

Cultivating Positive Relationships in Pesantren: An Indigenous Perspective on Positive Education

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Abstrak

Relasi positif merupakan salah satu pilar utama dalam berbagai kerangka *positive education* kontemporer, seperti PERMA, PROSPER, EPOCH, dan SEARCH. Namun, bukti empiris mengenai bagaimana relasi positif dikembangkan dalam konteks pendidikan Islam, khususnya di pesantren, masih terbatas, terutama dari perspektif psikologi *indigenous*. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi bentuk-bentuk relasi positif yang berkembang dalam kultur pesantren serta mengkaji kontribusinya terhadap perkembangan psikologis dan sosial santri. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan melibatkan 177 santri sebagai partisipan. Data dikumpulkan melalui *open-ended questionnaire* dan dianalisis menggunakan *thematic analysis*. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa relasi positif dibangun secara struktural melalui interaksi interkonektif antara santri dengan kiai, guru, pembina asrama, dan sesama santri. Kontribusi teoritis utama penelitian ini terletak pada perluasan konsep *positive education* melalui perspektif relasional berbasis spiritual-komunal. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa nilai-nilai relasional khas seperti kedekatan spiritual dengan kiai, keteladanan (*uswah hasanah*), kepedulian proaktif pembina asrama, dan persaudaraan komunal antar-santri dapat berfungsi sebagai fondasi penting bagi terciptanya rasa aman psikologis, resiliensi, regulasi diri, dan *flourishing* santri. Praktik berbasis kearifan lokal ini memberikan karakteristik khas yang membedakan lingkungan pesantren dari lembaga pendidikan konvensional pada umumnya. Temuan ini memberikan landasan konseptual yang berharga bagi pengembangan praktik pendidikan yang responsif budaya demi mendukung kesejahteraan psikologis siswa dalam ekosistem masyarakat kolektif-religius.

Kata Kunci: Relasi Positif, Positive Education, Psikologi Indigenous, Pesantren, Flourishing.

Abstract

Positive relationships constitute a core pillar in various contemporary positive education frameworks, such as PERMA, PROSPER, EPOCH, and SEARCH. However, empirical evidence on how positive relationships are cultivated within Islamic educational contexts specifically the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) remains scarce, particularly through an indigenous psychology lens. This study explores the distinct forms of positive relationships embedded within the *pesantren* culture and examines their contributions to students' (*santri*) psychological and social development. Employing a qualitative approach, data were gathered from 177 *santri* via open-ended questionnaires and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that positive relationships are structurally built upon interconnected interactions between *santri* and their *Kiai* (spiritual leaders), teachers, hostel wardens, and peers. Crucially, the primary theoretical contribution of this study lies in expanding the conceptual boundaries of positive education through a spiritual-communal relational perspective. The findings suggest that indigenous relational values namely spiritual closeness with the *kiai*, *uswah hasanah* (exemplary moral conduct), proactive supervisor care, and communal peer brotherhood serve as vital foundations for fostering psychological safety, resilience, self-regulation, and student flourishing. These practices provide distinct characteristics that differentiate the *pesantren* from conventional educational institutions. Consequently, this study offers a valuable conceptual framework for developing culturally responsive educational practices to support student well-being within collectivist-religious educational ecosystems.

Keywords: *Positive Relationships, Positive Education, Indigenous Psychology, Pesantren, Flourishing.*

Introduction

Positive relationships are a fundamental pillar of positive psychology and are widely recognized as essential contributors to human well-being (Luque-Reca *et al.*, 2022). Through reciprocal exchanges of emotional, social, and instrumental support, these relationships enhance psychological functioning and facilitate individual adaptation across diverse social contexts (Bakalim & Karçkay, 2016; Mertika *et al.*, 2020). Previous research demonstrates that supportive social environments foster crucial interpersonal skills, which subsequently generate higher levels of well-being (Segrin & Taylor, 2007). As contemporary educational institutions increasingly seek to promote student flourishing alongside academic achievement, understanding the cultivation of positive relationships has become a central concern within positive education. However, existing knowledge remains heavily derived from Western social and educational contexts, leaving a significant empirical gap regarding how relational dynamics are socially and culturally constructed within distinct religious educational communities (Roy *et al.*, 2018).

