Digital *Maslahah* in Higher Education: Communicating Transformational Leadership through Implicit Islamic Ethics

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Abstract: This research explores how university leaders employ transformational styles of Islamic leadership and migration ethics, and how such leaders in Islamic higher education navigate crisis. Using qualitative methods and a case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with four strategic leaders from private universities in the Greater Jakarta Area. The findings demonstrate the emergence of "Digital Maslahah", a conception in which technology is used (though not only for operational efficiency) to sustain the ummah. In theory, this study proposes a new communication leadership theory that seeks to resolve the paradox of high-tech "digital infrastructure" and high-touch "humanist touch". This study proposes that the ability to convert and actualize the spiritual dimension of a leader to Miranda's adaptive digital policies is the essential core of Islamic higher education.

Keywords: Digital maslahah, transformational leadership, Islamic communication, higher education.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana pimpinan perguruan tinggi mengintegrasikan gaya kepemimpinan transformasional dengan nilai-nilai etika komunikasi Islam secara implisit (Amanah, Fathonah, dan Maslahah) dalam menavigasi krisis. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi kasus, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan empat pimpinan strategis dari universitas swasta di Jakarta. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan munculnya paradigma "*Digital Maslahah*", di mana teknologi yang diadopsi bukan sekadar efisiensi operasional semata, tapi untuk menjaga kesejahteraan kolektif umat (sivitas akademika). Secara teoretis, penelitian ini menawarkan kerangka baru komunikasi kepemimpinan yang menyeimbangkan ketegangan antara *high-tech* (infrastruktur digital) dan *high-touch* (sentuhan humanis). Implikasi studi ini menegaskan bahwa keberhasilan transformasi digital di perguruan tinggi Islam bergantung pada kemampuan pemimpin menerjemahkan nilai spiritual ke dalam kebijakan digital yang adaptif.

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Introduction

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the global higher education environment has changed drastically, leading to an accelerated and, in many cases, forced move to digital education. Specifically in Indonesia, there has been an educational "digital shock" as universities have transitioned from in-person, face-to-face education to an entirely digital learning environment. Recent statistics on the percentage of fully online university education validate this permanent alteration of the educational landscape (see Figure 1). This transition in education did not come without challenges; while the adoption of technology is not the most critical issue, the "human" aspect of educational digitalization is. Educational leaders face the challenges of digital education and technology adoption without compromising the educational process. They had to balance and manage the cultural and emotional challenges among the academic staff to ensure that digital technology is seamlessly integrated into the educational process without losing the essence of education.

Figure 1: Online University Penetration Rate (Statista, 2024)
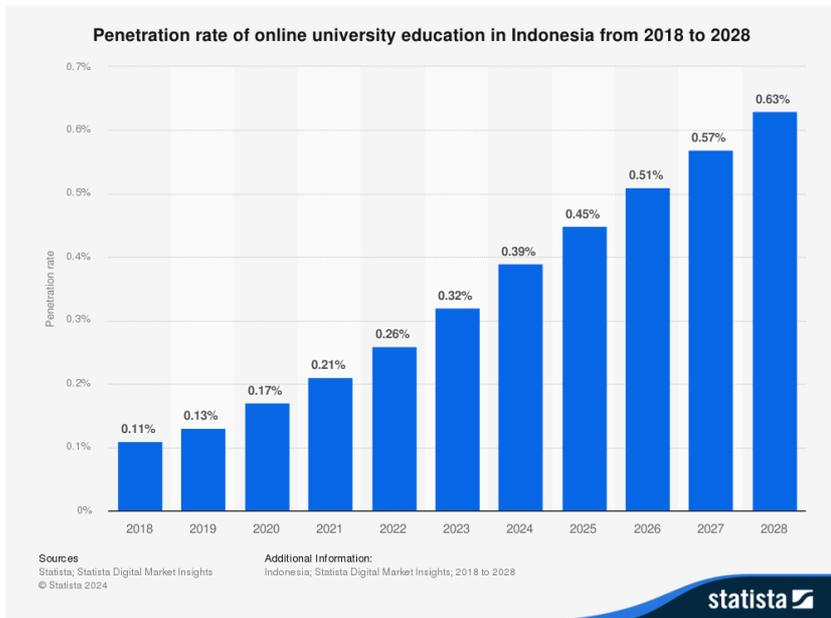
Consequently, traditional leadership practices characterized by transactional leadership, which focuses on routine and compliance, have proven ineffective during periods of disruption. The reliance on transformational leadership theories and practices has been well documented in the scholarly literature, as such leadership practices prioritize motivational and intellectual stimulation necessary in times of crisis. Al-Husseini et al. (2016) provide evidence of the effectiveness of transformational leadership in promoting the adoption of digital leadership practices, as such leaders focus on vision and disregard immediate transactional benefits. Moreover, such leadership practices foster an inclusive environment that supports and encourages the myriad academic users to adopt digital technologies through collaboration and empathy.

