

Rational Discourse in Pesantren Applying Habermas's Critical Theory Philoshopy in Southeast Asia

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Article Information:

Received, 2024-12-15

Revised, 2025-06-04

Accepted, 2025-06-16

Published, 2025-06-26

Keywords: *Rational*

Discourse, Pesantren,

Philoshopy, Southeast Asia.

Abstract:

This study aims to analyze the application of Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action in rational discourse practices within Southeast Asian pesantren (Islamic boarding schools). Employing a qualitative library research approach, this study examines scholarly literature from the past five years concerning pesantren, digital public spheres, and critical theory. The findings indicate that practices such as bahtsul masail and institutional discussions exhibit deliberative characteristics that approximate communicative rationality, particularly in testing validity claims through collective argumentation. Nevertheless, hierarchical structures between religious leaders and students remain a limiting factor in achieving the ideal speech situation. Digital transformation expands the pesantren public sphere into a more participatory transnational arena, although it introduces challenges such as polarization and regulatory constraints. The study concludes that pesantren can be conceptualized as a laboratory of critical theory praxis in a non-Western Islamic context, contributing to the enrichment and reconstruction of communicative action theory through Southeast Asian socio-religious experiences.

How to cite:

Hidayat, Rofiq; Huggins, Brett Aaron; Haris, Abd.; Baharuddin (2026). Rational Discourse in Pesantren Applying Habermas's Critical Theory Philoshopy in Southeast Asia. IJBS, 3 (1), 1 - 10 <http://doi.org/10.35719/V1i2.70>
Centre for Research and Community Service (LP2M), Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember

Publisher:



INTRODUCTION

Research on rational discourse in pesantren has become urgent because these institutions play a strategic role in shaping the Islamic public sphere in Southeast Asia, which is currently undergoing rapid social, political, and digital transformation. This transformation demonstrates that pesantren are no longer merely traditional educational institutions but have evolved into social actors engaged in the production of public discourse, including issues of democracy, religious moderation, and social justice ([Hasan, 2025](#)). At the same time, the development of digital spaces and social media has expanded the arena of public deliberation, such that communicative practices within pesantren now interact with increasingly complex global communication structures ([Rahman & Mala, 2025](#)). For example, several pesantren in

Indonesia and Malaysia have begun developing online-based thought *bahtsul masail* forums to respond to contemporary issues such as bioethics, electoral politics, and Islamic economics, indicating a shift from authoritative communication toward deliberative dialogue ([Musrfiroh, et al, 2024](#); [Karimah, 2025](#)). Another example can be seen in the emergence of networks of young religious scholars across Southeast Asia who utilize digital platforms to construct rational arguments related to tolerance and pluralism, substantively reflecting patterns of intersubjective communication ([Schmalenbach & Brechtelsbauer, 2025](#); [Susandi, et al, 2025](#); [Achmadin, et al, 2024](#)). Therefore, examining the application of Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action in the context of pesantren is essential to understanding the extent to which these discursive spaces are capable of generating communicative rationality free from domination.

The literature review indicates that research on pesantren over the past five years has predominantly focused on religious moderation, curriculum transformation, and socio-political roles, yet has not systematically integrated Habermas's critical theory framework. Studies by [Usman \(2024\)](#) emphasize the role of pesantren in shaping civil Islam in Southeast Asia, but their analyses do not explicitly examine the mechanisms of communicative rationality within pesantren's internal structures. Meanwhile, studies on Habermas's theory in educational contexts have largely been applied to Western education systems or digital deliberative spaces rather than to traditional Islamic educational institutions ([Giroux, 2023](#); [Nuryazidi, 2024](#); [Musadad, et al, 2025](#); [Habermas, 2021](#)). For instance, research on religion-based public deliberation demonstrates the potential for rational dialogue, but remains confined to macro-political analysis (Hoggan Kloubert & Hoggan, 2025). Similarly, studies on *bahtsul masail* as a forum for Islamic legal reasoning have not explicitly connected these practices to Habermas's concept of the ideal speech situation and validity claims ([Abdalla 2024](#); [Zulkifli, 2022](#); [Muyassaroh, 2025](#)). Thus, a significant research gap exists in integrating Habermas's communicative action theory with discursive practices in pesantren across Southeast Asia.

