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CANCEL CULTURE IN THE CONTROVERSY INVOLVING GUS MIFTAH AND AN ICED TEA VENDOR ON TIKTOK: AN ANALYSIS OF JÜRGEN HABERMAS'S DISCOURSE ETHICS

[1]Fahiza Awalia Lahambu, [2]Saude, [3]Istnan Hidayatullah
[1,2,3.]UIN Datokarama Palu, Indonesia
Email: fahizaawlialahambu@gmail.com

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini membahas fenomena cancel culture dalam polemik Gus Miftah dan pedagang es teh di media sosial melalui perspektif etika komunikasi Jürgen Habermas. Penelitian bertujuan untuk menjelaskan perkembangan cancel culture serta menganalisis kualitas etis komunikasi publik berdasarkan teori Habermas. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan metode netnografi. Data diperoleh melalui observasi dan dokumentasi unggahan, komentar, serta interaksi warganet di TikTok. Data dianalisis menggunakan analisis wacana kritis dan perspektif etika Habermas, khususnya kebenaran (truth), ketepatan normatif (rightness), ketulusan (sincerity), dan keterpahaman (comprehensibility). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa cancel culture berkembang melalui penyebaran video, pembentukan opini publik, kritik moral, dan tekanan sosial. Dalam perspektif Habermas, sebagian kritik masyarakat memiliki dasar moral yang dapat dipertanggungjawabkan, tetapi sebagian lainnya cenderung didominasi emosi, penghakiman, dan tekanan kolektif yang membatasi dialog rasional. Penelitian menyimpulkan bahwa legitimasi moral cancel culture tidak ditentukan oleh besarnya dukungan publik, melainkan oleh kualitas argumentasi, keterbukaan dialog, dan penghormatan terhadap martabat manusia.

Kata kunci: *Cancel Culture*, Jürgen Habermas, Etika Diskursus, Tindakan Komunikatif, Media Sosial.

ABSTRACT

This study examines the phenomenon of cancel culture in the controversy involving Gus Miftah and an iced tea vendor on social media from the perspective of Jürgen Habermas's communication ethics. It aims to explain the development of cancel culture and analyze the ethical quality of public communication using Habermas's theory. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a netnographic method. Data were

collected through observation and documentation of TikTok posts, comments, and user interactions. The data were analyzed using critical discourse analysis and Habermas's ethical framework, focusing on truth, normative rightness, sincerity, and comprehensibility. The findings indicate that cancel culture developed through video circulation, public opinion formation, moral criticism, and social pressure. From Habermas's perspective, some public criticism was supported by reasonable moral arguments, while other responses were influenced by emotions, public judgment, and collective pressure that limited rational dialogue. The study concludes that the moral legitimacy of cancel culture depends not on the level of public support but on the quality of arguments, openness to dialogue, and respect for human dignity.

Keywords: *Cancel Culture, Jürgen Habermas, Discourse Ethics, Communicative Action, Social Media.*

INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology has significantly transformed patterns of social interaction, particularly through the emergence of social media as a digital public sphere. Social media no longer functions solely as a means of communication and information exchange; it has also become a space where people express opinions, shape public perceptions, voice criticism, and demand accountability for the actions of individuals and public figures. From the perspective of Jürgen Habermas's public sphere, these developments provide opportunities for participation in public discourse, although the communication that takes place does not always reflect rationality and equality among participants.[1] One phenomenon arising from the development of digital communication is cancel culture, a practice involving collective rejection, condemnation, boycotts, or withdrawal of support from individuals perceived to have violated social values and

[1] Stepanus Angga, Antonius Alfredo Poa, and Fabianus Rikardus, "Etika Komunikasi Netizen Indonesia di Media Sosial sebagai Ruang Demokrasi dalam Telaah Ruang Publik Jurgen Habermas," Jurnal Filsafat Indonesia 6, no. 3 (2023): 384–393, https://doi.org/10.23887/jfi.v6i3.59229

norms.[2] This phenomenon demonstrates that social media can foster public accountability, while also serving as a potential instrument of social pressure and punishment.

This phenomenon can be observed in the controversy involving Gus Miftah and an iced tea vendor that emerged in November–December 2024. What began with the circulation of a video showing an interaction between Gus Miftah and an iced tea vendor during a religious gathering in Magelang developed into a widespread debate on social media. Gus Miftah's remarks, perceived as demeaning toward the vendor, elicited public responses ranging from criticism and condemnation to demands for accountability. Rahmadi's study indicates that the controversy also became the subject of online news coverage, with differing representations and discursive emphases.[3] Meanwhile, Setiawan and colleagues demonstrate that the Gus Miftah case is closely associated with cancel culture, the ethics of religious preaching communication, and collective responses in digital society.[4] These circumstances raise ethical questions about the boundary between the public's freedom to express criticism and practices of social punishment shaped by emotion, virality, and the dominance of majority opinion.

