Piloting film-based intervention on *santri*'s perception towards striving for academic success: findings from Kampung Santri, Kudus Regency

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Abstract

This study is performed based on concerns that knowledge dichotomy in traditional Islamic boarding schools has not received the serious attention it deserves. In contrast to modern *pesantren* where *santri r*eceives both religious and non-religious knowledge, most traditional *pesantren* in Jekulo, Kudus regency only emphasizes religious knowledge as their core curriculum. Our preliminary study in 2022 suggested that the majority of student *santri* in Jekulo, Kudus regency showed unfavorable perceptions towards pursuing higher education despite being offered financial aid and academic mentorship. Our current task is to introduce film-based intervention and document its effect on *santri's* perception change towards academic success. Although the use of film-based intervention to change perception and reduce stigma has been profound in the field of clinical psychology, its application in a nonclinical setting is still understudied. Using Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) as our analytical framework, we propose that historical film can be introduced as an alternative point of reference for our subject. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling (n=20). Pre- and post-studies are provided to document *santri's* perception change toward striving for academic success. The results of this study confirm that film intervention can act as positive stimuli in the process of perception changes among *santri* by presenting relatable cinematic historical experiences as an alternative social reference. However, a lack of a role model and a shared perception toward academic success in *santri's* immediate environment can hinder the process

Keywords: *Film-based intervention, Perception Change, Higher Education, Pesantren, Social Reference*

INTRODUCTION

The contribution of Islamic boarding house, or *pesantren* hereafter, in the development of student's personal and academic skill has so far been unparalleled. Indonesian *pesantren* started with a humble beginning as a community-based education emphasizing religious knowledge and practical skills. Despite its outstanding reputation, this study is performed based on concerns that knowledge dichotomy in *pesantren* has not received the serious attention it deserves. In contrast to modern *pesantren* where santri receives both religious and non-religious knowledge, most traditional *pesantren*

emphasize religious knowledge in their core curriculum. This study further argues that the discrepancy between religious and non-religious knowledge in traditional *pesantren* curriculum resulted in unfavorable perceptions towards nonreligious knowledge among *santri.* A growing number of literatures appear to suggest the hypothesis. Baharuddin (2011) extensively unravels the issue of dichotomy in Islamic education arguing that resistance towards non-religious knowledge can be the extreme result of prolonged dichotomy practices in Islamic educational institutions. Iing (2021) highlights the negative stigma received by modernity in *pesantren* curriculum i.e., overly academic oriented, prioritizing formal education, and shifting of traditional values.

This study was carried out as a follow-up to a community service program held by the Faculty of Languages and Communication Sciences, Universitas Islam Sultan Agung in 2022 located in Kampung Santri Jekulo, Kudus Regency. The program provides mentorship for *santri* interested in joining Beasiswa Santri Berprestasi (Distinguished *Santri S*cholarship) selection. The scholarship was awarded by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Indonesia and aims at selecting the most distinguished *santri* to receive financial aid in pursuing higher education.

Respondents in this study takes the same respondents as in our community service program. We initiate partnerships with two *pesantren* in Kampung Santri Jekulo, Kudus Regency i.e., Pondok Pesantren Darul Falah and Pondok Pesantren An-Nur Al-Islami to distribute info about our mentorship program. Prospective *santri* then receives endorsement from their *pesantren* leader or *kyai* to participate in the program. The endorsement was made based on academic performance and interest to join the mentorship program. The demography of our respondents along with their perception of pursuing higher education is summarized in the following table:

Table 1. Respondents' Distribution based on Sex, Age, and Initial Perception toward Higher Education

Respondents Characteristics	n	%
Sex		
Male	20	100
Female	0	0
Age		
17 years old	16	80
18 years old	4	20
Currently Attending Formal Education		
Yes	20	100
No	0	0
Perception towards Higher Education		
Strong Positive	0	0
Positive	8	40
Negative	11	55
Strong Negative	1	5

Our preliminary study suggested that the majority of student *santri* in Jekulo, Kudus regency showed unfavorable perceptions towards pursuing

higher education despite being offered financial assistance and academic mentorship. Factors influencing *santri's* perception towards striving for higher education are a lack of confidence in their own academic skills (60%), concerns about new unreligious environments in campus accommodation (30%), and fear of long structured academic commitment (10%).