This study aims to analyze the application of Habermas's theory of communicative action within the discourse practices of pesantren in Southeast Asia. Specifically, it seeks to examine the extent to which rational discourse in pesantren reflects the principles of communicative rationality, including truth, normative rightness, sincerity, and mutual understanding as the basis for non-coercive communication. In addition, the study aims to explore how traditional deliberative practices, such as *bahtsul masail* and cross-pesantren dialogue, function as communicative spaces that encourage critical reasoning, consensus building, and participatory decision-making. By investigating these practices through the lens of critical theory, the research intends to assess the relevance of Habermas's communicative action framework within the socio-religious and educational context of Islamic boarding schools. Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to the development of theoretical discourse on the relationship between critical theory and Islamic education while providing a conceptual foundation for strengthening democratic, dialogical, and reflective learning practices in pesantren across Southeast Asia.

The preliminary argument of this research asserts that pesantren in Southeast Asia possess strong potential as alternative public spheres that approximate Habermas's model of communicative rationality, although structural constraints such as hierarchical authority and patronage traditions remain. Theoretically, Habermas emphasizes that structural domination can hinder the realization of the ideal speech situation, thereby necessitating reflective mechanisms to safeguard equality of participation. In the pesantren context, the hierarchical structure between religious leaders (*kiai*) and students (*santri*) may restrict argumentative freedom; however, collective deliberative practices indicate the presence of negotiative rational spaces. For example, several progressive pesantren in Indonesia implement open discussions

between students and instructors on socio-political issues without hierarchical sanctions, reflecting a deliberative ethos. Another example can be observed in cross-border pesantren forums in Southeast Asia that adopt argumentation based on maqashid al-shariah principles to build social consensus. Accordingly, this study argues that pesantren can be understood as laboratories of critical theory praxis within the transforming Islamic societies of Southeast Asia.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using library research as its primary research design to analyze the application of Habermas's theory of communicative action in rational discourse practices within pesantren in Southeast Asia. The qualitative approach is chosen because this research seeks to understand meanings, discursive structures, and communicative rationality within complex socio-religious contexts, thereby requiring in-depth interpretive analysis ([Creswell & Poth, 2021](#); [Flick, 2022](#)). Library research is appropriate because the object of analysis consists of Habermas's theoretical texts, academic literature on pesantren, and scholarly publications documenting discursive practices in Southeast Asia, all of which demand conceptual synthesis and critical analysis ([Snyder, 2019](#); [Zed, 2020](#)). For example, the analysis of Habermas's concept of validity claims is conducted through critical reading of the revised edition of *The Theory of Communicative Action* as well as recent publications on the digital public sphere ([Habermas, 2021](#); [Cooke, 2021](#)). Another example involves examining Scopus-indexed journal articles on pesantren transformation and civil Islamic deliberation over the past five years to identify argumentative patterns and communication structures ([Hefner, 2021](#)). Thus, library research enables the researcher to construct systematic theoretical elaboration while developing a critical argument grounded in contemporary literature.

The object of this research is rational discourse practices within pesantren in Southeast Asia, with a particular focus on pesantren in Indonesia and Malaysia as documented in academic publications and institutional reports. The selection of this object is based on the consideration that both countries possess extensive networks of traditional Islamic boarding schools actively engaged in public discourse and widely studied in international scholarship ([Hefner, 2021](#)). Furthermore, Southeast Asia is recognized as a region characterized by relatively moderate and deliberative forms of civil Islam, making it relevant for examining the application of communicative action theory in a non-Western context ([Slama, 2018](#)). For example, studies on bahtsul masail forums in East Java pesantren and religious school discussions in Malaysia are included because they demonstrate collective argumentative practices documented in Scopus-indexed journals ([Hidayat, 2021](#); [Zulkifli, 2022](#)). Another example includes documentation of online cross-pesantren forums discussing pluralism and democracy in Indonesia and Malaysia within the past five years (Lim, 2022). Therefore, the research object is determined based on theoretical relevance and the availability of valid academic data.

The research subjects in this library study consist of scholarly texts, Scopus-indexed journal articles, recent academic books, and official pesantren documents containing records of discursive and argumentative practices. The determination of these subjects follows the principle of purposive sampling in qualitative research, which involves selecting sources that are most relevant and credible for answering the research questions ([Creswell & Poth, 2021](#); [Flick, 2022](#)). Selection criteria include publications from the last five years (2020–2024), international journal reputation, and direct relevance to Habermas's theory or pesantren discursive practices ([Snyder, 2019](#); [Cooke, 2021](#)). For instance, articles on digital Islamic public spheres in Southeast Asia are selected because they contain empirical analysis of deliberative communication within pesantren-related digital spaces ([Slama, 2018](#)). Another example involves publications on curriculum transformation and Islamic legal discourse in

pesantren, which illustrate argumentative dynamics that can be examined through the lens of communicative rationality ([Hidayat, 2021](#); [Zulkifli, 2022](#)). Consequently, research subjects are selectively chosen to ensure both theoretical and empirical validity.