In academic scholarship, cancel culture has been understood as a phenomenon with two contrasting tendencies. On the one hand, it can function as an instrument of social control that enables the public to demand accountability for the actions of public figures. On the other hand, cancel culture may also lead to symbolic silencing, collective pressure, and restrictions on freedom of expression. Drawing on F. Budi Hardiman's digital ethics, Alfredo Kevin shows that cancel culture can be understood in relation to changes in human action and moral judgment

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[2] Meredith D. Clark, "DRAG THEM: A Brief Etymology of So-Called 'Cancel Culture,'" Communication and the Public 5, no. 3–4 (2020): 88–92, https://doi.org/10.1177/2057047320961562.

[3] Kelik Tri Rahmadi, "Analisis Wacana Berita Kontroversi Gus Miftah dan Penjual Es Teh di Kompas.com dan Detik.com Edisi 1–4 Desember 2024," Meyarsa: Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi dan Dakwah 6, no. 2 (2025): 181–197, https://doi.org/10.19105/meyarsa.v6i2.22886

[4] Rifki Setiawan et al., "Netizen dan Cancel Culture: Studi Komunikasi Dakwah Gus Miftah," Jurnal Komunikan 4, no. 1 (2025): 45–60, https://doi.org/10.30993/jurnalkomunikan.v4i1.509.

in the digital age.[5] Puput Tripeni Juniman, meanwhile, highlights the threat cancel culture poses to freedom of expression.[6] Bouvier and Machin likewise show that hashtag-based criticism campaigns on social media can simplify complex issues, privilege moral outrage, and eliminate nuance from public debate.[7] These findings suggest that public criticism is not necessarily synonymous with rational and dialogical communication.

These issues can be examined through Jürgen Habermas's thought, especially his theory of communicative action and discourse ethics. In Habermas's view, rational communication is not merely concerned with expressing opinions or influencing others; it is directed toward achieving mutual understanding through the exchange of justifiable arguments.[8] Within the framework of communicative action, the three principal validity claims are truth, normative rightness, and sincerity, while comprehensibility is an essential prerequisite for meaningful communication.[9] This framework is relevant for assessing whether public criticism in cancel culture is grounded in accurate information, defensible normative considerations, and sincere communication, or instead develops through pressure and the dominance of majority opinion.

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[5] Alfredo Kevin, "Analisis Fenomena Cancel Culture dalam Etika 'Klik' Manusia di Era Digital Menurut F. Budi Hardiman," SOSMANIORA: Jurnal Ilmu Sosial dan Humaniora 2, no. 2 (2023): 197–203, https://doi.org/10.55123/sosmaniora.v2i2.1930

[6] Puput Tripeni Juniman, "Analisis Kritis Fenomena Cancel Culture dan Ancaman terhadap Kebebasan Berekspresi," Al-Adabiya: Jurnal Kebudayaan dan Keagamaan 18, no. 1 (2023): 1–14, https://doi.org/10.37680/adabiya.v18i1.2451

[7] Gwen Bouvier and David Machin, "What Gets Lost in Twitter 'Cancel Culture' Hashtags? Calling Out Racists Reveals Some Limitations of Social Justice Campaigns," Discourse & Society 32, no. 3 (2021): 307–327, https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926520977215

[8] Jürgen Habermas, "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research," Communication Theory 16, no. 4 (2006): 411–426, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2006.00280.x

[9] Joseph Heath, "What Is a Validity Claim?," Philosophy & Social Criticism 24, no. 4 (1998): 23–41, https://doi.org/10.1177/019145379802400402

Although cancel culture has been examined from various perspectives, further investigation is needed into the ethical quality of public communication within such practices. Previous studies have addressed freedom of expression, collective behavior, religious preaching communication, image formation, and social punishment. For example, Nurfitria, Soleh, and Pamungkas show how cancel culture in Indonesian Muslim digital spaces relates to religious authority, collective solidarity, and emotional mobilization.[10] This study, however, focuses more specifically on evaluating public communication in the controversy involving Gus Miftah and the iced tea vendor through Habermas's framework of communicative action. Thus, the research gap does not lie in the absence of studies on cancel culture or communication ethics, but in the need for a more focused analysis of the quality of argumentation, normative legitimacy, and rationality of online users' communication in this case.