To address this limitation, positive relationships must be examined through complementary theoretical lenses. Ryff (1989) conceptualizes positive relationships as warm, trusting, and satisfying interpersonal connections characterized by empathy, compassion, and mutual concern. Extending this view, Feeney and Collins (2014) position these bonds as developmental resources that provide vital support during adversity while emboldening individuals to pursue opportunities for personal growth. Collectively, these perspectives frame positive relationships as dynamic processes through which individuals construct mutual meaning and sustain healthy social functioning. While these conceptualizations have profoundly informed positive education, their roots in Western psychological traditions mean they often prioritize individualistic autonomy. Consequently, they may not fully capture the relational nuances embedded within communal and spiritually oriented educational models.

The contextual variation of positive relationships is further evident across influential frameworks of positive education, including PERMA, PROSPER, EPOCH, and SEARCH (Lou & Xu, 2022). Although these models share the foundational assumption that supportive relationships are essential for resilience and psychological health, their manifestations differ significantly by environment. In peer groups, positive relationships manifest as trust and mutual support (Li *et al.*, 2024); in workplaces, they leverage collaboration and institutional trust; and in schools, they appear as teacher-student connectedness that drives academic engagement (Lai *et al.*, 2024). These variations underscore that positive relationships are inherently socially and culturally embedded phenomena. Despite acknowledging this contextual nature, mainstream positive education research has paid limited attention to traditional religious communities where interpersonal dynamics are inextricably intertwined with spiritual values, communal living, and moral obligations.

One educational environment that offers a profoundly distinctive socio-cultural and religious context is the traditional Islamic boarding school, known as the *pesantren*. As one of Indonesia's oldest educational institutions, the *pesantren* plays a vital role in transmitting religious knowledge, moral virtues, and social norms across generations. Operating through *salaf* (traditional), *khalaf* (modern), or convergent models (Hayati, 2019; Zakki & Hazinah, 2023), these institutions share a core characteristic: intensive, round-the-clock interactions among the *Kiai* (spiritual leaders), teachers, hostel supervisors, and *santri* (students) within a shared living environment. Rather than

functioning merely as institutional elements, foundational components such as the *pondok* (boarding facility), the mosque, and the study of classical Islamic texts serve as vital psychosocial resources that shape students' identities, interpersonal experiences, and character formation (Carter & Youssef-Morgan, 2019).

Investigating these rich, culturally embedded experiences requires the deployment of an indigenous psychology framework. Indigenous psychology emphasizes that psychological phenomena must be understood within their specific socio-cultural contexts by harmonizing *etic* (universal) and *emic* (culture-specific) perspectives (Eckensberger, 2015). In the context of the *pesantren*, an *emic* approach allows researchers to examine how positive relationships are structurally conceptualized and experienced through local religious values and daily communal practices. This indigenous lens is highly critical; a recent systematic review by Hall et al. (2024) revealed a profound scientific imbalance, noting that despite two-thirds of the world's population residing in Asia, empirical evidence from Asian contexts remains substantially lower than that from Western countries.

Furthermore, most positive education research in Asia continues to rely heavily on Western conceptual frameworks, failing to integrate rich indigenous spiritual traditions such as Islam that view personal development as inherently connected to communal harmony and spiritual devotion (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). By integrating positive education and indigenous psychology, the present study addresses these critical gaps. Similar to the conceptual development of Indigenous Thriving within specific cultural communities (Craven *et al.*, 2016), this study generates a culturally grounded understanding of positive relationships based on the lived experiences of *santri*.

The novelty of this study lies in three main contributions: first, it offers a novel conceptualization of positive relationships from an indigenous Islamic perspective by identifying culturally embedded relational values such as spiritual closeness with the *kiai*, *uswah hasanah* (exemplary moral conduct), and proactive communal care that emerge across the *kiai*, teacher, supervisor, and peer relational domains; second, it identifies culturally distinct forms of positive relationships that emerge through daily educational and spiritual interactions; and third, it maps the psychological and social outcomes generated by these relationships, thereby expanding current positive education frameworks beyond their Western, autonomy-centric foundations.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research objectives: (1) to explore how positive relationships are conceptualized within *pesantren* culture from an

indigenous psychology perspective; (2) to identify the specific forms of positive relationships that emerge within this educational environment; and (3) to examine the psychological and social outcomes generated by these relationships among *santri*. Theoretically, these findings broaden the scope of positive psychology, indigenous psychology, and Islamic psychology by offering a sophisticated understanding of well-being outside individualistic paradigms. Practically, this study provides a valuable conceptual framework for educators, *pesantren* leaders, and policymakers in designing educational environments that strengthen student resilience, social connectedness, and flourishing within collectivist-religious educational ecosystems.

