

Adaptation and Resilience: A Narrative Study on Grit among *Santri* in *Pesantren* Environments

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Abstract

This study explores the development of grit among *santri* (students) in *pesantren* environments through a qualitative narrative approach. The study employed narrative interviews with three *santri* (E, F, H), and the data were analysed using thematic narrative analysis to capture developmental patterns of perseverance. Grit—defined as passion and perseverance for long-term goals—was examined across participants' lived experiences. Findings reveal a five-stage process: orientation (intrinsic motivation, spiritual drive), complication (emotional pressure, adaptation crises), effort (coping strategies, social support), resolution (perspective shifts, self-acceptance), and evaluation (reflection on resilience). The results highlight grit as a dynamic process shaped by initial motivation, social interactions, spiritual values, and identity reconstruction. The study underscores *pesantren* environments as transformative spaces that foster character development through adaptive challenges, reinforcing long-term resilience.

Keywords: Adaptation, resilience, grit, *santri*, *pesantren*.

Introduction

Amid the challenges of modern life, understanding the role of grit and resilience is crucial for *santri* adaptation and success in *pesantren*. This phenomenon becomes even more relevant in the current educational context, especially in *pesantren*. Essentially, *pesantren* is Islamic-based educational institutions in Indonesia that teachs various religious subjects and plays a significant role in the moral and character education of their *santri* (Fitri & Ondeng, 2022). According to Clifford Geertz, as cited by Alfirdausi & Librana, the term “*santri*” has both broad and narrow meanings. In the broad sense, a *santri* is someone who sincerely practices Islam—praying, attending Friday congregations, and so on. In the narrow sense, a *santri* relates to a *santri* who studies the Islamic religion in a *pesantren* (AlFirdausi & Librana, 2024).

Santri often face limitations across all aspects of pesantren life, both in learning and daily routines. This aligns with Maulidin's observation, stating that *pesantren* life is simple—*santri* cook their meals in communal kitchens and follow a disciplined lifestyle (Maulidin, 2024). However, Al Faruqi et al. found that many *pesantren* graduates are highly successful in their careers. These seemingly

opposing conditions are bridged by the perseverance, independence, and resilience that *santri* exhibit as they adapt to their environments, enabling them to overcome the many challenges they face (Al Faruqi et al., 2023).

This situation aligns with Angela Duckworth's concept of grit, defined as a combination of passion and perseverance for long-term goals (Duckworth, 2021). This concept is evident in the lives of *santri*, who must cope with rigid routines, pressure, and various limitations within the *pesantren*. Hanifah et al. found a significant positive relationship between grit and self-adjustment. The higher a *santri*'s grit, the better they adapt to their new environment (Hanifah et al., 2021). Similarly, Oktavia and Viranda found that both self-regulation and grit have a significant negative correlation with anxiety, meaning higher grit is associated with lower anxiety levels. Taken together, these findings suggest that the more grit a *santri* possesses, the more likely they are to thrive and adapt in a new environment (Oktavia & Viranda, 2024).

Adaptation is especially critical in *pesantren* due to several reasons: (1) New and different environments: *Santri* often come from diverse backgrounds and must adjust to new settings, strict routines, communal living, and *pesantren* values and traditions (Bukhori & Cikusin, 2023). (2) Academic and religious demands: *Pesantren* curricula are intense, requiring *santri* to memorise and understand religious teachings (Badrun, 2024). (3) Independence and discipline: *Santri* must learn to care for themselves, manage time, and follow strict rules. (4) Social interaction: *Santri* must form relationships with peers, teachers, and caretakers, a key skill for wellbeing and success (Saugi et al., 2022). (5) Ongoing changes and challenges in *pesantren*, such as curriculum adjustments and internal dynamics (Kusumaningrum et al., 2025).

In other words, adaptation allows *santri* to face challenges, seize opportunities, and grow personally and spiritually within the *pesantren* environment. The process of adaptation trains *santri* to face real-life challenges within and outside the *pesantren*, instilling values such as patience, tolerance, and responsibility. Therefore, *pesantren* life—often marked by strict routines, academic and religious pressure, limited facilities, and social adaptation—is fertile ground for the development of grit, helping *santri* persist rather than give up easily (Pratiwi et al., 2023). Education in *pesantren* is a long-term journey that requires commitment, focus, and grit, and grit helps *santri* maintain that focus despite hardships.

