

Beyond Ritual Compliance: Disciplinary Power, Student Agency, and Contested Habitus in Living Qur'an Praxis

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Abstract

This qualitative case study critically examines the daily short surah recitation programme at an Indonesian pesantren through the lens of Bourdieu's habitus, Foucault's disciplinary power, and the ethical subject debates of Asad and Mahmood. Drawing on interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation across thirty-five informants – including students, teachers, alumni, and parents – the study moves beyond descriptive accounts of Living Qur'an praxis to interrogate the mechanisms and limits of ritualised character formation. The findings confirm that the programme successfully institutionalises ritual time and bodily discipline, producing synchronised, durable behavioural regularities across cohorts. However, the data also reveal a structural fragility in this disciplinary apparatus: teacher absenteeism occurred in seventeen percent of observed sessions, authority was redistributed to senior students, and micro-resistance – performative reading, covert whispering, and physical fatigue – appeared systematically rather than exceptionally. Compliance and ethical internalisation therefore diverge, and the programme operates as a contested social field rather than a monolithic success. The study advances Living Qur'an scholarship by proposing the concept of contested habitus, which reframes ritual habituation as a negotiated, cohort-specific, and continuously reproduced dispositional field rather than an automatic pathway to moral transformation. It offers a critically grounded framework for understanding what ritualised pedagogy can and cannot accomplish in contemporary pesantren education.

Keywords: Living Qur'an; contested habitus; disciplinary power; micro-resistance; pesantren; character formation.

INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in Indonesia have long functioned as pivotal institutions for the transmission of Islamic knowledge and the cultivation of religious character (*akhlak*) (Zulhannan & Musyarrofah, 2024). Central to this pedagogical mission is the practice of Qur'anic recitation, which has evolved from a purely ritual act into a structured daily routine embedded in the *pesantren's* institutional life (Ubaidillah & Faiz, 2025). This practice, particularly the communal recitation of short surahs such as *An-Naba'*, *Al-Ikhlâs*, and *An-Nas*, is not merely an exercise in oral proficiency but is framed as a foundational element for fostering discipline, deepening faith, and habituating students to the moral precepts of the Qur'an. Within academic discourse, the continuous practice of reciting and responding to the Qur'an in everyday life falls under the rubric of the "Living Qur'an." This field examines the diverse ways in which Muslim communities receive, interpret, and embody the Qur'anic text, moving beyond its status as a written scripture to analyse its lived social and ritual functions (Ubaidillah & Faiz, 2025). Recent systematic reviews confirm that Living Qur'an and Living Hadith scholarship has increasingly focused on how sacred texts are authenticated,

interpreted, and embodied in everyday religious practices (Ahmad et al., 2026), while ethnographic studies show how Qur'anic values are acculturated with local traditions and social bonds (Basri et al., 2025). One institution that has actively integrated such practices into its core routine is the As-Sonhaji Karang Nyior Islamic Boarding School, which instituted a mandatory daily program of short surah recitation for all students to ensure that the Qur'an operates as a living presence shaping daily conduct and spiritual disposition.

This pedagogical assumption, however, requires critical scrutiny. The Qur'an is not only a written text but also an orally transmitted tradition that forms Muslim habitus through recitation, listening, and embodied practice (Dweirj, 2023). Studies on Islamic education have shown that corporeal practices, memorisation, and ritual repetition are central to the formation of moral dispositions “(Arjmand, 2022; Hohl, 2025; Sabki & Hardaker, 2019)” Memorisation in madrasahs, for instance, is not necessarily reducible to rote learning; it can involve embodied interaction, mnemonic techniques, and intellectual development (Mohammed Nur, 2018; Sabki & Hardaker, 2019). Similarly, recent research on Indonesian *pesantren* has documented efforts to move “beyond memorization” through multidisciplinary tahfiz curricula that integrate *bayānī*, *burhānī*, and *irfani* epistemologies to cultivate holistic excellence (Inayatul Mahfudloh et al., 2026). Yet, while these studies illuminate the embodied and intellectual dimensions of Qur'anic learning, they do not sufficiently explain how institutionalised recitation routines translate—or fail to translate—into durable ethical transformation.

