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ANALYZING SANTRI PERCEPTIONS OF THE READABILITY AND COMPREHENSION OF CLASSICAL ISLAMIC TEXTS IN KHAT NASKHI

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Abstract: Classical Islamic texts remain the cornerstone of Islamic education in pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), yet their readability poses a significant challenge, particularly for novice santri. This difficulty stems not only from the linguistic complexity of classical Arabic but also from the visual characteristics of the script (khat) used in printing. This study aims to analyze the perceptions of santri regarding the readability and comprehension of classical Islamic texts written in khat Naskhi at the Qur'anan 'Arobiyya Islamic Boarding School in Kediri, Indonesia. Khat Naskhi was selected for its clarity, proportionality, and widespread use in modern Qur'anic mushafs, making it a potential candidate for enhancing text accessibility. Employing a mixed-methods descriptive approach, data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and a questionnaire distributed to 55 respondents across various educational levels. The results indicate that 87% of santri found khat Naskhi easier to read, while 86% reported that it improved their understanding of the text. These findings underscore the significant influence of the visual aspect of script on the effectiveness of learning classical texts. However, a notable minority of santri perceived khat Naskhi as less representative of the traditional aesthetic and scholarly heritage associated with classical texts. This study concludes that while khat Naskhi is a highly effective tool for improving readability and comprehension for beginners, its adoption must be balanced with the preservation of traditional script forms to maintain the cultural and spiritual identity of pesantren education. The results provide a crucial foundation for the development of adaptive, user-centered learning media that are both pedagogically effective and culturally grounded.

INTRODUCTION | مقدمة | PENDAHULUAN

Pesantren, as a traditional Islamic educational institution, has played a pivotal role for centuries in transmitting Islamic knowledge across generations, primarily through the study of classical books, commonly referred to as *kitab kuning* (yellow books) or classical Islamic texts (Jamil, 2024). These texts represent the intellectual legacy of past scholars (*ulama*), composed predominantly in classical Arabic. They are characterized by a distinctive writing style, often devoid of vowel markings (*harakat*), and employ dense, complex sentence structures that demand a high level of proficiency in Arabic grammar (*nahwu*) and morphology (*sharaf*) for full comprehension (Muslimah et al., 2024). The mastery of these texts is not merely an academic exercise but a spiritual journey, forming the bedrock of religious authority and scholarly tradition in the Indonesian context.

In practice, *santri* face a dual challenge when engaging with these texts: a linguistic barrier and a visual barrier. The linguistic challenge is well-documented, requiring years of dedicated study to master the nuances of classical Arabic. However, the visual challenge, stemming from the form of Arabic script (*khat*) used in the printing of these manuscripts, is a less explored yet equally critical factor (Mahmudi et al., 2025). For generations, the tradition of printing classical Islamic texts in Indonesia has favored classical *khat* such as *Thuluth*, *Farisi*, or *Riq'ah*. While these

scripts are aesthetically rich and carry a deep historical and spiritual resonance, their ornate and often cursive forms are frequently considered difficult to decipher for novice *santri* (Aswani, 2024).

The advent of modern printing technology and the growing need for enhanced accessibility have led to the introduction of *khat Naskhi* in the reproduction of classical Islamic texts (Ansari et al., 2024). *Khat Naskhi*, a more modern and systematic form of Arabic writing, is the standard script used in contemporary Qur'ans and Arabic language textbooks (Alashari & Hamid, 2021). Its letters are generally clearer, more proportional, and less ambiguous than many of its classical counterparts. This makes *khat Naskhi* significantly more accessible, particularly for *santri* who are at the beginning stages of their studies and are still grappling with the basics of Arabic script (Multazam & Nasrullah, 2023). The shift toward *khat Naskhi* represents a potential pedagogical innovation, aiming to lower the initial barrier to entry for classical learning.

