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**Transformational Islamic Leadership and Religious School Culture:  
An Interpretative Phenomenological Study in General Islamic  
Schools**

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study examines the meaning and practice of transformational Islamic leadership in strengthening religious school culture at SMA Al-Azhar 3 Bandar Lampung. Grounded in the premise that religious culture is not merely a set of ritual activities but a lived system of values shaping moral consciousness, this research adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore how leadership practices are experienced and internalized by school actors. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and document analysis involving the principal, vice principals, religious guidance teachers, and students. The findings reveal that transformational Islamic leadership operates through three interrelated mechanisms: spiritual role modeling that establishes moral legitimacy, empathetic and persuasive communication that fosters reflective moral awareness, and institutional policies that embed Islamic values into daily school routines. The study demonstrates that religious culture is constructed not through formal regulation alone, but through lived experiences, consistent moral example, and value-based institutional structures.*

Penelitian ini mengkaji makna dan praktik kepemimpinan Islam transformatif dalam memperkuat budaya keagamaan sekolah di SMA Al-Azhar 3 Bandar

Lampung. Berangkat dari pandangan bahwa budaya keagamaan tidak sekadar merupakan rangkaian aktivitas ritual, melainkan sistem nilai yang hidup dan membentuk kesadaran moral, penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologi interpretatif untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana praktik kepemimpinan dialami dan diinternalisasi oleh warga sekolah. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan analisis dokumen yang melibatkan kepala sekolah, wakil kepala sekolah, guru pembina keagamaan, dan peserta didik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan Islam transformatif beroperasi melalui tiga mekanisme yang saling terkait, yaitu keteladanan spiritual yang membangun legitimasi moral, komunikasi empatik dan persuasif yang menumbuhkan kesadaran moral reflektif, serta kebijakan institusional yang mengintegrasikan nilai-nilai Islam ke dalam rutinitas sekolah sehari-hari. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa budaya keagamaan terbentuk bukan semata-mata melalui regulasi formal, melainkan melalui pengalaman hidup, keteladanan moral yang konsisten, dan struktur kelembagaan berbasis nilai.

**Keywords:** *Character Formation; Interpretative Phenomenology; Islamic Education; Religious School Culture; Transformational Islamic Leadership.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Religious school culture has increasingly been recognized as a critical foundation for character formation and moral development in educational institutions, particularly within Islamic education systems. Beyond ritualistic practices, religious culture functions as a structured constellation of values, norms, and habitual behaviors that guide social interaction and ethical decision-making within school communities (Abdullahi, 2024; Shah & Asghar, 2023; Solomon et al., 2012). In this sense, religious culture operates not merely as symbolic religiosity, but as a living moral ecology that shapes students' spiritual identity and social responsibility in everyday educational practices.

Within Islamic education, religious culture is conceptualized as a process of value internalization that unfolds through continuous

habituation, moral exemplification, and the cultivation of a supportive socio-spiritual environment (Iqbal Mustakim et al., 2024; Liu, 2025). Value internalization is not confined to formal religious instruction; rather, it is embedded in the total school experience, including interpersonal relationships, institutional routines, and implicit moral messages conveyed through daily interactions. Through repeated and structured practices, religious values gradually form a *habitus religiosus* a disposition that orients individuals toward ethical conduct as a taken-for-granted mode of action (Collins et al., 2021; Davies & Thate, 2017; Mazid et al., 2025).

However, contemporary socio-cultural dynamics pose significant challenges to the sustainability of religious school culture. Globalization, digital media exposure, and pluralistic value systems increasingly introduce moral narratives that may conflict with Islamic ethical principles (Koehrsen & Burchardt, 2024; Meerangani et al., 2023; Richards et al., 2024). Moreover, students' diverse family backgrounds and prior religious socialization result in uneven readiness for value internalization, complicating efforts to cultivate a shared moral orientation within schools. These conditions indicate that strengthening religious culture cannot rely solely on normative instruction or disciplinary mechanisms, but requires transformative strategies that engage students' moral consciousness and lived experiences.

At this juncture, school leadership emerges as a decisive factor in shaping and sustaining religious culture. Principals are not merely administrative actors; they function as moral leaders who influence institutional values, norms, and collective orientations (Argyropoulou & Lintzerakou, 2025; Heim et al., 2026; Sumi et al., 2025). Leadership grounded in spiritual integrity and ethical consistency provides moral legitimacy that enables values to be embraced voluntarily rather than enforced formally. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that moral authority rooted in exemplification exerts a deeper and more enduring influence on school culture than procedural authority alone (Islam, 2024; Liden et al., 2025; Norlin, 2020).