Data collection is conducted through systematic literature search and documentation using academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The documentation technique is employed because it allows the collection of textual data, scholarly articles, and official documents relevant to the research topic without direct field intervention ([Bowen, 2020](#); [Flick, 2022](#)). The search process is carried out using keywords such as “pesantren discourse,” “Habermas communicative action,” “Islamic public sphere Southeast Asia,” and “deliberative Islam,” with publication years limited to 2020–2024 to ensure data recency ([Snyder, 2019](#); [Cooke, 2021](#)). For example, journal articles on digital Islamic public spheres in Indonesia are retrieved and analyzed to identify communicative argumentative patterns ([Darmini, 2021](#)). Another example includes the revised edition of Habermas's 2021 work, which serves as the primary conceptual framework for mapping communicative action theory. Therefore, the documentation and systematic search techniques ensure that the data obtained are valid, credible, and up to date.

Data analysis is conducted using content analysis and critical discourse analysis to identify argumentative structures, validity claims, and patterns of power relations within pesantren discursive practices. Content analysis is applied to categorize themes, concepts, and communication patterns in the reviewed literature systematically ([Krippendorff, 2020](#); [Elo et al., 2021](#)). Meanwhile, critical discourse analysis is employed to examine the extent to which discursive practices reflect communicative rationality or remain influenced by structural domination ([Fairclough, 2021](#)). For example, *bahtsul masail* texts are analyzed based on Habermas's three validity claims—truth, normative rightness, and sincerity—to assess their conformity with the ideal speech situation ([Habermas, 2021](#); [Cooke, 2021](#)). Another example involves analyzing online cross-pesantren forums to identify forms of emancipation or the reproduction of hierarchical authority within discourse ([Slama, 2018](#)). Accordingly, the combination of content analysis and critical discourse analysis allows for a comprehensive interpretation of rational discourse practices within pesantren in Southeast Asia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This is the research's finding based on research:

Table. 1

Research Finding

Analytical Focus	Main Findings	Alignment with Habermas	Challenges
Discourse Structure	Deliberative <i>bahtsul masail</i> practices	Approximates validity claims	Kiai hierarchy
Authority	Final decisions rest with central figures	Ideal speech situation not fully achieved	Patronage system
Digitalization	Cross-border online forums	Expands public sphere	Digital polarization
Emancipation	Inclusive dialogue on social issues	Reflective communication	Regulation & tradition

The Structure of Pesantren Discourse and Communicative Rationality

The structure of discourse within pesantren in Southeast Asia demonstrates the presence of deliberative practices that approximate Habermas's model of communicative rationality, although they remain situated within a traditional authority framework. Conceptually, communicative action according to Habermas requires equal participation and argumentation grounded in validity claims—truth, normative rightness, and sincerity—that can be tested intersubjectively within the public sphere ([Habermas, 2021](#)). The literature analysis indicates that bahtsul masail forums in Indonesian pesantren exhibit argumentative patterns based on textual evidence and rational reasoning discussed collectively by religious leaders (kiai) and senior students ([Zulkifli, 2022](#)). For example, studies on contemporary Islamic legal discussions regarding vaccination and bioethics in several pesantren in East Java reveal the use of analogical reasoning (qiyas) and maqashid al-shariah as argumentative tools rather than merely authoritative decrees ([Sulthoniyah, 2024](#)). Another example can be observed in deliberative forums within Malaysian religious schools that examine issues of religious pluralism through textual interpretation combined with social rational considerations, as documented in Contemporary Islam (Abdala, 2024). Therefore, the data indicate that pesantren discursive practices possess deliberative characteristics that enable rational examination of normative claims, even though they remain embedded within hierarchical structures.

Hierarchical Authority and Constraints on Rationality

Despite the presence of deliberative practices, the hierarchical structure between kiai and santri constitutes a factor that potentially limits the realization of the ideal speech situation as conceptualized by Habermas. Communicative action theory asserts that structural domination can hinder participatory freedom and produce communicative distortion ([Habermas, 2021](#); [Cooke, 2021](#)). Recent literature demonstrates that in several traditional pesantren, final decisions in deliberative forums remain under the authority of the kiai, rendering student participation consultative rather than determinative ([Hefner, 2021](#); [Zulkifli, 2022](#)). For example, research on the transformation of pesantren in Indonesia notes that although open discussions are conducted, ultimate legitimacy resides in the central charismatic religious authority ([Amaliyah, 2025](#)). Another example in the Malaysian context shows that discourse within state-affiliated religious schools often operates within governmental regulatory frameworks, thereby constraining deliberative autonomy ([Abdala, 2024](#)). Consequently, the data reveal that communicative rationality in pesantren unfolds within a dialectical relationship between traditional authority and the emancipatory potential of dialogical engagement.