The Qur'anan 'Arobiyya Islamic Boarding School in Kediri, East Java, exemplifies this trend. As an institution that integrates *tahfidzul Qur'an* (Qur'an memorization) with the mastery of classical Islamic texts, it has placed a special emphasis on learning media that support text readability. Several classical texts used in its curriculum have been reprinted using *khat Naskhi*, with the explicit goal of improving *santri*'s comprehension of the material. While this adaptation is promising, the extent to which this change in script affects *santri*'s subjective experience of reading and understanding remains an open question that warrants empirical investigation.

Perception, as a subjective representation formed from an individual's interaction with a stimulus (Nisa et al., 2023), is a crucial metric for evaluating the effectiveness of any learning medium. In this context, *santri*'s perception of the readability and comprehensibility of texts printed in *khat Naskhi* is paramount. Understanding these perceptions allows educational institutions to assess whether the technical adaptation of the script genuinely enhances the learning process or if it inadvertently creates a disconnect from the traditional learning environment.

This study is particularly important because the existing body of research has predominantly focused on methodological aspects of teaching classical texts, such as *sorogan* (individual recitation), *bandongan* (group reading), or *halqah* (circle discussion) (Neliwati, 2023). The technical aspects of text design, including the visual presentation of the script, have received far less scholarly attention. Yet, in the current digital and visual era, the visualization of text is a key determinant of reader engagement and comprehension (Bian & Ji, 2021). If *khat Naskhi* is proven to significantly improve readability and accelerate understanding, its adoption could be a strategic step in the technical modernization of classical text education in *pesantren*.

Readability is a fundamental prerequisite for text comprehension, especially in a context that demands intense concentration and sophisticated grammatical analysis (Kurniawan & Faqih, 2023). Although classical texts have been the primary reference for centuries, the modern generation of *santri* operates in a vastly different visual and cognitive environment. This necessitates technical adaptations to ensure that the profound values within these books are transmitted effectively. One such under-researched technical aspect is the form of the script used in the text's manuscript.

The scarcity of scientific studies on the impact of script form on the understanding of classical texts makes this research a significant contribution to the field. It directly addresses a gap by empirically examining *santri*'s lived experiences. By investigating their perceptions, this study provides more than just an assessment of effectiveness; it opens a space for learner-

centered innovation. The findings are expected to inform *pesantren* leaders and publishers, encouraging them to consider readability as an integral component of educational quality, all while preserving the traditional values that define the *pesantren* identity.

This study aims to analyze the perceptions of *santri* at the Qur'anan 'Arobiyya Islamic Boarding School regarding the readability and comprehension of classical Islamic texts using *khat Naskhi*. Specifically, it seeks to answer two research questions: (1) How do *santri* perceive the readability of classical texts printed in *khat Naskhi*? and (2) How does the use of *khat Naskhi* influence *santri*'s comprehension of the textual content? The research employs a mixed-methods descriptive approach, combining quantitative data from a questionnaire with qualitative insights from interviews and observations to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

METHOD | منهج | METODE

This study employed a mixed-methods descriptive research design to obtain a holistic and comprehensive understanding of *santri*'s perceptions of *khat Naskhi* in classical Islamic texts. The rationale for using a mixed-methods approach lies in its ability to capture both the breadth of quantitative data and the depth of qualitative insights (Pugu et al., 2024). A purely quantitative approach could measure the prevalence of positive or negative perceptions but would fail to explain the underlying reasons and contextual experiences. Conversely, a purely qualitative approach might provide rich narratives but would lack the generalizability offered by a larger sample. By integrating both, this study was able to measure the level of agreement numerically while also exploring the nuanced reasons behind these perceptions through direct dialogue.