Transformational Islamic leadership offers a conceptual framework capable of addressing these demands. This leadership paradigm emphasizes moral inspiration, empathetic communication, and collective empowerment, aligning organizational goals with transcendent ethical values (Alowais & Suliman, 2025; Eva et al., 2019; Heim et al., 2026). Within Islamic educational discourse, transformational leadership is further enriched by prophetic values

(*uswah hasanah*), humanization, and spiritual consciousness, positioning leaders as facilitators of moral growth rather than controllers of behavior (Ratnawati et al., 2025; Wahyudienie et al., 2024). Through this lens, leadership becomes a relational and transformative process that cultivates shared moral commitment across the school community.

Despite growing scholarly attention to Islamic leadership and school culture, existing studies predominantly adopt normative, managerial, or quantitative approaches that emphasize outcomes rather than lived experiences. Research often examines leadership effectiveness, teacher performance, or policy implementation, while offering limited insight into how transformational Islamic leadership is *experienced, interpreted, and enacted* in the everyday cultural life of schools (Brooks & Brooks, 2024; Efendi & Rifa'i, 2025; Leithwood, 2021). Moreover, phenomenological investigations that explore the subjective meanings of leadership practices in shaping religious school culture particularly in general Islamic schools navigating modern urban contexts remain scarce.

SMA Al-Azhar 3 Bandar Lampung presents a compelling case within this gap. Situated at the intersection of Islamic identity, modern educational demands, and urban socio-cultural dynamics, the school faces the dual challenge of preserving religious values while adapting to contemporary educational expectations (Couva et al., 2024; Ramli et al., 2025; Wahid, 2024). Understanding how transformational Islamic leadership operates within this context offers valuable insights into the mechanisms through which religious culture is constructed, sustained, and internalized at the institutional level.

Based on these considerations, this study addresses the following research gap: while prior studies have explored Islamic leadership and religious culture separately or normatively, there is limited empirical understanding of how transformational Islamic leadership is meaningfully experienced and practiced in strengthening religious school culture from the perspectives of school actors themselves.

Therefore, this study aims to reconstruct the meaning and practice of transformational Islamic leadership in strengthening religious culture at SMA Al-Azhar 3 Bandar Lampung using an interpretative phenomenological approach. By examining leaders' and teachers' lived experiences, this research seeks to contribute a nuanced, experience-based understanding of Islamic leadership as a cultural and moral force within contemporary Islamic schooling.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Religious school culture constitutes a central dimension of Islamic educational institutions, functioning as a moral framework that shapes students' values, behaviors, and spiritual identities. In Islamic pedagogy, school culture is not merely an organizational atmosphere but a system of meanings embedded in daily practices, social interactions, and institutional norms (Mothafar et al., 2024; Sellami et al., 2022). This culture manifests through shared religious routines, ethical standards, and collective commitments that guide both formal learning and informal socialization processes.

Scholars argue that religious culture in schools operates as a mechanism of value internalization, where Islamic principles are gradually transformed into lived dispositions through habituation and social reinforcement (Taylor & Dunstone, 1996; Wiysahnyuy & Valentine, 2023). Such internalization does not rely solely on cognitive transmission of religious knowledge but emphasizes affective engagement and behavioral consistency. Through repeated participation in religious practices such as congregational prayer, Qur'anic recitation, and ethical conduct students develop a *habitus religius* that integrates faith into their everyday decision making (Masngut et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, sustaining religious school culture has become increasingly complex in contemporary contexts. Global cultural flows, digital media exposure, and pluralistic social environments introduce competing moral narratives that may dilute or challenge Islamic values within school settings (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2011; Vedeckina & Borgonovi, 2021). These dynamics necessitate deliberate cultural strategies that move beyond ritual formalism toward deeper moral consciousness and identity formation.

Leadership plays a decisive role in shaping and sustaining school culture, particularly within value-oriented institutions such as Islamic schools. Transformational leadership theory conceptualizes leadership as a process of inspiring shared vision, fostering moral commitment, and empowering members to transcend self-interest for collective goals (Karimi et al., 2023; Ravet-Brown et al., 2024; Steinmann et al., 2018). In educational settings, transformational leaders influence not only organizational performance but also the ethical climate and cultural orientation of schools.