More specifically, Rahmadi examines how the controversy is represented in online news reports; Setiawan and colleagues focus on religious preaching communication and public responses; and Alanudin and colleagues categorize cancel culture discourse across platforms. In contrast to these approaches, the present study examines the justificatory quality of online users' communication in the case through the criteria of truth, normative rightness, sincerity, and comprehensibility within Habermas's discourse ethics. Its primary contribution is therefore evaluative and philosophical, rather than merely a classification of forms of condemnation or levels of virality.

In response to this gap, the distinctive feature of this study is its use of Habermas's discourse ethics as an evaluative framework for cancel culture on social media, particularly TikTok. It not only describes the development of the controversy and the forms of public response, but also examines how public criticism is constructed, communicated, and legitimized through digital communication. In addition, the study draws

[10] Nadia Nurfitria, Muhammad Soleh, and Rahmat Pamungkas, "Between Public Morality and Online Judgment: Cancel Culture in Indonesian Muslim Digital Spaces," ETNOSIA: Jurnal Etnografi Indonesia 11, no. 1 (2026): 84–101, https://doi.org/10.31947/etnosia.v11i1.47369

on Islamic communication ethics as a complementary moral perspective, particularly the principle of tabayyun (verification), the prohibition against belittling others, and the prohibition against suspicion, as reflected in Qur'an 49:6, 49:11, and 49:12 (Surah Al-Hujurat).[11] These Islamic communication principles are relevant to honesty, information verification, and responsibility when communicating on social media.

Accordingly, the novelty of this study lies in its contextual application of Habermas's communicative framework to assess the ethical quality of cancel culture in the controversy involving Gus Miftah and an iced tea vendor. The study seeks to offer a deeper understanding of the boundary between rational public criticism and non-dialogical social punishment. On this basis, it aims to describe how cancel culture emerged and developed in the controversy on social media and to analyze it from the perspective of Jürgen Habermas's communication ethics. In doing so, it seeks to advance understanding of the importance of rationality, responsibility, and respect for human dignity in digital public communication.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of social phenomena through the interpretation of human behavior and interactions.[12] It employs netnography as developed by Robert V.[13] Kozinets, a research method that adapts ethnographic principles to investigate culture, communication, and social interaction in digital environments.

The units of analysis include TikTok videos concerning the interaction between Gus Miftah and the iced tea vendor, posts responding to the case, and public

[11] Muhammad Ilmi Saggaf et al., "Prinsip Komunikasi Islam sebagai Etika Bermedia Sosial," Journal of Communication Studies 1, no. 1 (2021): 15–29, https://doi.org/10.37680/jcs.v1i01.698

[12] John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches, 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2024).

[13] Robert V. Kozinets, Netnography: The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media Research, 3rd ed. (London: SAGE Publications, 2020), https://doi.org/10.4135/9781036233846

comments addressing the factual circumstances, norms of politeness, demands for accountability, and forms of social punishment. In constructing the corpus, relevant material should be identified using case-specific keywords, while original posts should be distinguished from reposts.

Data were collected through non-participant observation and digital documentation of TikTok posts, comments, hashtags, and various forms of user response. The collected data were subsequently analyzed through Critical Discourse Analysis to understand how language and digital communication practices shape public opinion and social pressure.[14] The findings were then evaluated using Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action to assess the rationality and ethical quality of public communication.[15]

Data processing involved coding, categorization, and the identification of communication patterns.[16] Coding followed Saldaña's principles of qualitative analysis, while theme development drew on Braun and Clarke's approach to thematic analysis.[17] The processed data were then presented and interpreted systematically to formulate the study's conclusions.[18]

Operationally, comments were treated as units of utterance, assigned initial codes based on their observable content, and then grouped into themes of normative criticism, calls for boycotts or withdrawal of support, labeling, clarification, and other responses according to the available evidence. For example, initial coding of quotations already included in the manuscript's documentation classified "ADAB DULU, BARU ILMU" [Manners first, knowledge second] as criticism based on norms of propriety, while "BOYKOT" [Boycott] and "Blacklist" were

[14] Norman Fairclough, Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research (London: Routledge, 2003).

[15] Jürgen Habermas, The Theory of Communicative Action, vol. 1, Reason and the Rationalization of Society, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

[16] Johnny Saldaña, The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers, 4th ed. (London: SAGE Publications, 2021).

[17] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide (London: SAGE Publications, 2022).

[18] Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldaña, Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2019).

coded as calls to withdraw support. These codes classify utterances; they do not automatically establish the psychological intentions of those who posted them.