The growing body of literature also demonstrates the overall influence of transformational leadership on employees' performance and satisfaction within organizations (Rouzi et. al, 2022). The impact of transformational leadership practices on internal communication and employee interaction has been documented during the COVID-19 pandemic (Santoso et al., 2022). However, a significant gap remains. The majority of the literature fails to recognize the communication strategies and the implicit Islamic values that leaders in the Indonesian context use. While Islamic leadership literature has acknowledged Islamic leadership frameworks, it is scarce in its use of fundamental Islamic values to communicate digital strategies to the highly religious academic community.

This study proposes a framework that connects transformational leadership theory with local Islamic ethical wisdom. However, this research is particularly concerned with the concept of "implicit ethics". This is because most of the values that leaders are expected to employ merely as religious rhetoric, such as *amanah, fathonah*, and *maslahah*, are more strategic and functional as means of communication. While *Amanah* values the trust and integrity with which leaders ought to communicate the impacts of digital transformation, *Fathonah* values leaders' intelligence and wisdom in strategically communicating during

a crisis. This is consistent with the sustainable, value-sensitive, and culturally attuned leadership of modern higher education.

Consequently, this research aims to answer the following central research question: How does transformational leadership, and the Islamic ethical value of indirect yet implicit integration, advance digital transformation in Indonesian higher education institutions? This question seeks to explore the leadership and communication dimensions that will allow institutions to pivot more humanely, ethically, and digitally.

| Literature Review |

Transformational Leadership in Higher Education

Higher education institutions require leadership that transcends the status quo in the wake of the pandemic's volatility. Idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration are components of transformational leadership, which has been recognized as a vital element in organizational development (Khan et al., 2022). Transformational leadership is effective, particularly in times of crisis, because it fosters high employee engagement through a supportive rather than transactional focus. Transformational leaders motivate employees to perceive challenges as opportunities, thereby sustaining a competitive and market-oriented posture within the university.

Indonesia's digital transformation faces challenges that differ from those in the West. Asmendri et al. (2024) refer to this phenomenon as a "digital shock," in which the transition to online services and tools significantly altered academics' social relations (online social networks). In this context of digital disruption, leaders' challenges and priorities extend beyond technical infrastructure to the complexities of evolving social (cultural) attitudes and human resource competencies (soft skills) to facilitate an effective response to the digital economy. In Indonesia, digital leadership entails leaders mentoring anxious staff, as Akbari and Pratomo (2022) suggest.

If digital transformation is a phenomenon (disruption) in all sectors, there is a communication problem. Santoso et al. (2022) point out that during the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders' internal communication was significantly associated with employees' engagement and resilience, as well as with organizational resilience. Transformational leaders, in this case, facilitate the "human" side of the educational process by focusing on soft relational communication to overcome distance barriers in remote work settings.

Leaders' effectiveness in the Indonesian higher education system is said to increase when they hold local cultural and spiritual values (Amrullah, 2020). Islamic universities employ transformational leadership to enhance lecturers' performance and job satisfaction. There is a high degree of alignment between this leadership style and the context of a religious university. Implicit ethical values are expressed in this leadership style: First, *amanah* (Trust). This is what Arifin and Maunah (2020) call professional integrity, fundamental to organizing trustworthy relations in data and administrative processes of the institution. Second, *fathonah* (Wisdom): This value denotes the virtue of crafting practical ways out of a quandary. Third, *maslahah* (Common Good): This leads the leaders to ensure that their digital policies provide a calm focus during crises and benefit the anchored community.