In Islamic education, transformational leadership is enriched by religious and prophetic values that emphasize *uswah hasanah*, justice, compassion, and spiritual integrity (Ming et al., 2021; Rammidi, 2024). Islamic transformational leaders are expected to

embody the values they promote, positioning personal conduct as a primary source of moral authority. Empirical studies indicate that leadership grounded in spiritual authenticity generates higher levels of trust, commitment, and value alignment among teachers and students (Ming et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2023; Xu & Pang, 2024).

Unlike transactional leadership, which emphasizes compliance through rules and sanctions, transformational Islamic leadership seeks to cultivate inner awareness and voluntary adherence to values. This orientation aligns leadership practice with the broader objectives of Islamic education, namely character formation, spiritual growth, and social responsibility (Karim et al., 2025; Mohd Isa & Md Rami, 2025).

Moral exemplification constitutes a foundational mechanism through which leadership influences religious school culture. Islamic educational philosophy underscores that values are most effectively transmitted through lived examples rather than verbal instruction alone (Abdalla, 2025; Memon et al., 2024). When school leaders consistently demonstrate ethical behavior, spiritual discipline, and interpersonal integrity, they create moral credibility that legitimizes institutional values in the eyes of school members.

Complementing exemplification, empathetic and dialogical communication functions as a critical pathway for value internalization. Communication that prioritizes listening, understanding, and moral reasoning fosters relational trust and reflective awareness among students and teachers (Haile et al., 2024; Phan, 2025). Such communication shifts moral education from an authoritarian mode to a transformative process, where individuals engage with values as meaningful components of their identity rather than external obligations.

Research in Islamic educational leadership suggests that empathetic communication strengthens students' moral agency by enabling them to comprehend the ethical rationale underlying religious norms (Agbaria, 2024; Hastasari et al., 2022; Wahyudienie et al., 2024). Through dialogical engagement, values are not merely obeyed but consciously embraced.

While leadership exemplification and communication operate at interpersonal levels, institutional policies play a crucial role in sustaining religious culture structurally. Value based policies translate Islamic principles into organizational routines, regulations, and programs that shape daily school life (Rohmatulloh et al., 2023; Urrila & Eva, 2024). Practices such as mandatory congregational prayer, structured religious mentoring, and ethical codes of conduct function as institutional supports for moral habituation.

The institutionalization of values ensures cultural continuity beyond individual leadership tenure. Studies indicate that schools with clearly articulated value-based policies exhibit greater cultural stability and resilience amid social change (Khatri et al., 2024; Posklinsky et al., 2025; Zaidan et al., 2025). In this sense, policy operates as a mechanism of cultural reproduction, embedding religious values into the organizational fabric of the school.

Existing literature demonstrates that religious school culture, transformational leadership, moral exemplification, empathetic communication, and value-based policy are interrelated components of effective Islamic education. However, most studies approach these elements through normative frameworks, quantitative surveys, or managerial analyses, emphasizing outcomes such as performance, discipline, or compliance (Dauerer, 2025; Verburg et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2023).

There remains a notable lack of phenomenological research that explores how transformational Islamic leadership is *experienced*, *interpreted*, and *meaningfully enacted* by school actors in the process of strengthening religious culture. Particularly limited are studies situated in general Islamic schools operating within modern urban environments, where religious identity must continuously negotiate contemporary social dynamics.

Accordingly, this study positions itself to fill this gap by employing an interpretative phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of school leaders and teachers in practicing transformational Islamic leadership as a cultural force. By focusing on meaning-making processes rather than prescriptive models, this research contributes a deeper, experience-based understanding of how religious school culture is constructed and sustained within contemporary Islamic education.

## **METHODS**

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of school actors regarding transformational Islamic leadership in strengthening religious school culture. A qualitative design was deemed appropriate because the focus of the study was not to measure variables or test hypotheses, but to understand how leadership practices are perceived, interpreted, and internalized within the everyday socio-spiritual life of the school community. Interpretative phenomenology was specifically selected to capture the depth of subjective experiences while acknowledging the

active role of the researcher in interpreting participants' accounts within their cultural and institutional contexts.

The research was conducted at SMA Al-Azhar 3 Bandar Lampung, an Islamic secondary school situated within an urban educational environment characterized by the intersection of religious identity, modern academic demands, and socio-cultural diversity. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement and experiential knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation. The participants consisted of the school principal, vice principals, religious guidance teachers, and students. The inclusion of multiple participant groups was intended to provide a holistic understanding of leadership practices and cultural processes from different institutional perspectives. Data saturation was achieved when no new significant meanings or themes emerged from subsequent interviews.