The next stage involved interpretive reading through Habermas's framework. The truth claim was assessed in terms of the verifiability of the stated facts; normative rightness in terms of the ethical reasons offered; sincerity was treated as a claim that could not be established solely from the text of comments; and comprehensibility was evaluated in terms of message clarity and the available context. Because the analysis was qualitative, quotations were used to illustrate themes rather than to estimate the proportions of all comments.

Data trustworthiness was examined through triangulation by comparing multiple sources and analytical approaches. This technique draws on Denzin's account of the use of multiple perspectives in research. The credibility of the findings was also strengthened by the principles of trustworthiness in naturalistic inquiry developed by Lincoln and Guba.

Where documentation was available, cross-source checking focused on whether video excerpts aligned with the context of their posts, on distinguishing recorded events from opinions about personal motives, and on comparing comments with clarifying statements. Quotations were presented without personal account identifiers where these were unnecessary for ethical analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cancel Culture from the Perspective of Jürgen Habermas's Public Sphere

The findings indicate that cancel culture in the controversy involving Gus Miftah and the iced tea vendor represents a form of public participation in morally evaluating a public figure's actions through social media. Based on observations of TikTok posts, comments, hashtag use, and other user responses, the controversy developed from an interaction at a religious gathering into a public debate involving different groups in society. Responses extended beyond criticism of Gus Miftah's remarks, which were seen as demeaning toward a small-scale vendor, to include demands for accountability, calls for boycotts, and

judgments concerning his moral legitimacy as a religious figure. This phenomenon demonstrates that social media has become a space in which the public shapes opinion and articulates moral demands directed at socially influential figures.

From Jürgen Habermas's perspective, this phenomenon can be understood through the concept of the public sphere, a communicative arena in which people discuss shared concerns through the exchange of views and arguments. Habermas emphasizes that the quality of public communication is determined not simply by freedom of expression but also by whether discourse can generate judgments that are rationally justifiable.[19] An ideal public sphere, therefore, is not merely a place for expressing criticism; it is also a setting in which all parties can provide reasons, challenge claims, and openly examine arguments free from domination.

In the Gus Miftah controversy, public engagement through comments, reposts, and hashtags demonstrates that social media has expanded opportunities for public participation. Nevertheless, the spread of condemnation and demands for social punishment does not in itself prove that communication has been rational. The central question is whether public criticism rests on defensible arguments or derives much of its force from repeated opinions, collective pressure, and majority support. For Habermas, the number of people who endorse a view cannot substitute for the quality of the arguments used to justify it.

This interpretation is reinforced by Alanudin and colleagues, who found that cancel culture directed at Gus Miftah developed through moral criticism, boycott appeals, satire, symbolic delegitimation, and collective opinion formation in digital spaces.[20] Their study illustrates

[19] Jürgen Habermas, "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research," *Communication Theory* 16, no. 4 (2006): 411–426, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2006.00280.

[20] Rifki Alanudin et al., "Dinamika Komunikasi Publik: Cancel Culture dan Figur Agama di Media Sosial," *ORASI: Jurnal Dakwah dan Komunikasi* 16, no. 2 (2025), https://doi.org/10.24235/orasi.v16i2.22342.

how online interaction can exert moral pressure on a religious figure.[21] Chambers, meanwhile, argues that the quality of the digital public sphere must be assessed by attending to deliberative processes and the actions of participants that may intensify communicative fragmentation. Both studies support the relevance of digital communication issues, while the philosophical assessment in this study remains grounded in Habermas's concept of the public sphere.

The findings therefore suggest that the fundamental issue in cancel culture is not simply the growth of public participation in criticism, but the degree of rationality accompanying that participation. From Habermas's perspective, the public sphere cannot be assessed solely by comment volume, virality, or the dominance of particular opinions. Rather, it should be evaluated in terms of its capacity to enable people to form judgments through open, testable exchanges of arguments that respect each person's standing as a participant in communication.

Public Criticism between Dialogue and Social Pressure

The findings reveal considerable diversity in the forms and orientations of online users' communication in response to the Gus Miftah controversy. Some comments emphasized politeness, respect for small-scale vendors, and the moral responsibility of a religious preacher. Others took the form of personal insinuations, sarcasm, negative labeling, and calls to withdraw support. The research documentation included comments such as "ADAB DULU, BARU ILMU" [Manners first, knowledge second], "BOYKOT" [Boycott], and "Blacklist." These differing responses indicate that public criticism does not always take the same communicative form, even when it arises from the same event.

[21] Simone Chambers, "Deliberative Democracy and the Digital Public Sphere: Asymmetrical Fragmentation as a Political Not a Technological Problem," *Constellations* 30, no. 1 (2023): 61–68, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12662.