Research Method

1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design utilizing thematic analysis to explore the socio-cultural construction and lived experiences of positive relationships within the *pesantren* context. Guided by an indigenous psychology framework, this study prioritized the participants' emic perspectives to uncover culturally embedded meanings rather than imposing predetermined, Western-centric relational models. The research was naturalistic and context-bound, capturing how religious values and communal practices shape interpersonal dynamics. The study was formally approved and conducted at a major Islamic boarding school in Indonesia during the 2024–2025 academic year.

2. Participants and Data Sources

The participants comprised 177 *santri* (boarding school students) spanning Grades 10, 11, and 12. Participants were selected via purposive sampling based on two inclusion criteria: (1) full-time enrollment and residency at the selected *pesantren* during the 2024–2025 academic year, and (2) active, daily engagement in the institutional ecosystem involving the *kiai* (spiritual leader), teachers, dormitory supervisors, and peers. This large qualitative sample size was intentionally designed to facilitate thematic saturation and capture diverse relational configurations across genders and educational levels. The demographic distribution of the participants is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Distribution by Grade Level and Gender

Grade Level	Boys	Girls	Total
Grade 10	29	30	59
Grade 11	26	30	56
Grade 12	29	33	62
Total	84	93	177

The primary data source consisted of qualitative written narratives generated through a structured open-ended questionnaire. Secondary data sources included literature on positive education frameworks (e.g., PERMA, SEARCH) and indigenous Islamic psychology, which served as a conceptual backdrop for contextualizing the findings.

3. Research Procedure and Data Collection

The research process followed a systematic five-stage procedure: framework formulation, instrument development, data collection, data preparation, and indigenous thematic interpretation. Data collection was executed using an open-ended questionnaire administered in controlled, quiet environments within the *pesantren*. To extract authentic emic accounts, the instrument avoided Western psychological jargon and utilized culturally familiar prompts. The core open-ended prompts included:

1. *"Describe a meaningful interaction with your kiai or teacher that gave you a sense of psychological comfort and explain why it felt meaningful."*
2. *"How do you and your fellow santri navigate daily communal life, especially during moments of difficulty or shared responsibilities?"*

Prior to participation, informed consent was obtained from both the institution and the *santri*. Participation was entirely voluntary, and strict protocols were implemented to guarantee complete anonymity and data confidentiality.

4. Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The written qualitative narratives were systematically analyzed using a six-phase codebook thematic analysis, adapted from the phase structure originally outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022) and informed by the Framework Method (Gale et al., 2013), which is designed for multi-researcher qualitative analysis of large-N datasets in applied research. Given the sample size ($N = 177$) and the involvement of multiple researchers in coding, a shared coding framework was used to support consistency across the dataset, while remaining

grounded in participants' own language and meanings. The analytical process progressed iteratively through six distinct phases, transitioning from raw data to indigenous conceptual themes. The operationalization of each analytical phase in this study is detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Operationalization of the Codebook Thematic Analysis Process (adapted from Braun & Clarke, 2022, and informed by the Framework Method, Gale et al., 2013)

Phase	Thematic Analysis Stage	Description of Research Operationalization in This Study
1	Familiarization with the data	Immersive, repeated reading of the 177 written text responses to obtain a comprehensive overview of the <i>santri</i> 's accounts.
2	Generating initial codes	Extracting open, meaningful words, phrases, and expressions directly related to relational experiences without imposing psychological jargon.
3	Searching for themes	Clustering and organizing related initial codes into broader semantic categories and potential conceptual themes.
4	Reviewing candidate themes	Cross-checking the candidate themes against the entire raw dataset and generated codes to ensure contextual consistency.
5	Defining and naming themes	Conceptualizing the psychological essence of each theme and assigning final thematic titles that accurately represent the data structure.
6	Producing the report	Drafting the final interpretative narrative, vividly integrating raw verbatim quotes with positive education and indigenous psychology theories.