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted to elicit participants' personal experiences, reflections, and interpretations regarding leadership practices and religious culture within the school. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility to probe emerging meanings while maintaining consistency across participants. Participant observation was carried out during routine religious activities, such as congregational prayers, Qur'anic recitation sessions, mentoring programs, and daily interactions among school members. This method enabled the researcher to examine the alignment between articulated values and observable practices, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings. Document analysis included institutional texts such as the school's vision and mission statements, policy documents, codes of conduct, and religious program guidelines, which provided insight into the formal structures supporting the religious culture.

Data analysis followed an iterative and interpretative process consistent with phenomenological inquiry. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were analyzed through multiple stages of coding. Initial open coding was conducted to identify significant statements and meaning units related to leadership practices and religious culture. These codes were then refined and clustered into broader thematic categories through axial coding, allowing patterns and relationships among meanings to emerge. Selective coding was subsequently employed to integrate the themes into coherent interpretative narratives that reflected the essence of participants' lived experiences. Throughout the analysis, the researcher

engaged in reflexive interpretation, moving recursively between the data and emerging themes to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed. Credibility was enhanced through methodological triangulation by combining interviews, observations, and document analysis. Prolonged engagement in the research setting and member checking were conducted to confirm the accuracy of interpretations and to minimize researcher bias. Dependability was addressed by maintaining a transparent audit trail of data collection and analysis procedures, while confirmability was supported through reflexive journaling that documented the researcher's assumptions and interpretative decisions. Ethical considerations were upheld throughout the study, including obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, and respecting participants' rights to withdraw from the study at any stage.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study are organized into three major thematic categories that emerged from the interpretative phenomenological analysis. These themes represent the core mechanisms through which transformational Islamic leadership strengthens religious school culture at SMA Al-Azhar 3 Bandar Lampung.

### **Spiritual Role Modeling as the Foundation of Religious Culture**

The first theme indicates that spiritual role modeling by the principal constitutes the primary foundation of religious culture formation. The principal consistently demonstrated religious devotion and ethical conduct through regular participation in congregational prayers, leading prayers and supplications before school activities, and maintaining humility and moral integrity in daily interactions.

One participant emphasized this commitment by stating, "I cannot merely instruct others; I must be the first to practice what I expect from them." This statement reflects the principal's awareness that leadership legitimacy derives from example rather than authority. Teachers and students perceived this consistency as authentic, which fostered trust and moral inspiration across the school community.

This pattern shows that leadership influence was exercised through moral presence rather than coercion. Spiritual consistency created an ethical climate in which religious values were naturally imitated, forming the emotional and moral basis of school culture.

### **Empathetic and Persuasive Communication in Value Internalization**

The second theme highlights empathetic communication as a central strategy for internalizing religious values. Moral guidance was conducted through dialogical and humanistic approaches, emphasizing understanding before correction. Teachers and school leaders prioritized listening to students' perspectives, emotional conditions, and personal backgrounds prior to offering advice or guidance.

As expressed by a religious guidance teacher, "We listen first before advising." This approach transformed moral education into a relational process, allowing students to engage reflectively with religious values. Rather than being positioned as objects of discipline, students were treated as moral subjects capable of understanding and internalizing ethical meaning. This communicative pattern shifted moral education from rule enforcement toward consciousness development, enabling values to be embraced as personal convictions rather than external obligations.

### **Institutionalization of Islamic Values through School Policy**

The third theme demonstrates that religious culture was strengthened through systematic institutionalization of Islamic values. School policies, schedules, and regulations were explicitly designed to reflect Islamic moral principles. Programs such as morning Qur'anic recitation, congregational prayers, spiritual mentoring, and ethical codes of conduct were embedded within the formal structure of the school.

A vice principal explained, "Every decision must reflect moral benefit." This illustrates that policy formulation was guided by ethical considerations rather than administrative efficiency alone. Religious activities were not treated as supplementary programs but as core mechanisms of character formation. The institutionalization of values ensured continuity and sustainability of religious culture, reducing dependence on individual leadership figures and enabling values to be reproduced across student generations

### **Thematic Summary of Findings**

The relationships among the themes, their cultural functions, and their impacts are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Thematic Summary of Transformational Islamic Leadership

Theme	Cultural Function	Impact on School Members
Spiritual Role Modeling	Moral legitimacy	Inspires voluntary value adoption
Empathetic Communication	Formation of moral awareness	Values internalized through reflection
Islamic Value-Based Policy	Cultural sustainability	Values become collective habits

The findings demonstrate that transformational Islamic leadership functions as a holistic system integrating moral exemplification, relational communication, and institutional structures. Leadership in this context transcends administrative roles and operates as a process of collective moral consciousness formation.