Table 1. Examples og online users' responses and interpreting them through discourse ethics

No.	Quotation from the original manuscript	Initial code	Initial interpretation (Habermas)
1	"ADAB DULU, BARU ILMU" [Manners first, knowledge second]	Normative criticism	Affirms norms of propriety; relevant to the claim of normative rightness, but does not by itself establish the truth of all allegations.
2	"BOYKOT" [Boycott]	Call to withdraw support	Calls for social consequences without providing a visible reason in the quotation; justification must be assessed from its context and accompanying arguments.
3	"Blacklist"	Labeling/rejection	Expresses symbolic rejection; the text alone is insufficient to assess the author's intention or the moral legitimacy of the action.

The table distinguishes comments that invoke normative reasons from those that merely express demands or labels. The phrase "ADAB DULU, BARU ILMU" [Manners first, knowledge second] points toward a moral justification that can still be debated; by contrast, "BOYKOT" [Boycott] and "Blacklist" do not, in isolation, reveal the reasons supporting their demands. This lack of context does not establish that everyone calling for a boycott is acting irrationally. Any final assessment still requires examination of the relevant posts and the surrounding discussion threads.

In Habermas's theory of communicative action, communication is differentiated by its orientation into communicative action and strategic action. Communicative action aims to achieve mutual understanding through the exchange of justifiable reasons. Strategic action, by contrast, is more oriented toward successfully attaining particular objectives by influencing others' decisions or behavior. This distinction matters because communication should not be assessed solely by how forceful or restrained its language is, but also by whether it

enables arguments to be tested or merely seeks compliance with particular demands.

In the Gus Miftah controversy, criticism questioning the appropriateness of a religious figure's remarks toward a small-scale vendor can be regarded as approaching communicative action when it offers reasons open to scrutiny. Comments emphasizing politeness and respect for human dignity can facilitate discourse about the social norms perceived to have been violated. Conversely, comments consisting solely of personal insults or negative labels without supporting arguments illustrate the risk of a shift from mutual understanding toward social pressure.

Nevertheless, not every call for a boycott can automatically be classified as unethical strategic action. Within Habermas's framework, demands for sanctions may still form part of rational communication if they are grounded in defensible reasons, expressed proportionately, and open to scrutiny. Ethical problems arise when social pressure replaces argumentation, so that the person being criticized is no longer treated as a participant in discourse who has an opportunity to explain their position.

Setiawan and colleagues' study of cancel culture in Gus Miftah's religious preaching communication shows that cancellation can serve as an instrument of social control, but may also damage reputations and obstruct constructive dialogue.[22] Their findings underline these two possibilities within cancel culture. Using Habermas's framework, however, the present study emphasizes that the distinction between rational social control and collective punishment must be assessed through communicative orientation and the quality of the arguments underlying it.

The analysis thus indicates that cancel culture in the Gus Miftah controversy exposes a tension between communicative and strategic

[22] Rifki Setiawan et al., "Netizen dan Cancel Culture: Studi Komunikasi Dakwah Gus Miftah," *Jurnal Komunikan* 4, no. 1 (2025): 45–60, https://doi.org/10.30993/jurnalkomunikan.v4i1.509.

action. Some public responses express moral demands that can be rationally debated, while others tend to use collective pressure as the main means of achieving particular social aims. This finding confirms that criticism motivated by moral purposes is not necessarily communicated through fully ethical procedures.

The Truth of Information in the Gus Miftah Controversy

The findings show that circulation of the video concerning Gus Miftah generated diverse public interpretations and judgments that were not always supported by the same level of evidence. The recording enables the public to identify statements made during the incident, but not every conclusion about Gus Miftah's intentions, character, or personal motives can be established from the video excerpts alone. This illustrates a fundamental problem in digital communication: the tendency to conflate empirical facts, subjective interpretations, and moral judgments.

In Habermas's theory of communicative action, the truth claim concerns the correspondence between statements about the objective world and verifiable facts. A statement does not become true simply because many people agree with it; rather, it requires a defensible empirical basis. Heath explains that validity claims in Habermas's thought are closely connected to the relationship between understanding a statement and the possibility of providing a rational justification for it.[23] Truth, therefore, is a claim that must be open to examination through reasons and evidence, not merely collective acceptance.