> "As much as I want to go to college, I don't think I can keep up with the (course) materials. It's not that I don't want to try but I am afraid to drop out in the middle of the semester" (Respondent 1, 2022).

> "I have heard stuffs about boys and girls sharing accommodations in the campus area. How's that possible? There's no night curfew? ... I am not accustomed to such an environment. It's dangerous" (Respondent 7, 2022).

> "My hometown is just too far away from my hometown. I don't think I want to go to university. Four years is a long-time commitment." (Respondent 17, 2022)

It is worth mentioning here that the above responses were given after *santri* was informed that academic mentorship as well as financial resources are available not only from the Distinguished *Santri S*cholarship (in case they failed the recruitment process) but would also be available from our partner institutions. It was not our goal to trace down the underlying cause of these unfavorable perceptions toward pursuing higher education. The following task, which is the concern of the current study, is to examine if *santri's* perception towards striving for academic success will change after a film-based interventions. Our definition of academic success refers to York, Gibson, & Rankin's (2015): student's engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational outcomes, and post-college performance.

This study uses a historical film titled "The Land of Five Towers". The film narrates an inspirational friendship of five *santri* – Alif, Raja, Atang, Said, and Dulmajid – who grow a special bond as they quest for their life purpose while attending *pesantren* Madani. Released in 2012, "The Land of Five Towers" receives positive reviews for its inspirational message of friendship, courage, and perseverance of each character to pursue their success. Directed by Affandi Rachman, "The Land of Five Towers" is an adaptation of a novel inspired by the author of "Negeri Lima Menara" — Ahmad Fuadi who is a *pesantren* graduate and former TEMPO & VOA reporter.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Although the use of film-based intervention to change perception and reduce stigma has been profound in the field of clinical psychology (see Lohan, et. al., 2014; Lagana, et. al., 2017; Marsick, E., 2020; Goodwin, et. al., 2021; Sznadjer, et. al. 2022, etc.), its application in a nonclinical setting is still understudied. Documented attempt in other fields has so far been limited to its

implication for (English) language skills improvement (see Joan Morley, 2006; Sánchez-Auñón, et. al. 2023; Alolaywi, 2023, etc.).

If we start our discussion with an argument that positive intervention in film experience plays role in audiences' perceptions, how does it work? This section calls into question the interactions and intersections between intervention, perception change, and film experience. For the purpose of this study, firstly, investigate the main theses in Social Comparison Theory. Secondly, we examine the role of intervention and perception change in a historical film screening setting.

Perception Change in Social Comparison Theory

Social Comparison Theory was introduced in 1954 by American social psychologist Leon Festinger. In principle, the theory suggests that people are more likely to be engaged in social comparison as a mechanism to draw an accurate self-evaluation and to reduce doubt about their own self-perception and abilities. Festinger proposed nine fundamental principles to understand how individuals evaluate themselves, their perceptions, and their abilities with others in their social environment:

1. *A drive to evaluate one's opinion and abilities is inherent in the human organism.* This emphasizes that opinions and abilities act together and affect behavior. Consequently, inaccurate appraisal of one's abilities can serve negatively and even fatally affect his social life.
2. *To the extent that objective, non-social means are not available, people evaluate their opinions and abilities by comparison respectively with the opinions and abilities of others.* Festinger further explains that conversely, in a situation where an objective, non-social basis of evaluation becomes readily available, people will no longer evaluate their opinion or abilities by comparing themselves with others.
3. *The tendency to compare oneself with some other specific person decreases as the difference between his opinion or ability and one's own increases.* The hypothesis seems to confirm the opposite *i.e.,* a person will not have the tendency to compare himself with people whose opinions or abilities are extremely divergent from his own's.
4. *There is a unidirectional drive upward in the case of abilities which is largely absent in* opinions. Festinger posits that "with respect to abilities, different performances have intrinsically different values … while with respect to most opinions, on the other hand, in the absence of comparison, there is no inherent, intrinsic basis for preferring one opinion over another."
5. *There are non-social restraints which make it difficult or even impossible to change one's ability.* These non-social restraints are largely absent for [change of] opinions. The fifth hypothesis stresses that regarding the presence of non-social restraints, once they can be overcome, there should never be any further restraint that would make it difficult for the change to become effective.
6. *The cessation of comparison with others is very likely to be accompanied by hostility or derogation to the extent that continued comparison with those persons implies unpleasant consequences.* Here we learn that continued comparison, according to Festinger, can

result in the feeling of derogation and association with rejection from the social group.

7. *Any factors which increase the importance of some particular group as a comparison group for some particular opinion or ability will increase the pressure toward uniformity concerning that ability or opinion within that group.*

8. *If persons who are very divergent from one's own opinion or ability are perceived as different from oneself on attributes consistent with the divergence, the tendency to narrow the range of comparability becomes stronger.*

9. *When there is a range of opinions or abilities in a group, the relative strength of pressures toward uniformity will be different for those close to the group's mode than for those distant from the mode.* Specifically, those close to the mode of the group will have: 1) stronger tendencies to change the positions of others, 2) relatively weaker tendencies to narrow the range of comparison, and 3) much weaker tendencies to change their own position compared to those who are distant from the mode of the group (summarized from Festinger, 1954: 1-13).

In pedagogical research, the concept has been useful in offering a psychological framework to explain students' unique process of self-evaluation and to some extent, predict their social behaviours. Norvilitis JM, & Zhang J (2009), for example, provide comprehensive research on the effect of perceived class mean on the evaluation of instruction while Zhao & Zhang (2020) study how changing reference can alter college students' perception of physical attractiveness. In terms of modality, these studies served as an important setup to ours. However, the role of film experience as a modifying factor in students' perception remains understudied.

Audience and Perception in Historical Film Experience

For a *santri* audience, Alif's doubt about staying at *pesantren* Madani; Baso's fear of dropping out *pesantren;* the voice of self-determination as *santri* cheers *man jadda wa jada* are some relatable historical experiences pictured in "The Land of Five Towers". As was mentioned in the introduction, we propose that historical film can be introduced as an alternative point of reference in *santri*'s process of perception toward academic success.

Discussion on perception constitutes attempts to understand the complex relationship between humans and the world. The study of perception has so far been understood in two contradictory streams. The traditional approach unreservedly acknowledged the world and the individual as separate entities where objective realities are observable from the outside. In this perspective, "… the world was always presented first, as an existing reality external to the individual, and whose truth the individual had to conquer" (Meunier, 2019). As a result, discussion of film experience has been limited to spectatorship fascination, the outsized control of the image, or the magic of movies. A phenomenological approach, on the other hand, relies on the embodiment of the lived, first-person experience and how it is used to understand the subjective world. According to Meunier (2019), phenomenology

lets the spectator find reality internally, in the experience of the subject. In line with this view is Greiner (2021) who suggests that film should not merely be seen as an object of study but as a phenomenology. In a study design where a historical film is the study object, this approach would lend itself especially well for its emphasis on embodied perception and reflexivity. For the present purpose of this study, we use the term historical film in reference to a genre of film comprising narratives taking place in the past and characterized chiefly by an imaginative reconstruction of historical events and personages.