Research Setting and Population

The research was conducted at the Qur'anan 'Arobiyya Islamic Boarding School in Kediri City, East Java, Indonesia. This institution was chosen as a case study because it actively uses both traditional script editions and newer editions printed in *khat Naskhi* for its classical text curriculum, providing a natural environment for comparison. The population for this study consisted of all 122 *santri* enrolled in the classical text study program at the boarding school.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

A sample was drawn from the population using the Slovin formula to determine the minimum sample size required for a population of 122 with a 10% margin of error. The calculation yielded a sample size of 55 respondents. This sampling technique ensured that the findings could be generalized to the population with a reasonable level of confidence. The sample was selected through proportional stratified random sampling to ensure representation across different educational levels, including junior high school (SMP/MTs), senior high school (SMA/MA), undergraduate (S1), and postgraduate (S2) students. This diversity was crucial for capturing a range of experiences, from those of beginners to more advanced learners.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using four primary techniques to ensure triangulation and enhance the validity and reliability of the findings.

1. Questionnaire: A closed-ended questionnaire was administered to all 55 respondents. The instrument used a five-point Likert scale (ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree") to measure the level of agreement with statements related to readability (e.g.,

"The letters in *khat Naskhi* are clear and easy to distinguish") and comprehension (e.g., "Using *khat Naskhi* helps me understand the meaning of the text faster"). This provided the quantitative data for statistical analysis.

2. Semi-structured Interviews: In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 purposively selected *santri* (5 from each of the beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels). The interview guide was flexible, allowing for follow-up questions to explore themes that emerged in the questionnaire. Questions focused on their personal experiences, challenges, and preferences when reading texts in different scripts.
3. Observation: The researcher conducted non-participant observations during *santri*'s independent study and group recitation (*sorogan* and *bandongan*) sessions. The focus was on their reading behavior, such as the frequency of pausing, squinting, or using a finger to track lines, which served as non-verbal indicators of reading difficulty. 4. Document Analysis: A comparative analysis was performed on the physical copies of classical texts used at the school. The study examined editions printed in traditional *khat* (e.g., *Thuluth*) and those in *khat Naskhi*, noting differences in letter form, spacing, font size, and overall layout.

Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted in two parallel streams, corresponding to the two types of data collected.

1. Quantitative Data Analysis: The data from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for each response category to identify the dominant trends and overall tendencies in the santri's perceptions. This analysis provided a clear, numerical summary of the findings.
2. Qualitative Data Analysis: The data from interviews, observations, and document analysis were analyzed using thematic analysis. The process involved transcribing the interviews, reading through all the data to become familiar with its content, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining these themes, and finally defining and naming them. This method allowed for the identification of recurring patterns, such as the aesthetic value of traditional scripts or the practical benefits of khat Naskhi.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research, data triangulation was employed by cross-verifying the findings from the questionnaire, interviews, and observations. This multi-source approach strengthened the validity of the conclusions drawn.

RESULTS | نتائج | TEMUAN

The data analysis revealed a clear pattern of positive perception toward *khat Naskhi* among the majority of *santri*, particularly concerning readability, while also highlighting a significant concern for the preservation of traditional aesthetics.

Perceptions of Readability

The quantitative data from the questionnaire showed a strong consensus on the superior readability of *khat Naskhi*. When asked if the script made reading easier, 87% of respondents (48 out of 55) either "Agreed" or "Strongly Agreed." Only 7% (4 respondents) were neutral, and a mere 6% (3 respondents) disagreed.

The qualitative interviews provided context for this high level of agreement. Many beginner *santri* described the traditional scripts as "confusing" and "tiring to read," citing the difficulty in distinguishing between similar-looking letters (e.g., *ba'*, *ta'*, *tha'*). One first-year student stated, "When I read the old script, I often get lost in the lines. But with *Naskhi*, the letters are like blocks, standing clearly. I can follow the text much more easily." This sentiment was echoed in the observation notes, where researchers noted a significant reduction in the number of times beginner *santri* paused or used their fingers to track lines when reading *khat Naskhi* texts compared to traditional ones.

