

## Islamic college students' gratitude model: The role of social support in mediating spiritual well-being

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### ABSTRACT

Islamic college students are individuals who simultaneously study at a university and an Islamic boarding school (pesantren), thus facing complex academic, social, and religious pressures. This study tested a gratitude model by examining the role of social support in gratitude through the mediation of spiritual well-being. A total of 233 Islamic college students from various Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia participated through an online survey using a purposive sampling technique. Structural Equation Modeling (AMOS 26) analysis showed that social support had a positive effect on spiritual well-being ( $\beta = 0.314$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), but did not have a direct effect on gratitude ( $\beta = -0.010$ ;  $p = 0.815$ ). In contrast, spiritual well-being had a strong influence on gratitude ( $\beta = 0.713$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and fully mediated the relationship between the two ( $\beta = 0.224$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), with a marginal model fit ( $\chi^2/df = 2.98$ ; RMSEA = 0.094). These results indicated that gratitude is not formed directly from social support, but instead through spiritual well-being, which transforms external influences into inner well-being and grateful behavior. These findings extended the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2004) from an Islamic psychology perspective and provide a practical basis for developing spiritual interventions to strengthen the psychological resilience of Islamic college students.

### INTRODUCTION

In the dynamic digital era, students face multidimensional pressures that impact psychological well-being and academic achievement. Research by Nabila et al. (2025) showed that 55% of students experience high academic anxiety, while a WHO collaborative study in 20 countries found that 47-65% of students experience moderate to high academic stress (Karyotaki et al., 2020). In addition to academic pressure, the phenomenon of social comparison on social media also worsens psychological conditions. Research by Tungol & Enad (2025) reported that 78.44% of students frequently compare themselves to others, which triggers anxiety, depression, and self-dissatisfaction. This condition is exacerbated by the increasing cases of quarter-life crisis, a period of identity confusion and uncertainty about life direction in early adulthood (Pamungkas & Hendrastomo, 2024; Robinson, 2016).

A similar phenomenon is seen in Indonesian students, where research showed that 64.3% of students experience academic stress that impacts their academic performance (Saifudin et al., 2023). Another study reported that 27.26% - 46.2% of Indonesian students experience low psychological well-being due to academic pressure, social demands, and emotional regulation failure (Norhidayah et al., 2025). The combination of academic, social and existential pressures makes it difficult for many



students to adjust to the demands of life, which has implications for a decline in general psychological well-being (Febziantini et al., 2025; Pinasti & Hertinjung, 2025).

In the context of Islamic higher education, some students live in Islamic boarding schools (ma'had) or pesantren who lead dual lives as both students and santri are commonly referred to as Islamic college students because they face additional demands in the form of religious obligations, religious studies, and strict social discipline. Compared to regular students, santri experience higher psychological stress due to their busy schedules, limited personal space, and intense social interactions (Ikromi, 2025; Rizqullah & Ansyah, 2024). Research showed that this stress is often accompanied by role conflict between academic and religious demands, potentially reducing life satisfaction and increasing the risk of burnout and psychological stress (Radisti et al., 2023; Salmela-Aro et al., 2022). This condition confirms that the dynamics of stress in Islamic college students are unique and complex in various regions of Indonesia, so that adaptive psychological mechanisms are needed to be able to maintain academic, social, and spiritual balance as a basis for the formation of psychological well-being (Mudzkiyyah et al., 2022; Zahra & Sukirno., 2022).

One positive mechanism that plays a crucial role in maintaining individual well-being is gratitude. According to Emmons & Shelton (2002), gratitude is a feeling of awe, thankfulness, and appreciation for something an individual receives. From an Islamic perspective, gratitude is the awareness that all blessings come from Allah SWT, accompanied by verbal acknowledgment and the use of blessings for good (Al-Jauziyah, 2005; Rachmadi et al., 2019). In this study, both concepts are positioned integratively, because both emphasize the importance of appreciation and positive awareness, but the concept of gratitude in Islam deepens its meaning by linking gratitude directly to God, while Western psychology emphasizes interpersonal relationships as a source of gratitude (Chalmiers et al., 2023; McCullough et al., 2002). This integrative approach allows for a more complete understanding of gratitude in Islamic boarding school students who live in a religious environment and carry out daily spiritual practices (Harun & Taib, 2025). Research shows that gratitude is positively related to happiness and psychological well-being and negatively related to stress and depression (Anabella, 2022; Wood et al., 2009). Based on the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2004), positive emotions such as gratitude can broaden mindsets, build psychological resources, and increase resilience to stress, making it an important variable in understanding student well-being.