To preserve the indigenous integrity of the data during the coding phase (Phases 2 and 3), local and religious terminologies (such as *sorogan* and *uswah hasanah*) were deliberately maintained as *in-vivo codes* rather than being translated prematurely into Western psychological constructs.

To ensure qualitative rigor and trustworthiness (*credibility* and *confirmability*; Phil, 2021), the analysis incorporated *investigator triangulation*. Coding was performed iteratively and independently by the researchers against a shared codebook. Discrepancies in code

definitions or thematic boundaries during Phase 4 and Phase 5 were resolved through rigorous, iterative peer-debriefing and codebook refinement among the researchers until agreement was reached, ensuring the final conceptual model remained deeply grounded in the authentic lived experiences of the *santri*.

Research Finding

Emerging Forms of Positive Relationships Across Relational Domains

The thematic analysis revealed that positive relationships within the *pesantren* ecosystem are not merely casual social interactions; rather, they constitute deeply meaningful, culturally embedded bonds. These relationships are continuously nurtured across four distinct relational domains: *kiai* (spiritual leaders), teachers, dormitory supervisors, and peers (*fellow santri*). Across these domains, positive relationships are structurally manifested through explicit behavioral forms such as emotional closeness, proactive care, verbal appreciation, moral guidance, and communal togetherness.

Santri–Kiai Relationships

Interactions between *santri* and the *kiai* extend far beyond formal religious instruction, encompassing social, academic, and emotional layers within everyday *pesantren* life. The thematic analysis identified three primary forms of positive relationships within this domain: building relational closeness, giving appreciation, and providing advice and exemplary conduct.

The first prominent form of this relationship is building relational closeness. This dynamic emerges primarily through direct religious learning activities, particularly during intimate instructional settings like *sorogan* (individualized text recitation) where students receive direct guidance. As one participant noted, “*This pesantren is different from other Islamic boarding schools. One of the things that makes the students feel close to the kiai is that we can learn directly with him*” (P108). This proximity is further cemented through informal daily interactions outside the classroom, such as traveling together or engaging in casual conversations, as illustrated by P59 (“*Chatting with Mr. Hilmy, riding with Abah Afif*”), P62 (“*Taking a ride with Abah Afif when going to Sorogan*”), and P67 (“*Chatting with Abah for a long time*”).

Second, the relationship is sustained through giving appreciation. Simple, brief expressions of recognition and emotional affirmation from the *kiai* create profound emotional landmarks for the students, reinforcing their academic self-confidence and sense of value

within the community. This is clearly highlighted by P38, who recalled, “*Pak Hilmi once told me I was smart.*”

Lastly, the *kiai* functions as a structural anchor for advice and exemplary conduct. Within the *pesantren* ecosystem, the *kiai* is perceived not merely as an instructor, but as a living moral role model whose daily attitudes, speech, and behaviors serve as a behavioral blueprint for the students. This inspiring presence allows *santri* to internalize values that transcend the institutional boundaries and guide their wider social integration, as stated by P22: “*With my pesantren background, I can emulate the kiai and the teachers in my social life,*” and further echoed by P104, who identified the leadership figures as “*...the community members who inspire me greatly.*”

Santri–Dormitory Supervisor Relationships

Dormitory supervisors occupy a unique psychological space as parental substitutes who accompany *santri* throughout their daily lives. This relationship is characterized by care and affection, wherein supervisors are perceived as approachable, friendly, and supportive pillars who cultivate emotional comfort in the living quarters. Participants frequently highlighted their availability as crucial for well-being, noting that there are “*many people, from friends to teachers and dormitory supervisors, that we can explore*” (P61).

Furthermore, this dynamic fosters deep bonding and togetherness through active, informal problem-solving and shared recreation. Supervisors often shed their formal institutional authority to act as counselors or informal companions. This fluid boundary is vividly captured by participants who valued both the emotional guidance, such as “*the togetherness of the mentor and the Kiai as counselors in facing problems*” (P68), and the playful, unscripted moments of daily life, exemplified by P32: “*Beating the mentor on the PS (PlayStation) when he got home.*”

Santri–Teacher Relationships

Positive relationships between *santri* and their teachers primarily crystallize within the classroom ecosystem through two dimensions. First, teachers actively cultivate enjoyable learning experiences by engineering relaxed and stress-reducing classroom environments. By introducing recreational interludes, such as watching films after dense thematic lessons, teachers mitigate academic anxiety and boredom, as highlighted by P76 (“*The teachers also provide entertainment after the material has been studied, such as watching a movie*”) and

P90 (*“At the end of the lesson, some teachers provide a little entertainment to keep students from getting stressed”*).