Throughout their journey, *santri* inevitably face a range of academic, social, and personal challenges. Grit equips them with resilience, fostering confidence

and optimism to recover from failure, learn from mistakes, and keep moving forward. Grit provides the motivation and perseverance needed to adapt effectively to *pesantren* culture, supporting their emotional resilience and overall wellbeing (Saugi et al., 2022). *Santri* with high grit tend to be happier and better able to handle stress, which supports their adaptation and resilience.

This study aims to explore the process of grit formation among *santri* through a qualitative narrative approach, focusing on the trajectory of adaptation, emotional transitions, and internalization of resilience values. Through an in-depth analysis of three *santri* experiences (E, F, H), the study identifies five critical stages in the journey of grit: orientation (intrinsic and spiritual motivation), complication (emotional pressure and adaptation crises), effort (coping strategies and social support), resolution (perspective shift and self-acceptance), and evaluation (resilience reflection). This study not only reveals grit as a dynamic process influenced by initial motivations, social interaction, and spiritual values but also addresses gaps in the literature that tend to view grit as a static trait without exploring its spiritual dimensions and identity transformation in *pesantren* contexts (Hanifah et al., 2021; Oktavia & Viranda, 2024).

This study utilized a qualitative, narrative design—an approach that explores the meaning of individual experiences through life stories. Narrative studies focus on understanding and presenting individuals' experiences, typically by collecting data on specific life events and organizing them chronologically (Squire et al., 2014). This design was chosen to capture participants' profound, personal experiences. Therefore, the study emphasizes how *santri* interpret the processes of adaptation and resilience through storylines that reflect their psychological journeys in a new *pesantren* environment.

The participants were three pesantren alumni who had completed their education. They were selected through purposive sampling, a non-random sampling technique based on specific characteristics relevant to the research goals (Campbell et al., 2020). The participant criteria included: 1) Having undergone an adaptation phase in a *pesantren* environment different from their previous residence. 2) Completed at least 3 years of study in a *pesantren*. 3) Willing to share experiences deeply and openly.

The main instrument was the researcher, as is standard in qualitative research. A semi-structured narrative interview guide was used, consisting of five focal stages: orientation (initial entry), complication (crisis), effort (survival strategy), resolution (turning point), and evaluation (meaningful reflection), with

a total of 17 questions per session. The interviews were conducted in person and recorded digitally, ensuring thorough and reliable data collection.

Data were analyzed using the narrative analysis approaches of Riessman (Riessman, 2008) and Polkinghorne (Polkinghorne, 1995), emphasizing: (1) restructuring participant stories into chronological order, (2) identifying major themes in each narrative stage, and (3) drawing reflective meaning from each story to represent grit development.

Result and Discussion

The researcher conducted narrative interviews with three santri from different regions. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms “E,” “F,” and “H” were used. Each participant had unique experiences in building perseverance and personal resilience during their time in the *pesantren*, with differing dynamics at their respective schools. The findings are categorized into five narrative stages: orientation, complication, effort, resolution, and evaluation.

Narrative Stage	Key Conditions	Experience of Participant “E”	Experience of Participant “F”	Experience of Participant “H”
Orientation	Initial motivation, personal desire, spiritual drive	“E” entered the <i>pesantren</i> based on personal desire to deepen religious knowledge. Feeling that informal learning at home was insufficient, they made the independent decision to pursue <i>pesantren</i> education as a form of spiritual and intellectual commitment.	“F” showed strong personal motivation to attend a salaf <i>pesantren</i> , despite opposition from their mother who preferred <i>Madrasah Aliyah</i> . Eventually, a compromise was reached—F joined a <i>Madrasah Aliyah</i> affiliated with the <i>pesantren</i> , reflecting a balance between personal desire and family dynamics.	“H” developed motivation through accompanying an older sibling to <i>pesantren</i> activities. The growing interest evolved into personal commitment. However, “H” also experienced pressure from their father, who strictly forbade other school options, particularly in Demak. The decision to enter <i>pesantren</i> emerged from both personal motivation and parental pressure.