In addition to internal factors, social support plays a crucial role as an external factor in maintaining individual well-being. Social support is an individual's perception of the extent to which they feel cared for and accepted in meaningful social relationships (Zimet et al., 1988). Social support has been shown to buffer the effects of stress and enhance positive coping (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Research shows that social support consistently correlates positively with students' psychological well-being, gratitude, resilience, and academic adaptation (Fatiq & Nasrullah, 2024; Lakey & Orehek, 2011). Furthermore, social support also strengthens the spiritual dimension through a sense of acceptance and togetherness that fosters gratitude (Rochmawati & Laili, 2024). From an Islamic perspective, harmonious social relations are a manifestation of spiritual balance (Q.S. Al-Hujarat: 10). Thus, social support serves as an external foundation that protects individuals from stress while strengthening their spiritual aspects.

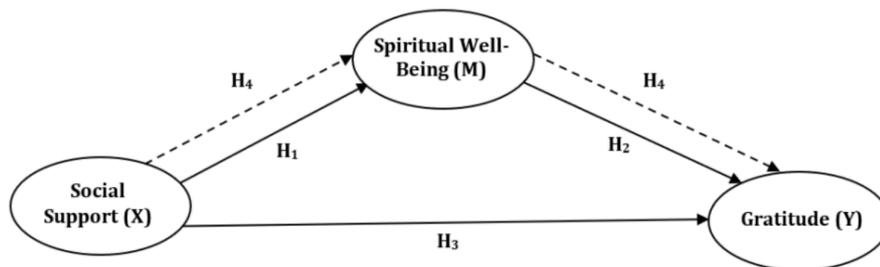
As a psychological mechanism that bridges the influence of external factors on an individual's emotional state, spiritual well-being plays a central role in this model. Spiritual well-being is a state of inner balance that arises from an individual's harmonious relationship with themselves, their

environment, and God (Fisher, 1998). This concept encompasses personal, communal, environmental, and transcendental dimensions that mutually reinforce psychological resilience (Gomez & Fisher, 2003). In the context of positive psychology, spiritual well-being serves as a source of meaning and a coping mechanism that helps individuals interpret life experiences reflectively and gratefully (Pargament, 1997). Research showed that spiritual well-being acts as a mediator between social support and psychological well-being (Bali et al., 2022; Sari et al., 2025), and is positively related to gratitude and happiness (Ajoudani et al., 2019). Therefore, spiritual well-being can be seen as a link connecting social support and gratitude.

Various studies have shown that social support, spiritual well-being, and gratitude are interrelated, although most have been studied separately. Social support has been shown to enhance spiritual well-being, which in turn strengthens psychological well-being (Feng et al., 2024; Li et al., 2022). In the context of college students, social support and spiritual well-being contribute to life satisfaction and emotional regulation (Alorani & Alradaydeh, 2018; Sari et al., 2025). Furthermore, spiritual well-being also strengthens gratitude, as found in trauma survivors and medical personnel who receive high social support (Feng & Yin, 2021). These findings confirmed that spiritual well-being acts as a mediating mechanism that enables individuals to transform social support into positive emotional experiences of gratitude and meaning in life. However, integrative studies examining the mediating role of spiritual well-being in the relationship between social support and gratitude are still very limited, especially in the context of Islamic college students facing “academic, social, and existential pressures.

**Figure 1**

*Hypotheses and Conceptual Framework*



Therefore, this study aims to examine the gratitude model that explains the psychological mechanisms through which social support influences gratitude, both directly and indirectly, through spiritual well-being as a mediating variable. Specifically, the model proposes that social support positively affects spiritual well-being (H<sub>1</sub>), spiritual well-being positively affects gratitude (H<sub>2</sub>), and social support directly influences gratitude (H<sub>3</sub>). Furthermore, it is hypothesized that spiritual well-being mediates the relationship between social support and gratitude (H<sub>4</sub>). Theoretically, this study seeks to strengthen the framework of positive psychology by integrating external factors (social support) and internal factors (spiritual well-being) that together contribute to the development of gratitude. Practically, the findings of this study are expected to provide a foundation for designing spiritual guidance, counseling, and psychological well-being programs in Islamic boarding school environments, helping students to balance academic and religious demands while enhancing their overall psychological and spiritual well-being.