Moreover, the transformational leadership style, within the domain of "individualized consideration," correlates with characteristics of Islamic women's leadership, such as inclusiveness, participative decision-making, empathy, and wisdom (Rouzi, et.al, 2022). This provides a culturally appropriate approach to inclusivity that empowers women and other members of academia within the community.

Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative approach to capture transformational leadership, digital transformation, and the

interplay of unarticulated ethical concerns in a thorough and meaningful manner. Flick (2014) and Creswell (2014) proposed that the most suitable approach for understanding the social complexities and contextual phenomena of Indonesia's higher education system and its sociocultural milieu was qualitative. A combination of methods, including data triangulation, is employed in the research design to enhance data richness and legitimacy. This design facilitates data validation and provides a multidimensional interpretation of the state of educational leadership in a digitally transforming environment.

The initial step in data collection involved conducting a syste–matic review of the available scholarly literature, governmental policy documents, and institutional strategic plans. This stage was of para–mount importance for integrating existing knowledge and developing a theoretical model that links transformational leadership and models of practice across varying degrees of digital transformation, particularly in the Indonesian context. Moreover, the review was aimed at uncovering the nuanced implicit Islamic ethical principles of leadership, that is, amanah, fathonah, and maslahah, in relation to the Indonesian norms and values, albeit cast in a secular framework (Creswell, 2014). At the same time, document analysis was conducted to situate these leadership practices within institutional policies and digital transformation roadmaps. The analysis identified several themes and crucial lessons that subsequently shaped the interview guide (Flick, 2014).

For empirical data collection, the researcher employed a stratified purposive sampling technique, enabling the selection of participants with specific knowledge bases and skills. Key informants were selected from varying reputable institutions across Indonesia. The respective participants were also considered the most senior academic leaders, including the Directors of the Center for Teaching and Learning, the Heads of Academic and Student Administration, and the Chairs of the Learning Institutions. They were selected for their influential and managerial positions and their direct contact with leading institutions during the transformation.

The primary data-gathering method was semi-structured interviews, which allowed for in situ adjustments to explore specific

topics while still addressing the research's central questions. The interview questions focused on the integration of online and offline communication and the leadership strategies employed during the digitization process, challenges of data-informed decision making, and, most importantly, the indicators of what one might call "implicit ethics" such as the trust (amanah) developed through communication on digital platforms and the wisdom (fathonah) used during crisis communication. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data. This process involved developing codes to identify and analyze similarities and differences in transformational leadership, behaviors, and ethics (Bogdan & DeVault, 2016). The harmonization of these disparate data points through triangulation strengthened the credibility of the research for a deep and rich examination of the facets of transformational leadership that underpin a human-centred digital transformation (Kılıçoglu, 2018; Flick, 2014).

Results and Discussion

These study results indicate that the types of digital transformation successfully achieved by the participating higher learning institutions were not only technological in nature but also involved the adoption of specific leadership and ethical values strategies. The three thematic areas were derived from the three main aspects of communication, namely, intellectual flexibility (Fathonah), trust (Amanah), and system-wide inclusion (Maslahah).

Intellectual Flexibility (*Fathonah*) as a Tool for Managing Digital Disruptions

The "digital shock" of the pandemic showed that leaders were required to make quick strategic changes almost on the fly. The first priority of leaders was to upgrade the technological infrastructure by implementing Learning Management Systems (LMS) and Zoom. However, as the data reveal, technological readiness alone proved insufficient.

The more enduring challenge lay in transforming organizational mindsets and professional cultures to support the sustainable use of digital technologies.

This challenge is evident in Respondent 1's account of culture shock, particularly among senior lecturers who struggled with digital literacy (*gaptek*). The respondent noted, "We upgraded the LMS and enforced the use of SPADA, but the problem was the '*gaptek*' mindset of senior lecturers." This finding indicates that digital disruption is not merely a technical issue but a deeply cultural and pedagogical one. Consequently, leaders were required to shift from a directive, compliance-based leadership style toward an educational and facilitative approach that emphasized guidance, patience, and capacity building.