The clarity of letter forms and consistent spacing were repeatedly mentioned as key advantages. A postgraduate student, while preferring the traditional script for its beauty, acknowledged the practicality of *Naskhi*: "For deep study, I still use the original. But for a quick reference or for beginners, *khat Naskhi* is undeniably clearer. The letters don't run into each other, and the baseline is stable."

Table 1: Distribution of Santri's Perceptions on the Readability of Khat Naskhi

Perception Level	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	10	18
Agree	38	69
Neutral	4	7
Disagree	2	4
Strongly Disagree	1	2
Total	55	100

Source: Primary data collected by the researchers

Perceptions of Comprehension

The study also found a strong correlation between readability and comprehension. A total of 86% of respondents (47 out of 55) reported that using khat Naskhi helped them understand the content of the text. This suggests that when cognitive effort is not consumed by the act of deciphering the script, more mental resources are available for linguistic and semantic analysis.

Interviews revealed that this improved comprehension was particularly noticeable in the early stages of learning. "Before, I would spend so much time just trying to read a single line," shared a second-year student. "Now, I can read a paragraph quickly, and my mind is free to think about what the words actually mean." This aligns with the cognitive load theory, which posits that reducing extraneous cognitive load (in this case, the effort to decode the script) frees up working memory for essential cognitive processes like understanding.

Perceptions of Aesthetic and Traditional Value

Despite the overwhelming positive feedback on readability and comprehension, a significant qualitative theme emerged: a perceived loss of traditional character. While 40% of respondents "Agreed" and 45% "Strongly Agreed" that khat Naskhi has advantages, a substantial number of santri, especially those at intermediate and advanced levels, expressed a deep emotional and cultural attachment to the traditional scripts.

One advanced santri lamented, "The old script has a soul. It connects us to the scholars of the past. Reading it feels like a form of takhalluq (emulating the manners of the pious). Khat Naskhi feels too modern, too plain. It loses the nuansa (nuance) of the kitab kuning." This

sentiment was not a rejection of khat Naskhi but a call for balance. The consensus among the more experienced santri was that khat Naskhi is an excellent tool for beginners but should not replace the traditional script entirely. They emphasized the importance of eventually learning the classical scripts to fully appreciate the heritage and authenticity of the texts.

DISCUSSION | مناقشة | DISKUSI

The findings of this study present a compelling case for the pedagogical value of *khat Naskhi* in the context of *pesantren* education, while simultaneously highlighting the need for a culturally sensitive approach to educational reform. The discussion will interpret these findings in relation to the research questions and existing literature, exploring the implications for practice and theory.

Interpreting the High Readability of Khat Naskhi

The primary finding—that *khat Naskhi* is perceived as significantly more readable than traditional scripts—is well-supported by the data and aligns with its inherent design principles. The success of *khat Naskhi* can be attributed to its visual clarity and structural consistency. Unlike the flowing, interconnected strokes of *Thuluth* or *Riq'ah*, *khat Naskhi* features a more modular design with distinct, upright letter forms and a stable baseline. This reduces the cognitive load required for visual processing, allowing the reader to focus on the linguistic content rather than the graphical form. This finding corroborates the work of Bian and Ji (2021), who emphasize that in a visual culture, the design of text is a critical factor in comprehension. The observation that *santri* made fewer reading errors and paused less frequently when using *khat Naskhi* texts provides empirical evidence of this reduced cognitive burden. This is particularly crucial for novice *santri*, whose Arabic proficiency is still developing; a clear script acts as a scaffold, preventing early frustration and dropout.

From Readability to Comprehension: A Cognitive Link

The second key finding—that improved readability leads to enhanced comprehension—demonstrates a direct link between the visual and cognitive aspects of learning. This supports the theoretical framework of cognitive load theory. When the effort to decode the script (extraneous load) is minimized, cognitive resources are freed for essential tasks such as parsing complex grammatical structures, understanding vocabulary, and constructing meaning (Kurniawan & Faqih, 2023). The qualitative data, where *santri* reported being able to "think about the meaning" rather than "just reading the letters," provides a vivid illustration of this cognitive shift. This finding has profound implications: it suggests that technical improvements in text presentation can have a direct and measurable impact on the core objective of *pesantren* education—the deep understanding of Islamic knowledge.

