

## Exploring The Link Between Gratitude and Negative Emotions in Female Islamic Boarding Students

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### Keywords

Anxiety, Depression, Female Students, Islamic Boarding School, Stress

### Abstract

This study explores the relationship between gratitude and negative emotions among female students in an Islamic boarding school (pesantren) in Tegal Regency, Indonesia. A total of 219 students aged 12–21 years participated in this study. Data were collected using validated scales to assess gratitude as well as symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression. The results showed that gratitude was negatively correlated with stress ( $r = -0.236$ ), anxiety ( $r = -0.202$ ), and depression ( $r = -0.339$ ), indicating that higher levels of gratitude tend to be associated with lower levels of these negative emotional states. Descriptively, over half of the participants (57.53%) reported high levels of gratitude. Most students experienced normal levels of stress and depression, but a notable proportion (31.51%) experienced extremely severe anxiety. These findings underscore the relevance of gratitude in supporting emotional well-being, while also pointing to the urgent need for interventions targeting anxiety among students.

## INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a crucial period in the human life span, marking the transition from childhood to adulthood. According to Santrock (2013) and Hurlock (2011), adolescence typically begins at the age of 12 and continues until approximately 21 years of age. Emotionally, this stage is characterized by heightened intensity and frequent mood swings, often referred to as being "moody." Adolescence is also known as a period of "storm and stress," filled with emotional turbulence, conflicts, and frequent mood changes (Santrock, 2016; Soetjningsih, 2010). Sudden expressions of anger or emotional outbursts toward family members are seen as part of adolescents' efforts to assert their independence (Santrock, 2016). In addition to experiencing emotional fluctuations, adolescents face developmental tasks such as forming a stable sense of identity, as proposed by Erikson.

The ability to successfully navigate these developmental challenges significantly influences one's well-being in later life (Sakız et al., 2020). For adolescents who choose to study in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), these challenges are often intensified. In addition to the usual developmental demands, santri (pesantren students) must also cope with being away from their families and adapting to a strict and highly structured educational model. Pesantren typically adopt a boarding school system with rigorous schedules and rules, which can become potential stressors (Nabila & Laksmiwati, 2019; Wahab et al., 2013). Compared to general schools, boarding schools impose greater demands in terms of routines, independence, and discipline (Xiao et al., 2025).

The negative emotions experienced by santri can have detrimental effects. Stress, for example, is known to reduce individual performance (Jum'ati & Wusma, 2013) and can hinder a person's ability to function optimally (Uhing & Mandagie, 2016). Therefore, it is important to support adolescents, particularly female students, in managing their developmental tasks to minimize the emergence of negative emotions.

Females and males also experience different emotional developments during adolescence. Female adolescents are reported to be twice as likely to experience stress compared to their male counterparts (Kountul et al., 2018). Emotional vulnerability increases particularly during puberty (Carol & Rider, 2012), and after puberty, adolescent girls show higher rates of depression. These emotional struggles can also affect physical health, particularly issues related to reproductive health. Psychosocial stress has been linked to conditions such as fluor albus (Hana et al., 2018), and female boarding students have been found to experience more intense negative emotions than males (Zhang et al., 2025).

Forms of negative emotions commonly observed include stress, anxiety, and depression. Stress is defined as an individual's response to environmental demands, expressed through physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral changes (Sarafino & Smith, 2012). Stress can also affect menstrual cycles in adolescent girls, leading to

irregular menstruation (Sari, 2020) and intensifying menstrual pain or dysmenorrhea (Mantolas et al., 2019). Emotional conditions experienced by santri are often different from those of students in general schools (Wahab et al., 2013). One emotional regulation factor that has gained attention is gratitude. In many pesantren, gratitude is taught as part of religious and character education (Wahid et al., 2018).

Seligman (2012) defines gratitude as a moral appreciation of the goodness found in others, and its expression may be directed toward people, nature, God, or other non-human elements. In this study, gratitude is understood within the framework of Islamic teachings, considering the background of the participants as santri. Wahid et al. (2018) found that gratitude is positively correlated with optimism, meaning that the more grateful an individual is, the more optimistic they tend to be. Musabiq et al. (2018) further noted that optimistic individuals are less likely to experience high levels of stress. Gratitude is also linked to happiness (Obeldobel & Kerns, 2021) and gratitude-based interventions have been shown to improve subjective well-being (Dian & Maya, 2017).

Additionally, gratitude correlates positively with a sense of life meaning. According to Maulidah (2016) individuals who are more grateful tend to perceive their lives as more meaningful, which is important because a strong sense of meaning in life is associated with reduced negative emotional states (Chauhan et al., 2025). Aritonang et al. (2018) also emphasized that individuals with a strong sense of meaning are less likely to experience depression.