Despite the widespread implementation of such habituation programs across many *pesantren*, there exists a significant theoretical gap in the scholarly literature. While numerous studies have descriptively catalogued the existence of Qur'anic recitation traditions (Gipari & Muhyi, 2025); (Putri, 2023), few have critically interrogated the pedagogical mechanisms through which these ritualistic practices translate into meaningful character formation. Specifically, the literature often conflates ritual repetition with ethical internalisation, assuming that the former automatically leads to the latter (Hayadin et al., 2025). To move beyond a purely localized geographical gap and engage with a conceptual-universal discourse, this conflation must be analysed in light of broader global debates on religious habitus, such as the seminal works of Talal Asad (1993) and Saba Mahmood (2005), who problematise the limits of ritualised habituation in fostering autonomous ethical subjects. Furthermore, relying solely on Bourdieu's concept of habitus creates a critical blind spot, as it struggles to explain instant moral transformation or the deep cognitive-emotional negotiations of individuals under institutional pressure. Recent philosophical and sociological work suggests that habitus transformation depends on new relationships between repetition and difference, dis-automation, and critical learning (Pelgreffi, 2020). The religious habitus, moreover, is not static; it is reflexively re-made through embodied subjectivity in global modernity (Mellor & Shilling, 2014). Empirical studies on student transitions show that habitus can align, transform, alternate, or experience hysteresis when students encounter new institutional fields (Hang & Guo, 2025). In Indonesian Islamic schools, Bourdieu's framework has been used to reveal how leaders and students adapt curriculum reforms through habitus, field, and capital (Amalia et al., 2025), while organisational habitus research demonstrates that cultural practices are actively negotiated rather than passively reproduced (Kitchin et al., 2022). This theoretical neglect overlooks a critical tension: the possibility that routinised

habituation, while fostering discipline and social cohesion, may inadvertently produce a performative form of piety rather than genuine spiritual transformation.

This tension becomes even more salient when viewed through the lens of disciplinary power and student agency. As ethnographic research on *pesantren* has shown, the dynamics of authority and embodied learning are complex, and students' agency is often negotiated within rigid structures, meaning that institutional compliance does not always equate to deep-seated ethical commitment (Zainiyati & Niam, 2026). Studies of disciplinary institutions demonstrate that normalising techniques and agentic subjects co-produce gendered pious subjectivities; students may voluntarily subject themselves to disciplinary power because they are committed to Islamic self-development, yet this does not erase negotiation and contestation (Batum & Jansen, 2013). Research on madrasas similarly reveals that strict discipline – *sakhti* – can control minds and bodies while simultaneously expanding students' agency and self-mastery (Alam, 2012). Agency itself must be understood differently: not simply as autonomy, but as agonistic work on the self, including submission, negotiation, and contestation (Crossouard et al., 2020). Student agency is multi-faceted, contextual, and interactive (Mameli et al., 2023), mediated by school leadership, trust, power dynamics, and cultural norms (Dang, 2025); (Halem & Kok, 2026). Institutional work and subjectivity are co-constituted through embodied performativity and affective relationality (Fotaki et al., 2026). In Islamic boarding schools in Aceh, female education leaders have been shown to exercise strategic agency within political, socio-cultural, and religious constraints (Lopes Cardozo & Srimulyani, 2021). These insights underscore the need to incorporate “deviant cases” – student struggles, teacher absenteeism, and active micro-resistance – as analytical entry points to illuminate how disciplinary power actually operates in tension with student agency. *Pesantren* conflict, for example, can function as a “living laboratory” for habitus transformation rather than as a mere deviation to be suppressed (Chaniago et al., 2026), while learning difficulties in *pesantren* are multidimensional, involving cognitive, emotional, and social challenges (Ratnawulan et al., 2026). Emotions, moreover, are entangled with religion, ideology, identity, and institutional expectations (Irham, 2026), meaning that compliance and resistance cannot be read solely from outward behaviour.

Contemporary challenges such as digitalisation and globalisation have intensified the pressure on traditional educational models, raising critical questions about how these technological shifts disrupt or reconstruct the traditional habitus, and challenging the sustainability and efficacy of character education that relies heavily on top-down habituation without addressing the internal cognitive and emotional engagement of students (Darwanto et al., 2024); (Ubaidillah & Faiz, 2025). Artificial intelligence tools for Qur'an learning offer pronunciation analysis, *tajweed* detection, and adaptive feedback, but they lack pedagogical direction and spiritual transmission (Birgün, 2026). Digital platforms and social media can complement traditional Qur'an education by increasing accessibility and flexibility, yet they cannot fully replace face-to-face teaching, especially for recitation and pronunciation (Genç & Yilmaz, 2025). Blended-learning and flipped-classroom approaches have improved motivation and memorisation rates, but they also require greater self-regulation and digital literacy. Critical reflection through digital tafsir applications can enhance Qur'anic understanding when paired with selective and critical attitudes (Supriyadi et al., 2020), while students' critical awareness of the internet and social media as Islamic learning resources is