The Aesthetic and Cultural Dimension: A Call for Balance

The most nuanced and arguably the most significant finding is the tension between pedagogical efficiency and cultural preservation. While *khat Naskhi* wins on practical grounds, it faces resistance on aesthetic and spiritual grounds. For many *santri*, the traditional script is not merely a vehicle for text; it is an integral part of the *kitab kuning*'s identity and a symbol of a centuries-old scholarly tradition. The script's beauty and complexity are seen as a reflection of the depth and sanctity of the knowledge it contains. This aligns with the concept of *takhalluq*, where the manner of engaging with a text is part of the learning process itself (Rofiq, 2022).

Replacing it with a more utilitarian script, no matter how effective, can feel like a loss of authenticity and a disconnection from the scholarly lineage (*sanad*).

This finding echoes the work of Aswani (2024), who noted the aesthetic challenges of traditional scripts, but adds a crucial layer by showing that this very "difficulty" is sometimes valued. The *santri*'s preference for the traditional script is not an irrational attachment but a recognition of the cultural capital and spiritual value embedded in its form. Therefore, the solution is not a wholesale replacement but a stratified approach to script usage.

Pedagogical Implications and Recommendations

Based on these findings, several practical recommendations can be made for *pesantren* educators and publishers:

1. Adopt a Phased Learning Model: Introduce classical texts to beginners using *khat Naskhi* to build confidence and foundational comprehension. As *santri* progress in their studies, gradually transition them to texts printed in traditional scripts. This approach respects the cognitive needs of beginners while ensuring they eventually master the authentic form of the texts.
2. Develop Bilingual or Annotated Editions: Publish new editions of classical texts that feature the main text in *khat Naskhi* with a marginal note or parallel column showing the same text in the traditional script. This would allow *santri* to benefit from the clarity of *Naskhi* while being exposed to the traditional form.
3. Integrate Calligraphy Training: Offer formal instruction in classical Arabic calligraphy (*khat*) as a separate subject. This would allow *santri* to appreciate the artistry of the traditional scripts without the pressure of having to read complex texts in them from the outset.
4. Leverage Digital Media: Create digital versions of classical texts where the script can be toggled between *Naskhi* and a traditional form. This would provide a flexible, user-controlled learning environment.

CONCLUSIONS | خاتمة | SIMPULAN

This study demonstrates that *khat Naskhi* is a highly effective script for improving the readability and comprehension of classical Islamic texts for *santri*, particularly beginners. Quantitative data shows that 87% of respondents found texts written in *khat Naskhi* easier to read, supported by qualitative evidence of reduced cognitive load and enhanced understanding. The visual clarity, proportional spacing, and distinct letter forms of *khat Naskhi* directly address the initial barriers commonly faced by *santri* when engaging with *kitab kuning*, making the learning process more accessible and less intimidating.

However, the research also reveals significant concerns regarding the potential loss of traditional aesthetic and spiritual value. For many *santri*, especially those at more advanced levels, traditional scripts such as *Thuluth* or *Riq'ah* are not merely a medium for text, but an integral part of the *kitab kuning*'s identity and a sacred symbol of scholarly heritage. This finding underscores that *pesantren* education aims not only to transfer knowledge but also to preserve deep-rooted cultural and spiritual traditions.

Therefore, the conclusion is not an outright endorsement of *khat Naskhi*, but rather a call for balanced and strategic integration. *Khat Naskhi* should be adopted as a pedagogical tool to facilitate access in the early stages of learning, but it must be implemented as part of a progressive curriculum that ultimately guides *santri* to master authentic, traditional forms of script. This approach allows for the modernization of learning media without sacrificing the core identity and noble values that define the *pesantren*.

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