Gratitude can lead to spiritual satisfaction and promote religiosity (Takdir, 2018). A deep sense of gratitude fosters optimism and a clearer understanding of life's purpose (Maulidah, 2016; Wahid et al., 2018). When individuals possess a strong sense of meaning and optimism, they become more capable of coping with various life demands and are thus better equipped to manage negative emotions.

Most previous studies on this topic have not focused specifically on gender differences. Given that adolescent girls are more vulnerable to negative emotional experiences than boys, this study aims to examine the correlation between gratitude and negative emotions specifically among female students.

## **METHOD**

### **Design**

A quantitative correlational approach was employed in this study. The research design used was a cross-sectional design. A cross-sectional study captures a snapshot of social life by collecting data at a single point in time (Neuman, 2014). This design aims to gather information regarding participants' current attitudes, beliefs, or opinions (Creswell, 2012).

## Participants

The participants in this study were female students (santri) attending an pesantren in Tegal Regency, Central Java. The sampling technique used was simple random sampling.

## Instruments

Data were collected using two instruments: a gratitude scale ( $n = 20$ ;  $\alpha = 0.857$ ) developed by Rusdi (2016) and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21), which was adapted into Indonesian by Damanik (2011).

## RESULT

Participants in this study were 219 female students (santri) from a pesantren. Their ages ranged from 12 to 21 years old, with a mean age of 15.89 years and a standard deviation of 2.07. The psychological scales were distributed in printed form with the assistance of the boarding school's administrators. The collected data were then input into Microsoft Excel and subsequently standardized based on the established norming procedures for each psychological instrument.

The gratitude scale was scored and interpreted based on the norms developed by Rusdi (2016), while the DASS-21 was scored according to the norms by Damanik (2011). Due to the data not meeting normality assumptions, non-parametric statistical analysis was applied. Specifically, Spearman's rank correlation was employed using SPSS version 23. The results indicated a significant negative correlation between gratitude and negative emotions, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Correlation Analysis between Variables*

No.	Variable	Significance Value	Correlation Coefficient
1.	Gratitude and Stress	.000	-.236
2.	Gratitude and Anxiety	.003	-.202
3.	Gratitude and Depression	.000	-.339

Table 1 shows that the relationship between gratitude and the three variables (stress, anxiety, and depression) is significantly negative. This negative relationship can be observed from the negative correlation coefficient values. The significance of the correlation is indicated by the p-values; since  $p < 0.05$ , the correlations between gratitude and each of the three negative emotions are considered statistically significant.

In addition to the correlation analysis, a descriptive analysis was also conducted to gain an overview of gratitude and negative emotions. The results of the descriptive analysis indicate that the majority of participants fall into the high category of gratitude, accounting for 57.53%, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
*Gratitude Categorization*

Variable	Categorization			
	Very Low	Low	High	Very High
Gratitude	N = 0	N = 14	N = 126	N = 79
	0%	6,39%	57,53%	36,07%

Table 2 shows that the majority of participants, totaling 126 individuals, have a gratitude level categorized as “High.” A total of seventy-nine participants (36.07%) fall into the “Very High” category, followed by fourteen (6.39%) in the “Low” category. No participants were found in the “Very Low” category.

**Table 3**  
*The Category of Negative Emotions*

Variable	Categorization				
	<i>Normal</i>	<i>Mild</i>	<i>Moderate</i>	<i>Severe</i>	<i>Extremely Severe</i>
Stress	N = 101	N = 25	N = 35	N = 36	N = 22
	46,12%	11,42%	15,98%	16,44%	10,05%
Anxiety	N = 41	N = 19	N = 65	N = 25	N = 69
	18,72%	8,68%	29,68%	11,42%	31,51%
Depression	N = 97	N = 30	N = 49	N = 22	N = 21
	44%	14%	22%	10%	10%

Table 3 presents the categorization of negative emotions, including stress, anxiety, and depression. For the stress variable, the majority of participants (101 individuals or 46.12%) fell into the “Normal” category. A total of thirty-six participants (16.44%) experienced “Severe” stress, followed by thirty-five participants (15.98%) in the “Moderate” category. In the “Mild” category, there were twenty-five participants (11.42%), and twenty-two participants (10.05%) were classified as experiencing “Extremely Severe” stress.