Speaking on the importance of the audience's perspective in the phenomenology of film, let's come back to Greiner's description that in embodied film perception, spectators are allowed to have an impression of making direct contact with a film's historical world. Although there seems to be no clear-cut definition of embodied film perception in the literature, we find it safe to agree here that film as embodied perception can refer to "… our day-to-day perception of the world, where experience and meanings are mediated." In this model, the audience's subjective perception is celebrated for its capacity of reflexivity as Shobchack (1992) puts it: "A film is an act of seeing that makes itself seen, an act of hearing that makes itself heard, an act of physical and reflective movement that makes itself reflexively felt and understood". Morsch's conception (in Greiner, 2011) goes further than this. He argues that "the corporality of the spectator should be understood as a productive power of aesthetic experience".

We believe that the choice of historical film in this study compares well with Breyer and Creutz 's (in Greiner, 2021) for several reasons. First, historical films "… have the power to convey other people's experiences to us and allow us to imaginatively relive them, such that by using imagination and empathy we are able, from the perspective of the narrator or characters, to relate to their experience as if we ourselves were having it right now". Second, in a moment of historical experience, "… film experience blends not just with the spectator's cognitive associations, but also with the perceptions of the film's body and with the film's historical narrative". Benjamin (2009) adds an interesting analogy between film perception and historical knowledge that: "no art can historically articulate the past in the way cinema can, for inherent in the transience of the film image is a specific possibility of experience and thought". At this point, we are confident to conclude that our proposal seems to satisfy Greiner's figuration of phenomenology in a historical film experience.

METHODS

Using a historical film titled "The Land of Five Towers", this study employs a qualitative method with a phenomenology of film approach. In film literature, this approach allows both of audience's imagination and perception to play an essential role in the experience of films (Wilson, 2011). Film intervention in this study includes cross-cutting vignettes highlighting four important aspects regarding striving for higher education. The first is vignettes of historical footage in" Negeri Lima Menara". The second one is of the characters' dreams and the difficulties each faces in pursuing their dreams. The third is the manifestation of the 'magical mantra' *man jadda wa jada* – an Arabic for 'whoever does something persistently will succeed', and the last one is a

vignette of the characters' success. After the film screening, post-tests and panel discussions are provided to answer questions and contextualize messages in the film.

This study finds good support in the Social Comparison Theory in the sense that perception change works best in the context of reference. In this light, the vignettes are presented as an alternative social reference to the idea of striving for academic success. Using the Theory of Social Comparison (Festinger, 1954) as our analytical framework, we propose that historical experience in a film can be introduced as an alternative point of reference for our subject. Respondents of this study involve student *santri* (n=20) from *Pondok Pesantren* Darul Falah and *Pondok Pesantren* An-Nur Al-Islami who were selected using purposive sampling. After the movie screening, pre- and post-studies are provided to document if *santri*'s perception towards striving for higher education shifts after the intervention. The result of our preliminary finding is summarized in Table 1.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our preliminary data revealed that 60% of *santri* agreed that pursuing higher education is a challenge due to fear of academic difficulties. Our immediate impression was that financial challenges were never a main concern regarding pursuing higher education. Initial observation of respondents' profiles suggests that lack of academic confidence correlates positively to *santri*'s unfavorable view of academic success. Although specific information regarding the level of santri's confidence level was not retrieved during our fieldwork, claims from our interview support this impression. A number of research on the relationship between self-confidence and academic success also bear close resemblance to our findings (see Aryana, 2010; Zhao, 2021; and Saban, 2022; for a *pesantren* context see Rahmatika, 2016).

During focused group discussion, four kinds of vignettes from *The Land of Five Towers* film were presented. The first vignette is the historical footage of *Pesantren* Madani.

Figure 1. Vignette of historical footage in "Negeri Lima Menara"

Although the naming of the *pesantren* in *The Land of Five Towers* is fictional, the film was shot at a real *pesantren building* in *Pesantren* Gontor, East Java. According to Sobhack, film as a communication system can be effective when the sensuous experience is used to make meaning visible, audible, and tangible. Unlike reading the novel version where visualization of historical

narrative is limited, watching "The Land of Five Towers" film can deliberately simulate and model *santri*'s historical experience in *pesantren.* Through the cinematic display of *pesantren* dormitory and its routine, both imaginative and empathetic relationships between our *santri* audience and the characters in the film are built.