Second, the presence of competent and inspiring teachers bridges the pedagogical gap. Teachers who exhibit high professional competence, combined with an accessible, non-threatening persona, make complex classical texts easy to learn, driving student engagement. As P123 explained, *“Maybe because the teachers are fun and not boring. Lessons on certain days are also interesting and easy to learn.”*

Santri–Peer Relationships (Among Santri)

Sharing a continuous communal residence throughout their educational journey enables *santri* to construct an exceptionally resilient peer ecosystem. This horizontal domain manifests first through inclusive relationships, where students build profound attachments with peers from diverse geographic, economic, and cultural backgrounds. Participants explicitly framed this cultural diversity not as a barrier, but as an enriching resource that prevents monotony, noting, *“Meeting people from various backgrounds, with different characters and personalities, keeps me from getting bored”* (P103) and *“Here I also meet friends from different islands”* (P154).

Second, this peer network thrives on togetherness and positive interaction embedded in daily routines, such as collaborative studying, joking late at night, and sharing communal meals. These micro-interactions build an intense sense of belonging, as one student shared: *“With friends like the twins and others, we often go to the kitchen to eat”* (P16).

Finally, this communal living naturally generates a reliable system of social support. *Santri* navigate the rigors of boarding life by offering mutual academic assistance, emotional validation, and collective daily rituals. This defensive relational shield protects vulnerable students from alienation, beautifully summarized by P132: *“I am grateful to have several friends who always accept me well when others cannot understand me.”*

Multidimensional Psychological and Social Outcomes

The thematic analysis indicated that the interwoven relational configurations within the *pesantren* are associated with six major, interconnected psychosocial outcomes that collectively facilitate student flourishing.

The first outcome is a heightened sense of security and self-confidence. By feeling systematically accepted and loved by both authority figures and peers, *santri* develop emotional resilience that insulates them from loneliness, as P109 expressed, *“I feel loved. I*

am cared for, made comfortable by my friends... which makes them happy.” This sense of emotional safety appears closely associated with resilience and a positive orientation. Living in a high-density communal setting acts as a crucible where students learn to abandon egocentric habits in favor of social adaptability and optimism, changing their worldview so that *“every day, meeting friends makes life here more colorful”* (pa.1.29).

Consequently, this relational ecosystem is described by participants as supporting self-regulation and personal wisdom. Navigating daily interpersonal frictions appears to encourage *santri* toward more mature impulse control and patience. A participant highlighted this profound personality shift by noting, *“I am a patient person because my friends say I am very patient and never retaliate when people insult me, even though I used to be a person who easily got angry”* (pa.4.27). This self-control appears connected to social care and altruism, reflecting a shift toward proactive empathy and a more collective, communally oriented mindset: *“Life is not just about ‘me,’ but also the people around me”* (pi.4.87).

Finally, these dynamics are associated with a strong sense of togetherness and belonging, allowing *santri* to internalize the institutional identity and build extensive, life-long social networks across regional boundaries (pa.3.95, pi.3.145). This sustained exposure is described as contributing to their social awareness and interpersonal competence. By constantly observing and interacting within this complex micro-society, *santri* master the practical wisdom of contextual communication, learning precisely *“when should I joke, when should I be serious, when should I study, when should I play”* (pi.4.68), thereby gaining experiential life knowledge through their surroundings.

The Indigenous Model of Pesantren Relational Culture

Based on the empirical thematic configurations, an integrated indigenous framework of positive relationships within the pesantren culture was developed. Rather than treating psychosocial well-being as an isolated consequence of individual agency, this indigenous model positions relational processes as structurally interdependent components within a collectivist-religious ecosystem. The architecture of this framework operates as a dynamic continuum consisting of three deeply intertwined dimensions: the cultural environment, the structural relational agents, and the subsequent multidimensional character outcomes.