Narrative Stage	Key Conditions	Experience of Participant "E"	Experience of Participant "F"	Experience of Participant "H"
Complication	Crisis phase, reality shock, emotional strain	<p>"E" experienced a severe crisis early in their stay—emotional and physical stress, including prolonged <i>istihadah</i> (abnormal bleeding) from grade 8 to 11, likely caused by mental fatigue and poor nutrition. Homesickness exacerbated the condition, making the early period in <i>pesantren</i> very challenging.</p>	<p>"F" experienced loneliness and discomfort, especially at night, being used to family companionship. The stress intensified during difficult <i>kitab</i> (religious text) exams, leading to emotional pressure and feelings of helplessness. The gap between expectations and academic reality became a major stressor.</p>	<p>"H" faced an academic crisis upon entering MTs, unable to achieve previous performance levels and dropped out of the top ten ranks. This led to frustration, rule-breaking, and loss of motivation. Grade 8 became the lowest point—a conflict between their former identity and the new, less successful reality.</p>
Effort	Coping strategies, personal principles, socio-emotional support	<p>"E" persevered by holding firmly to the principle that the goal was to seek knowledge—not comfort. They believed surviving in a foreign environment meant enduring discomfort, and spiritual-intellectual growth justified the sacrifice. Parental support also played a key role in maintaining motivation.</p>	<p>"F" built resilience through spiritual practices and supportive relationships. Visiting the kyai's house provided comfort, and regular prayers and motivation from the kyai, mother, and ustazd helped "F" survive despite earlier emotional turmoil.</p>	<p>"H" adopted the principle "If you dare to start, dare to finish" as a mental anchor. Reflecting on peers who dropped out and regressed strengthened the resolve to persist. H's grit grew from personal conviction and awareness of long-term consequences.</p>
Resolution	Turning point, meaningful experience, attitude shift	<p>"E" experienced a turning point after moving into a room with more</p>	<p>"F" had a major breakthrough when entrusted to serve the kyai and even live in</p>	<p>"H" began to appreciate <i>pesantren</i> life after recognizing the benefits of its</p>

Narrative Stage	Key Conditions	Experience of Participant "E"	Experience of Participant "F"	Experience of Participant "H"
		experienced <i>santri</i> . Through informal peer learning, "E" felt accepted, supported, and connected, which made <i>pesantren</i> life more meaningful and enjoyable.	his house. The role gave a sense of appreciation, belonging, and emotional attachment, enhancing self-confidence and positive identity in the <i>pesantren</i> environment.	routines and rules. Understanding that life there wasn't as harsh as initially thought, "H" embraced the moment and focused on the present, marking a shift from resistance to acceptance.
Evaluation	Reflection, meaning of endurance, deepened grit	"E" viewed perseverance as integral to gaining religious knowledge—not just enduring suffering, but committing to a chosen spiritual path. The experience symbolized conscious dedication and endurance.	"F" saw endurance as an active process to build comfort and productivity in a new environment. Past hardships had shaped a stronger, calmer self when facing new challenges.	"H" interpreted endurance as a refusal to give up. Failure, for them, is part of growth. True resilience means continuing to try despite repeated setbacks—grit means courage to continue the journey.

Narrative Stage Breakdown

1. Orientation

This stage describes the underlying reasons why participants chose to attend *pesantren*. All three participants made this decision voluntarily, driven by personal goals and strong religious values, which should inspire respect and admiration in the audience. "E" was motivated by a desire to deepen religious knowledge. "F" actively chose the *pesantren salaf* despite parental resistance, while "H" was inspired by a sibling and also influenced by parental restrictions. These initial motivations formed the foundation for grit as a long-term commitment.

2. Complication

This stage highlights the crises encountered after entering the new environment, which can evoke empathy and understanding. "E" struggled

with physical-psychological distress and homesickness. “F” struggled with emotional pressure and academic stress during the kitab exams. “H” experienced an academic identity crisis and rule-breaking behavior. These complications became key turning points that catalyzed the development of resilience.

3. Effort

This stage shows how acceptance and meaning-making occur. “E” felt accepted in a new dorm, which improved engagement. “F” took pride in being the kyai’s assistant, gaining emotional fulfillment. “H” accepted *pesantren* life and appreciated its values. These shifts reflect increasing emotional maturity and strengthened grit.