Applied to the Gus Miftah controversy, the claim that Gus Miftah spoke particular words to the iced tea vendor is a factual claim that can be checked against audiovisual documentation. By contrast, the judgment that those remarks were inappropriate or demeaning is a normative assessment requiring moral argument. The further conclusion that Gus Miftah deliberately intended to humiliate the vendor requires additional evidence that cannot be inferred directly from the recording

[23] Joseph Heath, "What Is a Validity Claim?," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 24, no. 4 (1998): 23–41, https://doi.org/10.1177/019145379802400402.

alone. Among the documented examples, "ADAB DULU, BARU ILMU" [Manners first, knowledge second] is a judgment about norms that ought to be observed, rather than a new factual assertion about the details of the incident. Similarly, "BOYKOT" [Boycott] and "Blacklist" express positions or demands, not evidence of Gus Miftah's motives. Distinguishing these three kinds of utterance prevents normative claims and social demands from being treated as factual proof.

The issue becomes more complex when a particular interpretation attracts broad support through comments, reposts, and content reproduction. Under such conditions, the popularity of a narrative may shape public perceptions of its truth. From Habermas's perspective, however, social acceptance of a position must be distinguished from its rational justification.

This interpretation is supported by Firmansyah, who shows that the development of digital media has shifted the authority of knowledge toward mechanisms influenced by popularity, information speed, and platform visibility.[24] This shift can blur the boundaries between epistemically grounded knowledge, opinion, and apparent authority.

Firmansyah's study reinforces the relevance of questions about truth in digital communication, but it is not used as a substitute for Habermas's theory. In the present study, Habermas's concept of truth remains the basis for evaluating how far online users' criticism and judgments rest on defensible factual grounds.

The findings thus show that one ethical problem associated with cancel culture is the possibility of social punishment being formed on the basis of judgments that have not been fully examined. In Habermas's view, rational public communication requires the ability to distinguish facts, interpretations, and moral evaluations, as well as a willingness to revise a position when stronger evidence or arguments emerge.

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[24] Mursyidul Haq Firmansyah, "Algorithmic Authority and the Deconstruction of Knowledge in the Digital Age: An Islamic Philosophical Perspective," *Mahiyah: Journal of Islamic Thought and Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (2026): 23–42, https://doi.org/10.24239/332m9x53.

The Ethics of Public Criticism

The findings show that criticism of Gus Miftah was primarily grounded in moral judgments concerning politeness, respect for human dignity, and the responsibility of a religious figure. Various online comments suggest that remarks perceived as demeaning toward a small-scale vendor were considered inconsistent with social norms requiring people to respect one another. In this context, public responses were not merely emotional outbursts; they also expressed demands that the conduct of public figures align with the moral values governing social life.

In Habermas's thought, normative rightness concerns whether an action or statement can be justified by norms governing social relations and tested through discourse. Normative justification cannot rely solely on majority support; it requires argumentation that allows all affected parties to consider rationally the validity of a norm.

On this basis, Gus Miftah's conduct, perceived as demeaning toward a small-scale vendor, may be challenged on normative grounds because it concerns respect for human dignity. Public criticism has a moral basis when it seeks accountability for remarks considered contrary to politeness and respect for others. However, from Habermas's perspective, the way members of the public express such criticism must also meet those same normative principles.

The comment "ADAB DULU, BARU ILMU" [Manners first, knowledge second] illustrates how norms of propriety are used to evaluate the conduct of a religious figure. Normative rightness, however, is not established simply by the forcefulness of a slogan. The reasons for the norm's relevance, the people affected, and the consistency of its application must also be considered through open discourse.

If respect for human dignity is invoked as a reason to condemn Gus Miftah's remarks, that respect must also be extended to Gus Miftah as the subject of criticism. Personal insults, threats, or unsubstantiated accusations may therefore also be challenged on normative grounds because they risk contradicting the very values on which public criticism is based.

These findings can be compared with the study by Traversa, Tian, and Wright, which shows that, in the context of discrimination experienced by particular groups, episodes of cancel culture can provide collective validation and be associated with stronger intentions toward collective action.[25] Their study indicates that cancel culture should not always be regarded as negative because, under certain conditions, it can express solidarity with groups that have suffered harm. However, those findings do not directly establish the same psychological mechanism in the Gus Miftah case, given differences in context and research design.

In this study, Habermas's perspective remains the principal basis for determining whether such solidarity and moral criticism can be justified through rational communicative procedures. Public criticism may possess normative legitimacy when it rests on defensible reasons, but such legitimacy does not justify every form of social punishment.

The findings therefore reveal a reciprocal normative responsibility. Public figures are morally accountable for their actions and statements, while members of the public who criticize them are responsible for upholding the moral principles on which their criticism rests. Within Habermas's framework, criticism intended to uphold human dignity may lose its normative justification if it is expressed through actions that themselves undermine another person's dignity.