The foundational bedrock of this model is the Pesantren Environment, which functions as a holistic, overarching canopy defined by communal living, shared spiritual values, and deep-seated cultural traditions. This environment is not a passive backdrop; instead, it actively

enmeshes all daily human interactions. Within this cultural canopy, the process of nurturing positive relationships is driven by four primary Relational Agents, each occupying a distinct psychological axis. Ultimately, this structural interdependence transforms raw, daily communal contact into a singular, cohesive relational mechanism. The model proposes that these positive relationships, characterized by closeness, care, guidance, and mutual support, function as a central component supporting the Holistic Psychosocial Development of the santri. The structural alignment, operational features, and systemic flow of this integrated model from the overarching environment down to specific agent-driven values are visually conceptualized in Table 3.

Table 3. The Indigenous Framework of Pesantren Relational Culture: From Cultural Environment to Holistic Character Outcomes.

Relational Agents	Characteristics / Values
Kiai (<i>Vertical Relationship</i>)	Closeness, warm spiritual connection, accessibility, and emotional attachment between kiai and santri.Exemplary, serving as a moral and religious role model through consistent words and actions (<i>uswah hasanah</i>).
Supervisor (<i>Parent-like Relationship</i>)	Proactive Care, providing continuous guidance, protection, and attention to students' daily needs and well-being.Companionship, creating a family-like atmosphere through emotional presence, approachability, and shared daily experiences.
Teacher (<i>Pedagogical Relationship</i>)	Relaxed Learning, fostering an enjoyable, non-threatening, and engaging learning environment that encourages active participation.Inspiring Persona, motivating students through enthusiasm, positive attitudes, and meaningful educational interactions.
Peer Network (<i>Horizontal Relationship</i>)	Inclusivity, accepting and respecting peers regardless of individual differences, promoting belonging and mutual respect.Daily Togetherness, strengthening bonds through continuous communal living, shared routines, and collective activities.Social Support, providing emotional, academic, and practical assistance that enhances resilience and interpersonal well-being.

Discussion

The Multi-Layered Relational Ecology of Positive Relationships in Pesantren

The findings reveal that positive relationships within the pesantren constitute a highly complex and interconnected relational structure that diverges significantly from the configurations commonly observed in conventional schooling contexts. Santri construct meaningful, multifaceted bonds not only with peers and teachers but also with kiai (spiritual leaders) and dormitory supervisors. These diverse relational actors create a unique, unified communal environment where educational attainment and personal development occur through continuous, unmediated daily interactions (Hayati, 2019; Zakki & Hazinah, 2023).

This finding fundamentally extends the conceptualization of positive relationships within the positive education literature. Within mainstream paradigms, such as the PROSPER framework (Noble & McGrath, 2016), positive relationships are primarily operationalized through a supportive school culture, teacher–student dynamics, and horizontal peer interactions (Lou & Xu, 2022). However, the present study suggests that the pesantren ecosystem encompasses a much broader, integrated relational network. These multiple actors appear to be jointly involved in student development through a blend of formal instruction, pastoral mentoring, intrinsic religious guidance, and continuous communal co-living.

These empirical insights strongly align with positive psychology research emphasizing that deep social connections are central to human flourishing (Hall et al., 2024). For instance, positive relationships are recognized as a core pillar of well-being within the PERMA model (Chisale & Phiri, 2022), while supportive social bonds serve as one of the most robust cross-cultural predictors of subjective well-being (Diener, 1984; Diener et al., 1985). Likewise, recent structural reviews in educational settings highlight that high-quality teacher–student relationships directly enhance institutional well-being and engagement (Lai et al., 2026; Luque-Reca et al., 2022).

Beyond the boundaries of positive education, these findings can be interpreted through an ecological systems perspective. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory suggests that proximal processes and interactions across overlapping social micro-environments heavily shape human development (Merçon-Vargas et al., 2020). In a pesantren, these micro-environments, educational, religious, and residential, converge within a single, high-density communal setting. Consequently, santri are exposed to sustained, non-transactional interactions with multiple caring adults and peers, creating a dense relational network that continuously reinforces positive moral values and behaviors (Carter & Youssef-Morgan,

2019).