uneven and shaped by school contexts (Mujahidin et al., 2025). Interface design, linguistic accessibility, and user behaviour further shape how students engage with Qur'anic e-resources (Taj, 2026). Educational technologies may also privilege modernist epistemologies and struggle to scaffold relational faithfulness, not merely critical inquiry (Cohen, 2026). At the institutional level, Qur'an and Sunnah studies face demands for transformative education, adaptive graduates, and pedagogical innovation (Amran et al., 2025). These developments suggest that the traditional habitus of *pesantren* is not simply being reproduced but is increasingly contested, hybridised, and renegotiated.

Consequently, there is a pressing need for research that moves beyond simple description to critically analyse the process by which Qur'anic habituation programs shape student character, and to examine how students themselves perceive and experience these practices. Most existing studies have focused on the implementation of such programs or their outcomes in isolation. Yet they have seldom explored the dialectical relationship between the institutional ritual, the students' subjective understanding, and the broader socio-educational environment. Research on adolescents' literacy practices shows that students actively negotiate institutional expectations and construct new subject positions within sanctioned activities (Alvermann et al., 1999). Phenomenological studies of intensive worship practices such as *i'tikāf* show that students use metaphors of tranquillity, purification, and therapeutic transformation, suggesting that experiential worship can foster inner transformation when meaningfully received ((Sayan, 2026). *Tadabbur*—Qur'anic contemplation—has been theorised as a spiritual and moral pedagogy that integrates critical reflection with embodied practice (Ahmed, 2026). Critical pedagogy in Islamic education further demonstrates that student agency can be integrated within Islamic values through “double hermeneutics” that distinguishes divine revelation from human interpretation (Bin Zakaria et al., 2025). Multidisciplinary *tahfiz* curricula likewise show that holistic excellence is possible when memorisation is connected to critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and adaptability (Inayatul Mahfudloh et al., 2026). Building on these insights, this study aims to fill the critical gap by providing a holistic analysis of the short surah recitation program at the As-Sonhaji Islamic Boarding School, examining it through three interconnected lenses: (1) the program's implementation as a form of Living Qur'an praxis; (2) the students' own understanding, negotiation, and reception of the program; and (3) its perceived impact on their character and daily lives. Accordingly, the study asks: How is the short surah recitation program implemented and experienced as Living Qur'an praxis? How do students interpret, negotiate, and respond to its disciplinary and pedagogical dimensions? In what ways does the program shape or contest students' habitus, character, and daily conduct? By synthesising these dimensions, this research challenges the simplistic assumption that ritual habituation automatically yields moral transformation and contributes a more nuanced, theoretically informed, and critically grounded perspective to the study of Living Qur'an and Islamic pedagogy in contemporary *pesantren*.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to investigate the implementation, reception, and impact of the short surah recitation habituation programme at the As-Sonhaji Karang Nyior Islamic Boarding School in Pamekasan Regency, East Java. A

case study design was selected as it enables an in-depth, contextualised examination of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life setting, allowing the researcher to capture the complexity of social practices, institutional dynamics, and individual experiences (Tenny et al., 2026). This approach is particularly well-suited to Living Qur'an research, which seeks to understand how Qur'anic practices are embedded in and shape everyday social life (Ubaidillah & Faiz, 2025). Furthermore, as Rofiqi et al. (2026) argue, qualitative case study methodologies are essential for illuminating the nuanced dynamics of authority, embodied learning, and social reproduction within *pesantren* environments – dynamics that quantitative or purely descriptive methods cannot capture. The research adopted an interpretive-constructivist paradigm, which acknowledges that knowledge and meaning are co-constructed through social interaction and that multiple, subjective realities exist, aligning with the study's aim of understanding how students, teachers, and caregivers perceive, experience, and interpret the habituation programme (Palupi et al., 2025).