Instead of taking a hardline approach, the leaders embraced the idea of "creative negotiation." This was emphasized by respondent 2 when it stated that "creative and innovative leadership is non-negotiable. We cannot only take the old ways; new patterns must be found." Such adaptability is a manifestation of *fathonah* (intelligence/wisdom), an Islamic principle. *Fathonah,* in this case, represents not only the abstract form of intelligence but also the wisdom to steer the enhancement of individuals' competencies without exclusion. Leaders implemented "Intellectual Stimulation," a component of Bass and Riggio's theory, to address the problematic status quo. This is consistent with Al-Husseini et al. (2016), who posited that transformational leaders cultivate innovation by shifting attention toward long-term visions rather than short-term transactional goals (Ingsih, et. al, 2021).

Furthermore, this finding resonates with Asmendri et al. (2024), who contend that successful digital leadership in Indonesia hinges on overcoming cultural inertia through the deliberate construction of digital competencies. However, this study extends their argument by demonstrating that such competency-building is most effective when grounded in ethical leadership values. By operationalizing Fathonah as intellectual flexibility, leaders were able to navigate digital disruption not as a rupture but as a transformative learning moment—one that

redefined authority, pedagogy, and institutional culture in more dialogical and inclusive terms.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Fathonah functions as a critical ethical bridge between Islamic leadership principles and contemporary digital governance. It enables leaders to respond to crisis-induced disruption with prudence, creativity, and moral sensitivity, ensuring that technological transformation remains aligned with human development and collective well-being.

Casting *Amanah* (Nurturing Relationships) As A Principle of Integrity for Managing Virtually

A delicate issue emerges from these interviews: how to manage professional integrity when hypotheses are supervised. A possible approach for leaders to address this issue was to reconceptualise employees' responsibilities as a spiritual and ethical concern through the lens of *amanah* (trust). In this regard, Respondent 3 firmly stated, "The fundamental thing is *amanah*. Leadership is a mandate from God … To exemplify (Uswatun Hasanah) is the most fundamental component in order to make the employees work with integrity even when there is no supervision." This statement situates leadership authority within a moral cosmology in which accountability is ultimately vertical—directed toward God—before it becomes horizontal, directed toward institutional superiors. Within this framework, integrity is cultivated through moral exemplarity rather than surveillance, positioning leaders as ethical role models whose conduct sets the normative standard for organizational behavior.

It is universal, and surprisingly, so is this value. Respondent 4 from a secular institution aligns with this through the concepts of 'Integrity and Professionalism' and the Javanese principle of "*Ing Ngarso Sung Tulodo*" as a means of establishing trust. Leaders instilled self-accountability by redefining the digital work as 'trust' rather than a contractual obligation. This indicates, as Arifin and Maunah (2020) espouse, that in a country such as Indonesia, classified as a high-context culture, ethical and spiritual preferences for remote governance extend beyond mere supervision. These findings support the basic

hypothesis that Amanah underpins professional integrity in educational leadership, as espoused by Arifin and Maunah (2020).

Nonetheless, the data also revealed an anomaly in the effecti–veness of this trust in purely digital contexts. Respondent 4 remarked on the decrease in the deeper level of engagement, indicating, "There is a loss of the human touch. We can facilitate the materials, but we cannot easily measure the learner's understanding and character forma–tion online." This illustrates that, although Amanah is proclaimed, its confirmation in a digital context remains a recurring challenge.

This finding constitutes a significant contribution of the present study. It suggests that *amanah*, while foundational for virtual leadership integrity, cannot function optimally in isolation from embodied and relational dimensions of leadership. Digital governance may successfully transmit tasks and information, but it struggles to fully convey moral presence and ethical intimacy. Consequently, *amanah* in virtual contexts remains aspirational and continuously negotiated rather than fully stabilized.

Taken together, these findings indicate that *amanah* serves both as a moral anchor and a relational challenge in digitally mediated leadership. It provides a powerful ethical framework for nurturing integrity without surveillance, yet simultaneously exposes the limitations of trust-based governance when human interaction is technologically mediated. This tension invites further theorization on how Islamic leadership ethics can be operationalized through hybrid models that combine digital efficiency with intentional practices of relational presence.

Digital *Maslahah*: Prioritizing Human Connection, Well-Being, and Inclusivity

Finally, and perhaps most distinctively, is the *maslahah* (collective benefit). In this study, leaders prioritized the mental well-being and inclusivity of the academic community over operational effectiveness. Respondent 1 described this as, "Servant Leadership… vision, but serves the needs of the community." This reflects the shift from top-down directives to supportive guidance.