We learned that most studies on *santri* and self-esteem tend to overlook the use of positive image comparison in a subject with low self-esteem. In this logic, the proposition is: *if they can do it then you can do it too.* The flaw of this approach is that it ignores the important starting point of providing the subject with a compatible point of reference. We assert that building associative mental images to the audience's historical experiences is important in the intervention process. To understand the importance of similarities range between the subject and object of comparison, it will be helpful to return to Festinger's Social Comparison Theory. The third principle of the theory asserts that a person will not have the tendency to compare himself with people whose opinions or abilities are extremely divergent from his own's. According to Greiner (2021), the introductory description of a similar process highlights the importance of conscious remembering for the historiographic process. The depiction of *santri*'s financial and academic difficulties; moments where love springs in the preadolescent years; and socio-emotional conflicts such as self-doubt or tense emotions with loved ones; are the historical glue that bonds the audience and the historical narrative in the film.

The second vignette is the depiction of each character's dream and their difficulties and the third is the manifestation of the 'magical mantra' *man jadda wa jada.*

Figure 2. Vignette of the character's dream and how each faces difficulties in pursuing their dreams

Figure 3. Vignette of the manifestation of the 'magical mantra' *man jadda wa jada*

The two vignettes go hand in hand in describing the causal relationship between *santri*'s elimination of non-social restraints and perception of academic success. The choice of these vignettes is provided largely based on Festinger's fifth principle. According to this proponent, "… any individual's opinion can be altered once he manages to overcome non-social restraints that make him lean in one direction or another". Unfortunately, the case is more difficult with regards to changing or improving one's ability or changing one's performance which reflects this ability. Festinger further explains, that there are non-social restraints such as consistency with other opinions and beliefs or personality characteristics that make it difficult or even impossible for an individual to change or improve his ability. We opt to take an optimistic look at this principle as: even though a change in an individual's ability is difficult, especially in a situation where the non-social constraint is absent, a change of opinion is still very much possible. In this perspective, our goal is to interfere and hopefully change their perspective by eliminating non-social constraints e.g., self-doubt and low self-esteem.

Figure 4. Vignette of the characters' success.

During the intervention session, we try to manipulate *santri*'s unfavorable perception towards striving for academic success by highlighting different kinds of difficulties faced *by santri* and the various struggles each character faces to overcome their difficulties, we then paired these with vignettes of the characters' success. Discussion on each character stresses on different kinds of intelligence and manifestations of academic success. With the magical mantra of *man jadda wa jada* or 'whoever does something persistently will succeed', Alif who finally finds his path in journalism, later becomes a VOA reporter in the US while Baso, despite dropping out of *pesantren*, manages to attain a scholarship to United Arab Emirates.

We pay serious attention to Baso's hero journey to facilitate a reflective-empathetic moment and open conversation on how members of marginalized and minority groups can achieve success if he seek stronger support within himself and less from the majority group. Unlike his peers who are financially comfortable, Baso's is underprivileged in many ways – an orphan with no immediate family support and facing financial difficulties – yet he eventually succeeds.

In a post-test session following the film screening, we return to our initial question on *santri*'s perception of academic success. The result of the post test shows a significant change in *santri's* perception of higher education and

academic success. Prior to watching the film, Respondent 1 showed a strong negative perception towards higher learning – doubting his own academic skill and commitment to finishing higher education. A summary of the post-test report is presented in Table 2 below.

> "It seems that everyone [in the story] is going through a lot but complains very little … turns out you can also figure out what you like in the process." (Respondent 1, 2023).

> "[Jokingly] Fuadi is cool but my friends is nothing like him. We play soccer and sleep a little bit too much … but interestingly, I've seen people who are more lazy than me and he graduated from university. Now he is a civil servant." (Respondent 7, 2023).