Furthermore, the relational architecture observed in the pesantren appears to foster a highly functional social capital, whereby mutual trust, shared norms, and enduring social ties facilitate systemic individual development (Li et al., 2025). The close-knit bonds provide not only structural emotional insulation but also organic access to moral role-modeling and a shared sense of collective responsibility (Feeney & Collins, 2014). Therefore, positive relationships in this context can be conceptualized as a multi-layered relational ecology of well-being. This finding enriches the positive education literature by suggesting that psychological flourishing can be fostered beyond school-based frameworks through integrated, community-based religious educational systems.

Finally, the daily micro-interactions within this ecosystem contribute significantly to tolerance, social harmony, and respect for diversity (Hadiyanto et al., 2022). The inclusive attitudes developed through navigating a culturally diverse student body enable santri to build healthy relationships across varied social groups without compromising their religious identity. From a positive psychology perspective, this reflects the maturity of relational and social well-being, which is essential for the flourishing of both individuals and the wider pluralistic society (Bakalim & Karçkay, 2016; Mertika et al., 2020).

Positive Relationship Outcomes in a Collectivist Context

The study suggests that positive relationships within the pesantren are associated with a rich matrix of psychosocial outcomes, spanning emotional security, systemic resilience, self-regulation, personal wisdom, proactive altruism, and advanced interpersonal competence (Segrin & Taylor, 2007). These findings support the foundational view that psychological well-being is not determined solely by individual or internal factors but is deeply shaped by the quality of one's proximal social relationships.

The relational configurations identified in this study also interface with indigenous sociopolitical values observed in Islamic boarding schools. Rohimah (2019) posits that social interactions within Indonesian pesantren culture are structurally grounded in moderate Islamic values (*wasatiyyah*) that actively encourage social cohesion, a profound sense of communal belonging, and the capacity to live harmoniously within a pluralistic society. Positive interpersonal relationships within this boarding framework cultivate inclusive bonds and a shared institutional identity, which have consistently been shown to be associated with improved psychological health outcomes and human flourishing (Craven et al., 2016).

Crucially, the outcomes observed in this study reflect the psychological characteristics

of a collectivist or interdependent cultural context (Triandis, 1995). Individuals in interdependent cultures construct their self-concept primarily through relationships with significant others, rather than through the strict assertion of personal autonomy (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). East Asian and collectivist cultural contexts place a premium on social roles and relational obligations as the fundamental definitions of the self (Markus & Kitayama, 2015). This cultural orientation is further supported by literature highlighting that collectivist societies prioritize group harmony, social cohesion, and in-group responsibility over individualistic achievement.

This cultural backdrop explains why the benefits of positive relationships in a pesantren extend beyond individual psychological hedonic benefits to encompass communal functioning and social harmony (Roy et al., 2018). The findings strongly suggest that character outcomes in this environment are fundamentally oriented toward social harmony, communal responsibility, and prosocial engagement. These outcomes reflect collective well-being, wherein emotional safety, altruism, and interpersonal sensitivity serve as shared social resources within the community. In this sense, positive relationships in the pesantren operate as a relational system that simultaneously nurtures individual psychological strengths while reinforcing collective cohesion, suggesting that well-being in collectivist educational contexts is inherently relational and embedded within shared moral, social, and cultural structures (Kitayama et al., 2010).

Toward an Indigenous Model of Positive Relationships in Pesantren

Based on the comprehensive empirical narrative, this study proposes an Indigenous Framework of Pesantren Relational Culture. This framework conceptualizes relational well-being not as an autonomous achievement, but as an organic product of a holistic, overarching cultural canopy characterized by communal co-living, shared spiritual values, and institutional traditions (Eckensberger, 2015). This environment actively enmeshes the interactions of four key relational agents: the kiai, dormitory supervisors, teachers, and peers.

In stark contrast to Western-developed, individual-centered models of positive education that prioritize independent self-actualization, this indigenous framework positions spiritual role-modeling, organic mentorship, moral commitment, and continuous communal residence as the foundational elements of positive relational development. This perspective aligns with the core tenet of cultural psychology that psychological processes are deeply shaped by cultural contexts and cannot be fully understood through universalist assumptions

alone (Heine & Ruby, 2010).