### **Moral Role Modeling as Ethical Legitimacy**

Spiritual role modeling emerged as the most fundamental source of moral legitimacy. Consistent religious practice and ethical conduct positioned the principal as a living representation of Islamic values. This aligns with the concept of *uswah hasanah*, where moral authority is established through behavioral consistency rather than verbal instruction. When leaders embody the values they promote, these values gain symbolic power and are internalized more effectively by school members. The affective influence of role modeling fostered trust and voluntary participation in religious practices, demonstrating that character formation is most effective when values are observed and experienced directly.

### **Empathetic Communication and the Development of Moral Consciousness**

Empathetic communication served as a critical mechanism for transforming compliance into consciousness. Dialogical guidance enabled students to understand the moral reasoning behind religious norms, shifting character education from external regulation toward internal awareness. Through reflective conversations, students were encouraged to recognize religious values as meaningful components of their personal identity. This finding confirms that moral development is strengthened when education is grounded in human relationships and emotional understanding rather than authoritarian control.

### **Islamic Value-Based Policy and Cultural Sustainability**

Institutional policy functioned as a structural reinforcement of religious culture. By embedding Islamic values into daily routines, regulations, and programs, the school ensured that religious practices

became habitual and enduring. Repetition of structured religious activities contributed to the formation of a collective religious habitus, in which values were practiced automatically as part of everyday school life. Importantly, institutionalization ensured cultural continuity beyond individual leadership tenures, allowing religious culture to be preserved and transmitted systematically

### Integration of the Three Pillars

The interaction among spiritual role modeling, empathetic communication, and value-based policy forms a cohesive ecosystem of religious culture. Table 2 illustrates the functional integration of these pillars.

Pillar	Value Function	Level of Influence
Moral Role Modeling	Builds trust and inspiration	Affective-Psychological
Empathetic Communication	Develops reflective awareness	Cognitive-Moral
Islamic Value-Based Policy	Ensures cultural continuity	Structural-Institutional

This integration demonstrates that religious culture cannot be sustained through a single mechanism. Without role modeling, communication loses moral credibility; without empathetic communication, policies become rigid; and without policy, values lack sustainability.

### Conceptual Model of Transformational Islamic Leadership

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model of transformational Islamic leadership derived from the findings.

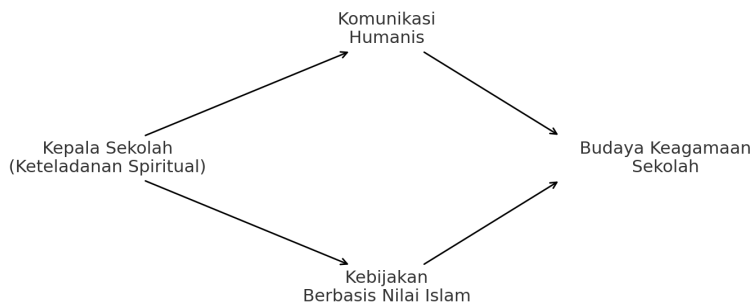


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Transformational Islamic Leadership in Strengthening Religious School Culture

The figure illustrates three interrelated components: (1) the principal as a source of spiritual role modeling, (2) empathetic and humanistic communication as a medium of value internalization, and (3) Islamic value-based policy as a structural support system. Arrows

indicate reciprocal relationships among components, emphasizing that religious culture emerges from their continuous interaction rather than linear causality. This model confirms that religious school culture is a living system shaped by leadership behavior, relational processes, and institutional structures operating simultaneously.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study resonate with and extend previous research on Islamic leadership and religious school culture, while also offering distinctive contributions. Prior studies consistently emphasize that school principals play a crucial role in shaping religious culture through leadership behavior and value orientation (Fisher, 2021; Leithwood, 2021; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Similar to these studies, the present research confirms that leadership influence is not limited to administrative control but is deeply rooted in moral authority. However, while earlier works largely conceptualize leadership influence normatively or descriptively, this study provides phenomenological evidence showing how moral authority is experienced and interpreted by school actors as a lived reality rather than a formal expectation.