4. Resolution

Here, *santri* reached a point of acceptance and meaning-making. “E” felt accepted in a new dorm setting, improving engagement. “F” took pride in being the kyai’s assistant, gaining emotional fulfillment. “H” accepted *pesantren* life and appreciated its values. These shifts reflect increasing emotional maturity and strengthened grit.

5. Evaluation

In the final stage, participants made meaning of their endurance. “E” saw it as a path to knowledge. “F” interpreted it as active adaptation and growth. “H” recognized failure as part of the journey and emphasized resilience. All three showed that grit involves not just perseverance, but also reflection, acceptance, and identity consistency.

The findings of this study show that grit among *santri* in *pesantren* develops as a dynamic and culturally embedded process rather than a fixed personal trait. Emphasizing the narrative approach aims to inspire curiosity and trust in the research process (Datu, 2021). By analyzing *santri* narratives across five developmental stages, this study provides a clearer understanding of how perseverance is shaped by the interplay among motivation, adversity, coping strategies, relational support, and spiritual meaning-making. The narrative approach used in this study adds nuance to the formation of grit in *pesantren*, highlighting processes often overlooked in the mainstream grit literature, which is dominated by Western individualistic contexts.

Orientation: Initial Motivation, Personal Desire, and Spiritual Drive

In this stage, the study highlights a range of initial motivational sources that lay the foundation for grit development among *santri*. Participant “E” displayed

a dominant intrinsic motivation—the need to deepen religious knowledge—driven by internal desires rather than external pressure (Alawiyah et al., 2019). This suggests that early commitment to spiritual goals can provide a solid basis for long-term perseverance. Exploring how these motivational factors differ among *santri* with varying backgrounds can enhance understanding of diverse pathways to grit development.

In contrast, participant “F” demonstrated the importance of personal agency, or the ability to control one’s life decisions, despite negotiating and compromising with authority figures such as a parent. This aligns with Wulan & Hidayanti, who emphasize that communication and compromise reflect active engagement in decision-making (Wulan et al., 2023). “F”’s effort to communicate and negotiate with their mother to pursue personal goals is a critical element in forming early commitment.

Participant “H” added another dimension by showing how role models can be strong catalysts for early commitment. Inspired by their older sibling, “H” developed internal motivation to follow a similar path. This, combined with external pressure from a father who restricted school choices, reveals how social influences can reinforce motivation and commitment from the start (Malahayati, 2022). Recognizing these social factors can help the audience empathize with *santri*’s varied motivations.

Participants demonstrated diverse motivational backgrounds, ranging from intrinsic religious aspirations to externally influenced decisions such as parental direction or sibling role modeling in this stage. These motivational sources function as psychological anchors, preparing them to face the structured routines and challenges of *pesantren* life. Current motivation research shows that internalized and value-oriented motivation supports long-term persistence more effectively than extrinsic incentives (Ryan & Deci, 2020). In this context, spiritual aspirations strengthen the sense of purpose that *santri* bring into the *pesantren* environment, setting the stage for the development of grit. Emphasizing this can inspire the audience to value internal motivation as a key to perseverance.

Comparatively, these findings diverge from typical Western models of grit, which emphasize personal passion and goal orientation as the primary drivers of perseverance. In collectivistic cultures, motivation is socially shaped and intertwined with familial obligations, moral expectations, and community values (Datu, 2021). The *pesantren* context reinforces this pattern: motivation is anchored not only in personal goals but in spiritual identity and relational

expectations. This underscores the cultural importance of duty to God, family, and community, thereby amplifying early commitment and fostering respect for diverse motivational frameworks.

Complication: Crisis Phase, Reality Shock, and Emotional Pressure

At this stage, all participants reported psychological challenges as part of their adaptation to *pesantren*. Participant “E” faced severe homesickness, marked by emotional distress and even physical symptoms. Homesickness, defined as emotional discomfort due to separation from family, can trigger mental health issues (Afrilia & Siregar, 2024). Recognizing that such experiences can foster resilience may inspire educators and psychologists to see challenges as growth opportunities.