> "*Pesantren* Madani is already like a university. The *ustadz* looks and dresses like a lecturer. If you're required to speak English everyday, everyone can be successful. It would be such a pressure when you don't" (Respondent 11, 2023).

Our success in presenting familiarization with the previously unimaginable idea of attending higher education owes a lot to Abdul Rachman's cinematic visualization of *pesantren* Madani as a modern place of learning resembling our respondent's imagination of universities. Respondent 7 explains in the focused group discussion that he imagined campus life as seen in *Pesantren* Madani where both students and teachers engages in extracurricular activities, speaks English and dress formally in suits and ties. Historical movie in this context, as Greiner (2021) puts it, act as a mediator between spectators' day-to-day experience and their perceived meanings.

Figure 5. Visualization of *Pesantren Madani* as University-like place of learning

The post test result indicates that *santri* with favorable opinion towards higher education is more likely to also have a favorable opinion towards striving for academic success. We find an important influencing factor here i.e. the portrayal of comparable role models as an alternative to *santri's* social reference. This finding finds high correllation with an experimental study by Zhao & Zhang (2021). Zhao & Zhang's study concludes that providing alternative point of reference can result in a change of a person's current references or their

intrepretation of their prior references. This is especially important when ideal role model is non-existent.

Table 2. Respondents' distribution based on sex, age, and final perception toward striving for academic success

Respondents Characteristics	n	%
Sex		
Male	20	100
Female	0	0
Age		
17 years old	16	80
18 years old	4	20
Currently Attending Formal Education		
Yes	20	100
No	0	0
Consider the Film as an Alternative Point of Reference of Success		
Yes	19	95
No	1	5
Perception towards Higher Education		
Strong Positive	0	0
Positive	8	40
Negative	11	55
Strong Negative	1	5
Perception towards Academic Success		
Strong Positive	0	0
Positive	8	40
Negative	11	55
Strong Negative	1	5

Generally speaking, we find that film intervention is helpful in altering *santri*'s perception except for one respondent (Respondent 17) who still shows an unfavorable perception towards academic success. This is contradictive to principle 7 in Social Comparison Theory where peer pressure and pressure towards uniformity (during the study) can influence an individual to change his opinion.

> "I like the movie. I actually have seen it before. The idea [of pursuing academic success] is interesting … I just don't think it's for me" (Respondent 17, 2023).

We follow up this finding with an in-depth interview and reveal that despite being considered as academically capable by the *kyai,* the parents of Respondent 7, who iare both entrepreneurs, hold the belief that a university degree is unnecessary to start a career as an entrepreneur. Being raised in a family where almost everyone is an entrepreneur, Respondent 7 does not have

any immediate family members who go to university (yet still become successful entrepreneurs).

To sum up our findings, we find several underlying factors contributing to their perception change: first, a shared feeling of vulnerability; second, the presence of an inspiring *santri* figure; and third, access to a supportive social and peer environment. With regards to principle 7 in Social Comparison Theory where peer pressure and pressure towards uniformity (during the study) can alter an individual's perception, our study suggests that a lack of social reference and shared perception in an immediate environment can hinder the process.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study confirm that: 1) building associative mental images to the audience's historical experiences is important in the perception change process; 2) alternative social reference presented as an intervention during film screening can act as positive stimuli in the process of perception changes among *santri;* 3) lastly there are three underlying factors contributing to *santri*'s perception change towards striving for academic success. First, acknowledgment of a shared feeling of vulnerability; second, the presence of an inspiring *santri* figure; and third, access to a supportive social and peer environment. Future studies should include a discussion of modifying factors in *santri*'s perception change.

AUTHOR STATEMENT

Author 1: Conceptualization, data collection, and data analysis. **Author 2**: Supervision and data collection. **Author 3**: Supervision, manuscript editing, and proofreading.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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