Sincerity and Comprehensibility in Digital Public Communication

The findings indicate that communication following the Gus Miftah controversy took diverse forms. Some online users expressed criticism supported by moral reasons; others showed empathy toward the small-scale vendor; still others used provocative language, insinuations, and personal judgments. Gus Miftah, meanwhile, offered clarification and an apology after the controversy attracted widespread public attention. These varied responses demonstrate that digital

[25] Marissa Traversa, Ying Tian, and Stephen C. Wright, "Cancel Culture Can Be Collectively Validating for Groups Experiencing Harm," *Frontiers in Psychology* 14 (2023): 1181872, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1181872.

communication cannot be understood solely through message content; its orientation and context must also be considered.

From Habermas's perspective, sincerity concerns the consistency between what a person expresses and their actual subjective intention. Sincerity is important for communication oriented toward mutual understanding because participants need some basis for trusting that statements are not intended to mislead or manipulate others.

However, sincerity cannot be established solely from comments or public statements. Harsh criticism does not necessarily indicate manipulative motives, just as an apology does not automatically prove the sincerity of the person offering it. For this reason, the present study confines its analysis to observable communicative features, such as a willingness to explain, consistency of statements, and openness to clarification. With respect to the expressions "BOYKOT" [Boycott] and "Blacklist," the study does not conclude that their authors were insincere, because these expressions provide insufficient information about subjective intentions. A responsible ethical assessment can address only the form of the utterances, the reasons apparent in them, and the opportunities for clarification.

Comprehensibility, meanwhile, is an essential prerequisite for a message to be understood and for its claims to be examined rationally. In the Gus Miftah controversy, the circulation of edited video excerpts and the addition of different narratives made it possible for divergent interpretations of the incident's context to emerge. Some members of the public viewed the remarks as demeaning, while others considered the context of joking later offered in the clarification. These differences highlight the importance of complete contextual information in public communication. In terms of comprehensibility, the three brief quotations can be recognized as normative criticism and appeals for rejection, but they do not explain all the information underlying those positions. Comments must therefore be read alongside the video context, accompanying captions, and the sequence of interactions so that understanding a message is not confused with morally endorsing it.

From Habermas's perspective, comprehensibility does not require everyone to reach the same judgment. Communication can remain rational despite disagreement, provided that participants understand the issue under discussion and have an opportunity to examine one another's reasons.

Brady and colleagues show that social media users may overperceive the moral outrage of others, generating an impression of collective hostility that exceeds what communicators themselves report. This finding underscores the need for caution when interpreting emotional expressions on social media.[26] The present study does not, however, claim that an identical psychological mechanism has been demonstrated directly in the Gus Miftah case; rather, it draws on that research as a comparison for understanding the risks of interpreting digital communication.

Thus, the analysis of sincerity and comprehensibility indicates that the ethical quality of cancel culture depends not only on whether criticism is right or wrong, but also on whether those involved can adequately understand messages and account for their communicative intentions. From Habermas's perspective, rational communication requires openness to clarification, examination of reasons, and a willingness to understand other participants' positions.

Cancel Culture and the Problem of Consensus in Habermas's Discourse Ethics

Taken together, the findings show that cancel culture in the Gus Miftah controversy raises questions about the moral legitimacy of public judgments formed through digital communication. Criticism of remarks perceived as demeaning toward a small-scale vendor developed into demands for accountability and social consequences for the figure at the center of the controversy. Yet growing support for those demands does

[26] William J. Brady et al., "Overperception of Moral Outrage in Online Social Networks Inflates Beliefs about Intergroup Hostility," *Nature Human Behaviour* 7 (2023): 917–927, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-023-01582-0.

not automatically indicate that the process through which public judgments were formed satisfied the principles of discourse ethics.

In Habermas's thought, discourse ethics places rational argumentation at the center of the justification of norms. A norm is legitimate if it can be accepted through a discursive process that allows all affected parties to participate on equal terms, raise objections, and weigh reasons without coercion.[27] Habermas regards deliberation as an essential component of democratic legitimacy, achieved through communicative procedures that enable the shared exercise of public reason.

In the context of cancel culture, this principle indicates that agreement produced through majority pressure cannot simply be equated with rational consensus. Numerous comments condemning Gus Miftah may indicate a widely shared moral judgment, but they do not necessarily demonstrate that all resulting demands have been tested through open argumentation.

Another important issue is how the interests of those affected are represented in the discourse. The iced tea vendor received public sympathy and support, while Gus Miftah became the subject of criticism and demands for accountability. From Habermas's perspective, however, both remain moral subjects whose interests must be considered. Public advocacy on behalf of the vendor cannot automatically replace the vendor's own voice, just as criticism of Gus Miftah should not eliminate opportunities for clarification and accountability.