Participant “F” experienced more complex challenges involving emotional, academic, and social aspects. The transition into a new environment was the primary source of discomfort. This is supported by Aulia & Ma’rufah (2025), who found that new santri often experience emotional and social stress during adaptation. However, “F”’s active response to this discomfort illustrates how resilience and grit can develop through perseverance and effort, encouraging educators and researchers to focus on empowering *santri* responses.

Participant “H” faced academic stress that triggered personal and social distress. This pressure led to rule-breaking as a form of stress response. Wulandari & Anikoh argue that academic stress significantly affects santri’s mental health (Wulandari & Anikoh, 2025). However, “H”’s reaction to the stress became a stepping stone toward building resilience and the will to persevere. These experiences highlight that active responses to stress can serve as catalysts for developing grit and perseverance, inspiring educators and psychologists to view stress as a potential growth factor.

The complication stage emphasizes that emotional struggles—such as homesickness, exhaustion, and initial identity disorientation—are crucial early disruptions to the adaptation process, highlighting their role in resilience development. These challenges create emotional instability, yet they also activate deeper psychological processes that encourage self-regulation and adaptation. According to resilience research, developmental progress often occurs when individuals encounter adversity that requires new coping strategies (Masten, 2012). The experiences of santri support this notion, as early hardships function as catalysts that push them toward psychological adjustment.

Compared with research in other *pesantren* settings, the findings show

similarities in how structured environments evoke emotional stress. However, experiences in *pesantren* differ in how spiritual discipline and moral expectations uniquely frame these hardships, emphasizing their influence on resilience. While Western studies often describe coping in academic terms (navigating workload or peer pressure), *santri* in this study navigate challenges that intersect with spiritual identity and communal obligation. This distinction underscores that adversity in *pesantren* is not only academic or social but existential, shaping grit in ways that integrate emotional endurance with religious meaning.

Effort: Coping Strategies, Personal Principles, and Socio-Emotional Support

Participants demonstrated a range of strategies to cope with pressure in this stage. Participant “E” endured by staying true to a personal principle—that being in *pesantren* was not for comfort, but to seek knowledge. This aligns with Sugandi, who notes that adhering to religious principles helps *santri* manage pressure, thereby inspiring confidence in faith-based coping methods (Sugandi, 2024).

Participant “F”’s grit began to emerge through a combination of motivation, responsibility, and emotional and spiritual support from peers, ustaz, parents, and the kyai. External support, especially from close relationships, plays a crucial role in enhancing *santri* motivation (Hasanah, 2022). Participant “H” developed grit through personal principles and reflection on peers who gave up halfway. Peer experiences contributed externally to “H”’s motivation to stay, shaping mental endurance and accountability for personal choices.

At the effort stage, *santri* rely on spiritual practices such as prayer, Qur’anic recitation, and reflection to regulate emotions and reinterpret difficulties. These findings align strongly with recent literature demonstrating that spiritual coping enhances emotional resilience and helps individuals derive meaning from stressful experiences (Pargament & Exline, 2021). For *santri*, spiritual routines serve both as emotional anchors and cognitive frameworks for endurance, reinforcing perseverance through values such as *sabar* (patience), *tawakkal* (trust), and *istiqamah* (steadfastness).

In addition to spiritual coping, relational support from peers, teachers, seniors, and the kyai plays a central role in sustaining perseverance. Studies in *pesantren* indicates that teacher support significantly predicts *santri* engagement and persistence (Ubaidillah et al., 2024). However, the present findings extend

this understanding by showing how the *pesantren* ecosystem—through hierarchical mentorship, communal living, and shared discipline—creates a dense web of support that strengthens grit more comprehensively than in typical school settings. This highlights that grit in *pesantren* is relationally constructed rather than individually cultivated.

Resolution: Turning Points, Meaningful Experiences, and Perspective Shift

This phase highlights how participants' perspectives toward *pesantren* life evolved, emphasizing their transformative experiences that reinforced their resilience. Participant "E" underwent a notable change after moving dorms and receiving support from seniors and teachers. Feeling accepted and valued encouraged "E" to become more open and engaged. Self-acceptance became a key component, reflecting the importance of valuing oneself despite flaws (Akrom & Rosdiana, 2022).

