership practices enabled teachers and staff to adapt to technological changes while maintaining organizational commitment. Consequently, digital leadership in the era of Artificial Intelligence can be interpreted as a contemporary form of transformational leadership that emphasizes digital innovation and organizational adaptability.

The dimension of teachers' digital capacity development further reinforces the ISTE Standards for Education Leaders (2018), which highlight the responsibility of school leaders to empower educators through continuous professional learning and digital competency development. The present findings are also consistent with Dexter (2018), who argued that technology integration is largely determined by leadership practices that support teachers' professional growth rather than by technological infrastructure alone. Nevertheless, this study provides a broader perspective by demonstrating that teachers' competencies in the AI era should include not only digital literacy but also AI literacy, critical evaluation of AI-generated content, ethical awareness, and responsible technology utilization. This finding reflects the evolving nature of teachers' professional competencies in response to emerging Artificial Intelligence technologies.

The findings concerning data-driven decision-making are consistent with recent studies emphasizing the strategic value of educational data in school leadership. According to OECD (2024), the integration of educational data analytics and Artificial Intelligence enables school leaders to improve organizational effectiveness, strategic planning, and institutional performance through evidence-based decision-making. Similarly, the principals in this study increasingly utilized student achievement data, teacher performance indicators, institutional evaluations, and AI-assisted analytics to formulate school policies and improvement strategies. These findings demonstrate that AI has evolved beyond instructional support and has become an essential component of strategic educational leadership.

Another important finding concerns the emergence of AI Governance as a central dimension of digital leadership. Existing Digital Leadership frameworks generally emphasize technology integration and innovation but pay relatively limited attention to governance mechanisms for Artificial Intelligence. The present findings support UNESCO's (2023) Guidance for Generative AI in Education and Research, which recommends that AI implementation should be governed by

principles of transparency, accountability, privacy protection, fairness, and responsible use. The participating madrasah principals developed institutional policies regulating AI utilization, academic integrity, data security, and ethical technology practices. Therefore, this study extends previous Digital Leadership models by positioning AI Governance as a core leadership competency rather than merely a technological management issue.

The findings also demonstrate the importance of developing a collaborative digital organizational culture. Madrasah principals encouraged teamwork, knowledge sharing, digital communication, and collaborative professional learning through various digital platforms. These findings are consistent with the Professional Learning Community (PLC) Theory proposed by DuFour and Eaker (1998), which emphasizes that sustainable school improvement depends on collaboration, collective learning, and shared responsibility. Likewise, Antonopoulou et al. (2021) found that collaborative organizational culture significantly influences the success of digital transformation in educational institutions. The present study confirms these findings within the context of Islamic schools, where collaboration is strengthened not only through digital technologies but also through collective responsibility and shared educational values.

The most significant contribution of this study lies in identifying Islamic Ethical Leadership as a distinctive dimension of digital leadership. Existing Digital Leadership models proposed by Sheninger (2019), Dexter (2018), and the ISTE Standards (2018) primarily focus on technological innovation, organizational improvement, and digital competence. In contrast, this study demonstrates that digital leadership in madrasahs is inseparable from Islamic ethical principles. Artificial Intelligence is regarded as a supporting instrument rather than a replacement for teachers' professional judgment. Consequently, AI implementation is guided by the principles of *amanah* (trustworthiness), *mas'uliyah* (responsibility), *'adl* (justice), academic integrity, and *maslahah* (public benefit). These findings suggest that technological innovation should always be accompanied by ethical responsibility and moral education. Therefore, the integration of Islamic values represents an important extension of Digital Leadership Theory within the context of Islamic educational institutions.

Overall, this study confirms the fundamental assumptions of Digital Leadership Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, and the ISTE Standards, while simultaneously extending these frameworks through the incorporation of AI Governance and Islamic Ethical Leadership. Previous studies have primarily emphasized digital vision, innovation, technology integration, and professional development as the main components of digital leadership. However, the findings of this study demonstrate that leadership in the era of Artificial Intelligence requires additional competencies related to responsible AI governance, ethical decision-making, and the integration of religious values into digital transformation. Consequently, the proposed Digital Leadership Model for Madrasah Principals in the Era of Artificial Intelligence contributes to the advancement of educational leadership theory by providing a contextual framework specifically designed for Islamic educational institutions. The model also offers practical implications for policymakers, educational leaders, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs in designing sustainable, ethical, and value-based digital transformation strategies for madrasahs.

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