To mitigate the "loss of human touch" described earlier, leaders employed specific strategies to enhance social cohesion. Respondent 2 noted that the "blended learning" approach was not adopted for practicality but to enhance the "emotional bond" that the total lockdown had erased. Leaders did not practice "Individualized Consideration" when recognizing that staff digital fatigue was consequential. The transition from "forced digitalization" to "human-centric digitalization" reflects an advancement in leadership communication. This aligns with the findings of Santoso et al. (2022), which state that human-centric internal communication is essential to sustaining engagement and resilience during crises. As shown in Figure 2, the Digital Maslahah Model explains the success of higher education digital transformation and outlines how success is driven not only by advanced technological capabilities but also by transformational leadership that incorporates value-based communication, particularly the Islamic value of ethics. Transformational leadership is an enabler who embodies the Fathonah, Amanah, and Maslahah leadership values and incorporates them in digital communication. Ultimately, by bridging the gap between high-tech digital infrastructures and high-touch human elements in digital interactions, empathetic, educative, and welfare-oriented leaders facilitate an ethical, inclusive, and sustainable digital transformation.

Figure 2: Digital *Maslahah* Model
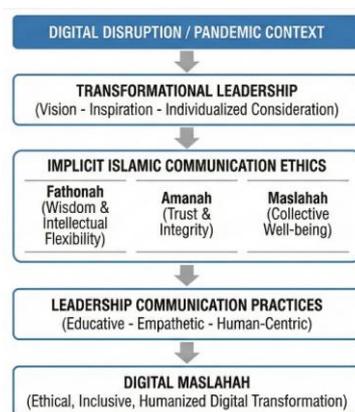
Research Novelty and Limitations

This study's novelty lies in positioning Islamic ethical values not as explicit doctrines, but as implicit communication strategies that enable transformational leadership to humanize digital transformation in higher education. The sample is restricted to four universities in Jakarta, thereby limiting generalizability to rural or public universities. Moreover, the leaders' data are self-reported and therefore susceptible to social desirability bias, the tendency for respondents to overstate the positivity or ethicality of their leadership.

Conclusion

This study consolidates and confirms the importance and role of transformational leadership in higher education in Indonesia during the pandemic. This study indicates that the most critical factor in the success of institutional digital transformation is not the digital (technological) infrastructure but rather relationships with leadership that communicate and integrate Islamic values, particularly ethical leadership. By focusing on motivational, inspirational, and innovative factors, leaders circumvented barriers and defensive strategies and cultivated positive, adaptive, and resilient outcomes. The Islamic values of Fathonah, Amanah, and Maslahah serve as a bridging culture, making the process and experience of digitization, which most participants regarded as foreign and alien, more acceptable and relatable.

In multiple respects, this study constitutes a positive contribution by drawing attention to, focusing on, and providing assets and benefits for leadership internationally, particularly by addressing enduring gaps in theory and empirical research. First, the extension and redefinition of Islamic leadership as Digital Maslahah: digital infrastructure and technology are not for the sake of efficiency but for the sake of collective good and well-being. The second focus is the establishment of the ethical values in question as a

communication strategy, resulting in a dominant leadership strategy that is universal and applicable across contexts, particularly in non-religious private institutions, which fall within the framework and sphere of transformational leadership. The third aspect, contribution to the theory of communication in crisis, is refined through the integration of the concepts of Santoso et al. (2022), who argue that a values-based communication framework is a key driver of engagement, particularly among employees in crisis. Given these conclusions, future research should examine the enduring effects of transformational leadership across three channels. First, longitudinal studies are needed to determine whether the "trust-based" (Amanah) remote working culture continues in the post-pandemic "new normal." Then, including public universities in Java to assess whether dependence on implicit ethical values is similar across other organizational cultures and regions. Lastly, additional studies are needed to examine the relationship between specific styles of ethical communication and lecturer digital burnout, using quantitative methods to enhance the external validity of the findings and support a sustainable digital transformation.

Declaration of Generative AI Use
Generative AI tools, including Grammarly and Google Gemini, were used solely to support linguistic refinement. All conceptual development, theoretical interpretations, argumentation, and final analytical decisions are the independent and original contributions of the researcher.

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