For the anxiety variable, the highest percentage of participants (31.51%) were in the “Extremely Severe” category. A total of 29.68% of participants fell into the “Moderate” category, 18.72% were in the “Normal” range, 11.42% were in the “Severe” category, and 8.68% were classified as experiencing “Mild” anxiety. Regarding depression, most participants (44%) were categorized as “Normal.” Another 22% fell into the “Moderate” category, and 14% were in the “Mild” category. The remaining participants were equally distributed between the “Severe” and “Extremely Severe” categories, each comprising 10%. Table 3 also reveals a concerning picture regarding the emotional well-being of the participants.

For stress, at least 36 participants experienced “Severe” stress, and 22 were categorized as experiencing “Extremely Severe” stress. Depression levels also warrant attention, as 22 participants were found in the “Severe” category and 21 in the “Extremely Severe” category. The most alarming figure was found in the anxiety

variable: 69 participants were categorized as experiencing “Extremely Severe” anxiety, with an additional 25 participants in the “Severe” category.

## DISCUSSION

Gratitude has been widely recognized for its protective role against negative emotional states such as anxiety and depression (Moon & Jung, 2020). A negative correlation between gratitude and anxiety has been found, indicating that individuals with higher levels of gratitude tend to experience lower levels of anxiety (Biber et al., 2020). In the present study, the majority of participants were found to have high levels of gratitude, which may be linked to the strong religious context of the pesantren environment. Pesantren is known for its intensive religious education, often more comprehensive than that offered in general schools or madrasahs (Abidin et al., 2022). Prior studies have also shown that the frequency of religious practices, such as prayer, is positively associated with gratitude (Lambert et al., 2009).

Most participants in this study reported normal levels of stress, a finding that can be understood in the context of their religious environment. Living in a religiously supportive setting has been shown to foster gratitude, which in turn promotes greater psychological well-being and life satisfaction (Aghababaei et al., 2018; Kraus et al., 2015). Gratitude is also negatively correlated with stress, suggesting that individuals with higher gratitude levels are less likely to experience stress (Moon & Jung, 2020). Moreover, research has shown that the relationship between gratitude and life satisfaction may be mediated by perceived stress: gratitude enhances life satisfaction, while stress reduces it (Yildirim & Alanazi, 2018).

Similarly, the normal levels of depression observed in most participants may be attributed to the protective effects of gratitude and the influence of their religious surroundings. Religiosity is positively associated with emotional intelligence (Zeinnida et al., 2022) which has been linked to lower levels of depression (Ayu & Suud, 2022). Moreover, gratitude, religiosity, and social support are all negatively associated with suicidal ideation and behavior (Krysinska et al., 2015), further reinforcing the mental health benefits of a spiritually grounded lifestyle.

However, the high levels of anxiety reported by many participants present a concerning contrast. Previous studies have shown that students in pesantren may experience higher anxiety levels than those in general schools, possibly due to separation from their parents or experiences of peer bullying (Aminullah, 2013; Triwibowo & Khoirunnisyak, 2017; Yani, 2017). Anxiety among adolescent santri may arise from unmet safety needs, such as emotional security and stable support systems (Maisyarah, 2013). Prolonged separation from parents can disrupt adolescents' sense of safety, and bullying has been shown to lower self-esteem, which in turn increases the risk of anxiety and depression (Balluerka et al., 2022).

High anxiety levels can significantly impact students' academic motivation (Triwibowo & Khoirunnisyak, 2017) and may lead to sleep disturbances, including insomnia (Yang et al., 2023). Thus, anxiety has meaningful implications for students' learning processes and overall mental health.

Gratitude, on the other hand, is linked to lower psychological distress (Mason, 2019) and alters the perception of stress in a more adaptive way (Lee et al., 2021). Practices such as gratitude journaling have been found to enhance life quality, reduce suffering, and buffer psychological distress. When gratitude is expressed within a religious framework specifically directed toward God it has been found to exert even stronger positive effects on mental well-being compared to general gratitude (Rosmarin et al., 2011).

Furthermore, the relationship between gratitude and depression can be strengthened when religious motivation is added as a moderating factor (Tulbure, 2015). Individuals with higher levels of gratitude are also more likely to be resilient (Du et al., 2021), and resilience is negatively correlated with stress (Budiyati & Oktavianto, 2020). Those who frequently express gratitude tend to have lower stress levels, improved health outcomes, and greater life satisfaction (Moon & Jung, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate a negative correlation between gratitude and negative emotions, meaning that higher levels of gratitude are associated with lower levels of negative emotional experiences, and vice versa. However, descriptive analysis revealed that the overall condition of negative emotions among participants is concerning. Special attention should be given to the variable of anxiety, as the majority of participants were found to experience anxiety at an "extremely severe" level.

One limitation of this study is its restricted scope, as it was conducted in only a pesantren, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future studies are encouraged to involve multiple pesantren to obtain more representative results.

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