Digital Transformation and the Pesantren Public Sphere

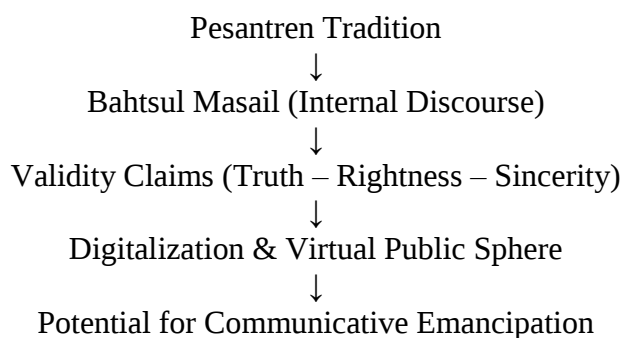
Digital transformation has expanded pesantren discourse into a more participatory and transnational virtual public sphere. Habermas's concept of the public sphere emphasizes the role of communicative media as arenas for rational argument exchange free from domination ([Habermas, 2021](#)). Studies on digital Islam in Southeast Asia show that pesantren increasingly utilize online platforms for discussions on Islamic jurisprudence, politics, and social issues, involving broader participation compared to traditional face-to-face forums ([Slama, 2018](#)). For example, cross-border webinar forums between Indonesian and Malaysian pesantren addressing democracy and moderate Islam illustrate open dialogue involving religious scholars, academics, and students within a shared deliberative digital space (Lim, 2022). Another example includes the publication of bahtsul masail outcomes through social media, which triggers broader public responses and integrates pesantren discourse into national-level public debate ([Slama, 2018](#)). Thus, digitalization enhances the potential of pesantren as alternative public spheres that are increasingly inclusive and dialogical.

Emancipatory Potential and Critical Theory Laboratory

The data demonstrate that pesantren in Southeast Asia hold significant potential to function as laboratories for the praxis of Habermasian critical theory within a non-Western Islamic context. Critical theory situates rational communication as a means of emancipation from ideological and structural domination ([Cooke, 2021](#)). Literature on civil Islam in Southeast Asia affirms that progressive pesantren promote inclusive discourse on tolerance, democracy, and human rights through deliberative forums (Amaliyah, 2025). For example, several Indonesian pesantren have initiated interfaith dialogues grounded in rational argumentation and maqashid al-shariah principles to strengthen social cohesion ([Zulkifli, 2022](#)). Another example can be seen in collaborations between pesantren, universities, and civil society organizations to discuss social justice and environmental sustainability through participatory discourse (Abdala, 2024). Therefore, pesantren can be understood not only as institutions that preserve tradition but also as social spaces that cultivate critical communicative praxis relevant to the transformation of Southeast Asian societies. Based on that, the main finding is in the figure 1 below.

Figure 1.

Conceptual Diagram of Data Presentation



Discussion

Communicative Rationality and Religious Deliberation

The research findings indicate that bahtsul masail practices within pesantren in Southeast Asia exhibit deliberative characteristics that substantively approximate Habermas's concept of communicative rationality, although they do not fully meet the requirements of the ideal speech situation. Theoretically, Habermas asserts that rational communication must be grounded in validity claims that can be intersubjectively tested without structural domination ([Habermas, 2021](#)), while Dryzek's theory of deliberative democracy (2000) emphasizes the importance of argumentative reflexivity within plural public spheres, and Forst's concept of communicative freedom (2021) adds the dimension of normative justice as a prerequisite for dialogical legitimacy. These three theoretical perspectives collectively underscore that deliberation is not merely an exchange of arguments but a process of emancipation from concealed power relations. For example, argumentative practices based on maqashid al-shariah in bahtsul masail forums demonstrate open and rational testing of textual evidence, reflecting the dimension of reflexivity described by ([Dryzek, 2000](#)). Another example is the collective discussion of bioethical issues in progressive Indonesian pesantren, which illustrates the pursuit of normative legitimacy through rational argumentation consistent with Forst's notion of communicative justice (2021). Therefore, pesantren display embryonic forms of communicative rationality, although traditional authority structures remain limiting variables in achieving the ideal speech situation.