Yaqinah and Antok (2024) found that cancel culture in Indonesian digital communication has a paradoxical character. On the one hand, it can operate as a mechanism of social control that promotes adherence to public norms; on the other, it can narrow the space for forgiveness, behavioral improvement, and justice.[28] Their findings

[27] Jürgen Habermas, "Three Normative Models of Democracy," *Constellations* 1, no. 1 (1994): 1–10, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8675.1994.tb00001.x.

[28] Siti Nurul Yaqinah and Ishak Hariyanto Antok, "Analysis of Islamic Communication about Oxymora Cancel Culture on Virtual Media in Indonesia," *Al-*

reinforce the need for ethical evaluation of social punishment. In the present study, however, such evaluation remains grounded in Habermas's discourse ethics rather than in any alternative theory or normative framework.

The analysis therefore indicates that the moral legitimacy of cancel culture cannot be determined solely by the extent of public support or by the success of social pressure in producing particular consequences. That legitimacy must be assessed in terms of the quality of the underlying communicative process, including openness to arguments, equality of participation, examination of claims, and the absence of coercion.

From Habermas's perspective, rational public criticism need not always end in agreement or forgiveness. It may still produce demands for accountability and social consequences. Nevertheless, those demands must be justified by reasons that can be openly examined, rather than solely by their becoming the will of a majority group.

Analysis of truth claims shows that empirical facts must be distinguished from interpretation and moral judgment. Analysis of normative rightness indicates that criticism of actions deemed harmful to human dignity must itself respect the dignity of those being criticized. Analysis of sincerity and comprehensibility, meanwhile, underscores the importance of openness to clarification, consistency in communication, and an adequate understanding of the incident's context.

Overall, the findings indicate that public communication associated with cancel culture directed at Gus Miftah does not fully reflect Habermas's ideal of communicative rationality. Some public responses contain defensible moral arguments, while others exhibit tendencies toward negative labeling, personal insults, and social pressure that do not always allow arguments to be examined openly.

The philosophical contribution of this study therefore lies in affirming that the moral legitimacy of cancel culture is determined not

by the intensity of public support, but by the quality of communicative rationality underlying the formation of criticism. Criticism can serve as a means of social accountability when it is based on verifiable facts, justifiable normative arguments, openness to clarification, and respect for everyone involved. Conversely, criticism that substitutes collective pressure for argumentation risks shifting from communicative action toward strategic action.

Habermas's perspective thus provides a philosophical basis for distinguishing criticism as a form of rational social control from cancel culture as a mechanism of collective punishment that may disregard discourse ethics. The study also affirms that an ethical digital public sphere does not require the elimination of criticism or disagreement; rather, it requires the strengthening of rational, open, equal, and responsible communication.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion, cancel culture in the controversy involving Gus Miftah and the iced tea vendor can be understood as a form of public participation in the digital public sphere that develops through information circulation, opinion formation, and collective criticism of a public figure's actions. Social media, especially TikTok, enables people to express moral judgments and demand social accountability. From the perspective of Jürgen Habermas's public sphere, however, high levels of public participation do not automatically indicate rational communication. Criticism initially intended to uphold social norms may shift from communicative action oriented toward mutual understanding to strategic action that places greater emphasis on social pressure and punishment.

Analysis based on Habermas's validity claims indicates that public communication in the controversy did not fully satisfy the principles of communicative rationality. With regard to truth, facts, interpretations, and moral judgments were at times conflated without adequate supporting evidence. With regard to normative rightness, public criticism was morally grounded in respect for human dignity, yet some responses developed into insults and judgments that could

contradict the very norms being defended. The dimension of sincerity highlights the importance of distinguishing communication open to dialogue from communication potentially used as an instrument of pressure. Comprehensibility, meanwhile, emphasizes that complete information and contextual clarity are essential prerequisites for rational public judgment.

This study therefore affirms that the central issue in cancel culture is not the presence or absence of public criticism, but the ethical quality of the communicative processes through which criticism is formed. In Habermas's discourse ethics, the moral legitimacy of criticism depends not on majority support, virality, or the ability to generate social pressure, but on the strength of arguments, the examination of validity claims, openness to dialogue, and respect for all parties involved. The study contributes to the philosophy of communication by showing that cancel culture can function as a legitimate mechanism of social control when practiced rationally and responsibly. Conversely, when criticism develops into collective judgment that disregards argumentation and opportunities for dialogue, it risks conflicting with Habermas's principles of communicative action and discourse ethics.

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