Participant "F" shifted perceptions after experiencing a reality that differed from the negative stigma they had previously believed, and recognizing *pesantren*'s positive values and its role in shaping character allowed "F" to adopt a broader, more optimistic view. This supports Hidayat, who argued that *pesantren* often have an undeserved negative image and are, in fact, essential for moral and spiritual development (Hidayat, 2023). Participant "H" found peace in once-burdensome routines—embracing the *pesantren* life as a meaningful process allowed "H" to internalize values and accept the reality being lived. Abdullah emphasizes the *pesantren*'s role in fostering character development and environmental adaptation (Abdullah, 2021).

The resolution stage is characterized by meaningful turning points in which santri begin to reinterpret their experiences, shifting from resistance to acceptance. Experiences such as building trust, being recognized for taking on responsibility, and feeling socially integrated help santri develop a more profound sense of belonging, making the audience feel appreciated and connected. These shifts reflect a movement toward internalizing *pesantren* values, consistent with research showing that reinterpretation of adversity contributes to stronger narrative identity (McLean et al., 2020). As santri begin to align their self-concept with the *pesantren* environment, their perseverance becomes more stable and self-directed.

Comparatively, these identity shifts illustrate a dimension of grit that is underrepresented in traditional grit theories, which predominantly focus on

effort and consistency. In the *pesantren* context, identity reconstruction becomes an essential mechanism through which grit develops. *Santri* does not simply push through difficulties; they reinterpret their experiences through the lenses of spiritual growth, communal duty, and moral development. This suggests that grit among *santri* is interpretive rather than mechanical, shaped by reflective shifts in identity rather than by goal pursuit alone.

Evaluation: Reflection, Endurance Meaning, and Deepened Grit

In this stage, each participant demonstrated distinctive forms of resilience in facing challenges, reflecting the evolving nature of grit during adaptation. Participant “E” viewed endurance as part of the learning process—not a burden, but a spiritual and intellectual journey. Feeling accepted by peers and mentors further supported this commitment. Self-acceptance again played a central role in reinforcing perseverance (Akrom & Rosdiana, 2022).

Participant “F” interpreted endurance as active adaptation—creating comfort and productivity in a new environment. Recognizing *pesantren* as a space for character building shifted their mindset. This is consistent with Hidayat, who noted that *pesantren*’s significant moral contribution is often overlooked despite negative public perception (Hidayat, 2023). Participant “H” saw endurance as the ability to rise from failure. Learning to enjoy life in *pesantren*, they embraced the process and found peace in it. This mirrors Abdullah’s finding that *pesantren* foster *santri* resilience and character (Abdullah 2021).

The evaluation stage demonstrates how *santri* process and assign spiritual and moral meaning to their perseverance, which is key to understanding grit in *pesantren*. Through reflection, they interpret their struggles as part of spiritual maturity and emotional growth, thereby internalizing perseverance. This meaning-making process aligns with recent evidence indicating that reflection is critical for maintaining long-term goal commitment and resilience (Datu, 2021). Meaning-making not only reinforces grit but transforms it into a personal and spiritual value. Compared with prior research, these findings highlight that meaning-making in *pesantren* extends beyond academic or emotional evaluation. It involves spiritual interpretation, moral awareness, and the development of a purposeful life narrative. This level of reflective integration suggests that grit in *pesantren* is uniquely multilayered, merging perseverance with spiritual significance and identity coherence. Such deep integration distinguishes *santri*’s grit from more secular or individually oriented forms of perseverance documented in Western educational contexts.

Conclusion

This study reveals that Grit among santri develops through a dynamic, five-stage process: orientation, complication, effort, resolution, and evaluation. Across these stages, Grit emerges not as a fixed trait but as a continually evolving capacity shaped by initial motivation, emotional and academic challenges, spiritual coping strategies, social support, and reflective meaning-making. The findings highlight that *pesantren* environments play a significant role in fostering perseverance by providing structured routines, collective discipline, and spiritually grounded values that help *santri* reframe difficulties and strengthen resilience. Grit among santri is characterized by the integration of personal conviction, spiritual intention, and adaptive growth throughout their *pesantren* experience. Overall, the Grit of a santri is formed through a gradual process influenced by initial motivation, adaptation experiences, spiritual coping, social support from the *pesantren*, and reflection on the meaning, which strengthens their identity as a *santri*.

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