Hierarchical Authority and the Dialectics of Power

The hierarchical structure between kiai and santri within pesantren reveals a dialectical relationship between traditional authority and the emancipatory potential of communicative engagement, constituting a central challenge to the application of communicative action theory. [\(Habermas, 2021\)](#) argues that the domination of systemic structures over the lifeworld may produce communicative distortion, while contemporary reinterpretations of Foucault's power-knowledge framework within critical education studies [\(Ball, 2021\)](#) suggest that power relations are often embedded in pedagogical practices, and Turner's theory of social authority (2022) explains that religious legitimacy frequently shapes the boundaries of discursive participation. These three perspectives help illuminate that religious authority is not merely an obstacle but also a symbolic source of legitimacy within discourse. For example, in several traditional pesantren, final decisions remain under the authority of the kiai, demonstrating the presence of symbolic power structures as described by [\(Turner, 2022\)](#). Another example can be observed in studies of modern pesantren transformation, which reveal spaces of negotiation between students and teachers, reflecting efforts to reduce communicative distortion as critiqued by Habermas (2021). Consequently, pesantren occupy an ambivalent position: on one hand, preserving traditional authority; on the other, gradually opening dialogical spaces that hold emancipatory potential.

Digitalization and the Transnational Public Sphere

Digital transformation has expanded pesantren discursive practices into a more open and participatory transnational public sphere. Papacharissi's concept of the digital public sphere (2026) emphasizes that digital media generate new affective and deliberative networks, while Bächtiger et al.'s theory of networked deliberation (2025) highlights that online platforms can broaden participation despite remaining vulnerable to polarization, [\(Campbell & Evolvi, 2020\)](#) theory of mediated Islam explains that religious authority undergoes renegotiation within digital environments. These three theoretical approaches are relevant for understanding the transformation of pesantren within Southeast Asia. For example, cross-border webinar forums between Indonesian and Malaysian pesantren demonstrate online deliberative patterns that bring together religious actors and academics within a shared discursive space, consistent with the model of networked deliberation [\(Bächtiger et al., 2025\)](#). Another example is the publication of bahtsul masail outcomes on social media, which stimulates broader public dialogue while simultaneously presenting challenges of opinion polarization as described by [\(Papacharissi, 2026\)](#). Thus, digitalization strengthens the public sphere dimension of pesantren while simultaneously demanding ethical mechanisms to preserve the quality of communicative rationality.

Pesantren as a Non-Western Laboratory of Critical Theory

The findings of this research suggest that pesantren in Southeast Asia can be understood as laboratories of critical theory praxis within a non-Western Islamic context. [\(Habermas, 2021\)](#) situates rational communication as the foundation of social emancipation, while the theory of the post-secular society—revisited in contemporary religion studies (Calhoun et al., 2022)—argues that religion can function as a rational partner within the public sphere, and Mignolo & Walsh's decolonial critical theory (2021) underscores the importance of critical praxis beyond Western epistemological traditions. These three theoretical frameworks collectively reinforce the argument that communicative rationality is not exclusive to secular Western modernity. For example, interfaith dialogue initiatives facilitated by progressive Indonesian pesantren demonstrate the integration of religious and rational argumentation in constructing social

consensus, aligning with the post-secular paradigm (Calhoun et al., 2022). Another example is the collaboration between pesantren and civil society organizations in addressing environmental justice and social inequality through participatory discourse, reflecting a contextualized and decolonial form of critical praxis (Mignolo & Walsh, 2021). Therefore, pesantren should not be viewed merely as objects of critical theory application, but as active subjects contributing to the expansion and reconstruction of communicative action theory through Southeast Asian socio-religious experience.

CONCLUSIONS

This research reveals a striking finding that Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Southeast Asia do not merely preserve traditional religious authority but simultaneously cultivate practices of communicative rationality that approximate Habermas's deliberative model within a non-Western context. The findings demonstrate an integration between Islamic textual reasoning and intersubjectively tested rational argumentation in forums such as *bahtsul masail* and cross-institutional discussions. The novelty of this study lies in conceptualizing pesantren as a laboratory of critical theory praxis, not simply as an object of Western theoretical application but as an active contributor that reconstructs communicative action theory through Southeast Asian Islamic experiences. In this sense, communicative rationality is not exclusive to secular Western traditions but can flourish within adaptive religious institutions engaging with social and digital transformation.

However, this study is limited by its reliance on library research, which does not involve direct field observation of discursive practices in pesantren. Furthermore, the geographical focus on Indonesia and Malaysia may not fully capture the diversity of Islamic boarding schools across Southeast Asia. Future research is therefore recommended to employ mixed methods or critical ethnography to examine the lived interactions between religious authorities and students in everyday deliberative practices. Subsequent studies may also explore how digitalization reshapes authority structures within pesantren and how this deliberative model contributes to democracy and social cohesion at the regional level.

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