The central role of spiritual role modeling identified in this study aligns with findings by Schwartz et al., (2025) and Eva et al., (2019), who argue that character formation is most effective when leaders exemplify values consistently. Nevertheless, the present study advances this argument by demonstrating that role modeling functions as a source of moral legitimacy, not merely as an instructional strategy. Participants did not describe the principal's behavior as an obligation to be followed, but as an inspiring moral presence that generated voluntary commitment. This experiential dimension of legitimacy is rarely articulated explicitly in earlier leadership studies, which often focus on observable behaviors without examining their subjective moral impact.

The importance of empathetic and dialogical communication corroborates research by Mincu et al., (2024), Heim et al., (2026), and Granello, (2025), who highlight relational and humanistic approaches in moral and leadership development. However, previous studies generally frame empathetic communication as a pedagogical technique or leadership skill. In contrast, this study reveals that empathetic communication operates as a transformative moral space in which students reinterpret religious values as personally meaningful. This finding shifts the understanding of communication from a functional

tool to a moral interactional process that actively reshapes students' ethical self-awareness.

The institutionalization of Islamic values through policy echoes findings from MacNeil et al., (2009) and Liddicoat et al., (2018), which emphasize the importance of structural support in sustaining school culture. Yet, while these studies primarily stress policy effectiveness and organizational stability, the present research highlights policy as a mechanism of cultural reproduction. Religious routines embedded in school regulations were experienced by participants not as rigid obligations, but as collective habits that gradually shaped identity. This insight contributes a sociocultural dimension to leadership discourse by showing how policy, repetition, and meaning interact to form a religious habitus.

Compared to studies that adopt quantitative or managerial perspectives on Islamic leadership Sodiq et al., (2024), this research offers a deeper interpretative understanding of how leadership practices are internalized at the level of lived experience. Quantitative studies often measure leadership effectiveness through performance indicators or attitudinal scales, whereas this study demonstrates that the success of transformational Islamic leadership lies in its ability to harmonize emotional trust, moral reasoning, and institutional consistency. This integrative understanding is largely absent from prior empirical works.

The novelty of this study lies in its reconstruction of transformational Islamic leadership as an interconnected moral ecosystem rather than a set of leadership traits or strategies. By integrating spiritual role modeling, empathetic communication, and value-based policy into a single interpretative framework, this research moves beyond fragmented analyses found in previous studies. Furthermore, the use of an interpretative phenomenological approach allows this study to foreground the subjective meanings of leadership practices, thereby contributing a methodological novelty to Islamic education leadership research, which remains dominated by normative and survey-based designs.

The theoretical implications of this study suggest that transformational Islamic leadership should be understood as a culturally embedded process that operates simultaneously at affective, cognitive-moral, and structural levels. This perspective enriches leadership theory by positioning values not as abstract ideals but as lived practices shaped through interaction and habituation. Practically, the findings imply that school leaders seeking to strengthen religious culture should prioritize consistency of personal example, cultivate

empathetic communication practices, and institutionalize values through coherent policies. Leadership training programs in Islamic education should therefore emphasize moral reflexivity and relational competence alongside managerial skills.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the research was conducted in a single Islamic secondary school, which limits the generalizability of the findings across different institutional contexts. Second, as a phenomenological study, the findings rely on participants' subjective interpretations, which may be influenced by social desirability or institutional loyalty. Third, this study focused primarily on leadership and teacher perspectives; future research could incorporate parental or alumni perspectives to enrich the understanding of cultural sustainability beyond the school environment.

Future studies may also adopt comparative or longitudinal designs to examine how transformational Islamic leadership practices evolve over time or across different types of Islamic educational institutions. Integrating phenomenological insights with quantitative measures may further strengthen the empirical foundation of leadership research in Islamic education.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that strengthening religious school culture at SMA Al-Azhar 3 Bandar Lampung is not an incidental outcome of religious activities, but the result of a sustained and value-driven leadership process. Transformational Islamic leadership functions as an integrative moral system in which spiritual role modeling, empathetic communication, and Islamic value-based institutional policies interact to shape collective ethical consciousness. The principal's consistent embodiment of religious values establishes moral legitimacy that inspires voluntary commitment rather than formal compliance, while empathetic and dialogical communication enables students and teachers to internalize values as reflective moral awareness. At the institutional level, the formalization of Islamic values within school policies and routines ensures cultural continuity and resilience beyond individual leadership tenure. Through a phenomenological lens, this study demonstrates that religious culture is constructed through lived experiences, relational trust, and habituated practices, thereby contributing an experience-based understanding of transformational Islamic leadership as a dynamic cultural force within contemporary Islamic education.

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