Psychological science has historically suffered from a reliance on Western populations (WEIRD data), which risks overgeneralizing culturally specific findings as universal principles. There is a critical need for a cultural psychology approach that conceptualizes humans as a cultural species whose cognition, motivation, and behavior are fundamentally shaped by their immediate cultural environments (Heine & Norenzayan, 2006). This theoretical caveat underscores the importance of context-sensitive, culturally grounded models in understanding human development in unique educational settings like the *pesantren*.

Complementing this, psychological processes are deeply embedded within cultural meaning systems and everyday social practices, meaning that culture is an integral component of how individuals think, feel, and relate to others. Consequently, the relational patterns and character outcomes observed among *santri* cannot be fully understood without considering their deep socio-cultural and religious embeddedness. Furthermore, the seamless integration of spirituality, moral commitment, and communal ethics within this model is highly consistent with cross-cultural research highlighting that well-being and relational functioning are continuously shaped by culturally constructed values, social roles, and interdependent self-construals.

Therefore, this study contributes significantly to the indigenous psychology and positive education literature by proposing a contextualized model of positive relationships rooted in the socio-cultural and religious ecology of the *pesantren*. It extends existing frameworks by proposing that relational well-being can be systematically constructed through an integrated system of spiritual mentorship, moral guidance, and communal co-living. While these qualitative insights offer a rich and nuanced portrayal of the *pesantren* relational ecosystem, they also present specific methodological boundaries that pave the way for future scholarly inquiry.

Limitations and Practical Implications

Despite these contributions, several limitations of this study must be acknowledged. First, the qualitative design relies on cross-sectional data, which captures participants' experiences at a specific point in time but limits causal inferences regarding the long-term trajectory of these psychosocial outcomes (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Longitudinal studies are warranted to track how these multi-layered relational bonds influence *santri* well-being well beyond their graduation (Carter & Youssef-Morgan, 2019). Second, the data were drawn from

specific pesantren settings, meaning that variations in institutional size, leadership styles, and regional cultures might yield nuanced differences (Hayati, 2019). Third, data collection relied solely on a single administration of the open-ended questionnaire, without complementary interviews or direct observation of daily interactions; this single-method design may have constrained the contextual depth of the accounts and limited opportunities for data source triangulation. Future research should incorporate in-depth interviews and participant observation alongside written narratives, and should examine cross-pesantren variations to test the broader transferability of the proposed indigenous model.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the findings carry significant practical implications for modern educational design. In an era where adolescent mental health challenges, alienation, and digital disconnection are rising globally (Jayatissa, 2023), secular and religious boarding institutions elsewhere may find aspects of the pesantren model instructive (Bella, 2023). By intentionally integrating spiritual mentorship, approachable residential supervision, and inclusive peer networks into a cohesive community canopy, educational leaders can foster an environment where individual flourishing and collective social responsibility mutually reinforce one another (Roy et al., 2018).

Conclusion

This study proposes an Indigenous Framework of Pesantren Relational Culture, suggesting that relational well-being within this ecosystem is organically constructed through a culturally grounded system of communal co-living, shared spiritual values, and institutional traditions. The empirical findings reveal that positive relationships emerge through sustained interactions across a holistic canopy involving four key relational agents, the *kiai*, dormitory supervisors, teachers, and horizontal peer networks, who collectively create an integrated relational ecosystem that systematically nurtures the psychological, social, and moral development of the *santri*. Unlike Western-oriented positive education frameworks that heavily emphasize individual autonomy, independent achievement, and secular school-based relationships, the *pesantren* model highlights the vital importance of spiritual guidance, deep moral commitment, communal responsibility, and shared daily residential experiences as the structural foundations of positive relational development and human flourishing.

Consequently, this study contributes significantly to indigenous psychology and positive education literature by illustrating that psychological well-being appears

fundamentally relational, interdependent, and dynamically shaped by localized cultural meanings and spiritual practices (Heine & Norenzayan, 2006; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). To expand upon this framework, future research should transition toward mixed-methods or longitudinal designs to empirically validate the directional paths between these unique relational configurations and standardized psychological outcomes over extended temporal periods. Furthermore, comparative investigations across diverse Islamic educational typologies, such as traditional *salafi* versus modern *khalafi pesantren*, as well as the integration of multi-informant perspectives from *kiai*, teachers, supervisors, and parents, are highly recommended to establish the systemic generalizability and multi-layered ecological depth of this indigenous model globally.

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