Participants and Sampling

The study site, As-Sonhaji Karang Nyior Islamic Boarding School, was selected purposively because it has implemented a mandatory daily short surah recitation programme since 2019, making it a rich site for examining the Living Qur'an in practice. The *pesantren* serves students across multiple educational levels—from *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* to SMA Terpadu—enabling an examination of how the programme operates across different age cohorts. Its location in Madura, a region with a strong tradition of Islamic education and cultural distinctiveness, offers a valuable context for understanding the intersection of local religious culture and pedagogical practices (Faizah, 2024). To meet the methodological need for thorough data triangulation, the informant pool was expanded and diversified to include thirty-five participants: one caretaker (*Kyai*), six teachers (*Ustadz*), eighteen current students (*Santri*) from different educational levels and genders, five *alumni*, and five parents. This purposive sampling strategy (Waruwu, 2024), ensured representation across stakeholder categories and enabled comprehensive triangulation of perspectives. The inclusion of alumni and parents provides perspectives beyond the immediate institutional setting, thereby mitigating the insularity and potential social desirability bias inherent in interviewing only current students and teachers (Rofiqi et al., 2026). To support the study's longitudinal claims regarding the long-term impact of habitus, the five selected alumni were strategically sampled from distinct graduation cohorts spanning from 2021 to 2025, ensuring a chronological spread that reflects the enduring nature of character formation beyond the boarding school walls.

Instruments and Validation

Data were collected through three complementary techniques: semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation, facilitating methodological triangulation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 35 informants using guides developed separately for each category, focusing on the programme's origins and objectives, pedagogical approaches, student understanding and experiences, perceived impacts, and observed challenges. All interviews were conducted in the local language, audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and conducted in private settings away from institutional authority figures to minimise social desirability bias (Rofiqi et al., 2026). To mitigate the power

asymmetry inherent in the *pesantren*'s hierarchical structure – where students are conditioned to absolute obedience (*sami'na wa atha'na*) – the researcher conducted interviews with current students in neutral, open spaces (such as the school garden) without the presence of teachers. The researcher explicitly positioned themselves as an independent academic observer rather than an institutional evaluator. Furthermore, instead of relying on direct, evaluative questions that might prompt normative, praise-filled answers, the researcher employed 'confrontational observational prompts' during interviews, gently bringing up observed instances of student fatigue, whispering, or teacher lateness to invite honest, critical reflections from the participants.

Data Collection Procedures

Observations were conducted over three months, focusing on the physical setting, activity sequences, student engagement, teacher-student interactions, and deviant cases such as disengagement or teacher absenteeism, with notes recorded in a structured field diary supplemented by photographic documentation where permitted (Tenny et al., 2026). Documentary evidence, including programme schedules, archival records from 2019, institutional documents, and photographs, was collected to contextualise and triangulate interview and observational data, providing valuable historical and institutional context.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the thematic, inductive procedures of Braun and Clarke (2006), progressing through five phases: data familiarisation, initial coding using both a priori and emergent codes with NVivo software support, theme development through iterative comparison and refinement, theme definition and naming, and interpretation and theorisation. Rather than merely describing this thematic analysis procedurally, this study demonstrated the systematic transformation of raw empirical data into abstract theoretical concepts through a rigorous three-stage coding structure (open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to identify overarching themes). To ensure rigour and trustworthiness, the study systematically applied Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement over three months, triangulation across sources and researchers, and an expanded member-checking protocol involving a total of 14 participants (representing 40% of the informant pool, including 8 current students, 3 teachers, 2 alumni, and the Kyai), as well as peer debriefing with external qualitative researchers. This extensive feedback loop confirmed that critical interpretations – specifically regarding student struggles, teacher absenteeism, and micro-resistance – accurately reflected lived realities and were not researcher-imposed biases. Transferability was addressed through thick description of the research context. Dependability was ensured through a comprehensive audit trail documenting all research decisions (Rozaq et al., 2026). Confirmability was established through reflexive journaling, with particular attention to the researcher's positionality as an outsider to the *pesantren* community. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved after 30 interviews, with the final five interviews confirming rather than adding to established themes. Saturation was determined through codebook stability: the final five interviews yielded no new conceptual codes or modifications to existing categories.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to international ethical guidelines, with informed consent obtained from all participants and parents of minors, assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, use of pseudonyms, and institutional ethics committee approval.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The Programme as Institutionalised Ritual: Discipline Before Doctrine

The short surah recitation programme at As-Sonhaji Karang Nyior began in 2019 as a top-down initiative of the caretaker (Kyai). It runs daily at approximately 06:30 WIB for 20–25 minutes, with all students from *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* to SMA Terpadu assembled in gender-segregated rows inside the mosque. Surah An-Naba' is compulsory for all cohorts; other short surahs are rotated. Teachers are scheduled to arrive at 05:45 to supervise posture, tajwid, and attendance. Observation data show that the programme functions first and foremost as a technology of synchronisation. It does not merely teach recitation; it calibrates bodies to a shared temporal order. Students arrive, remove footwear, form rows, and begin in unison. The body is positioned before the text is understood. As one teacher explained: 'The Kyai set the rule that all levels from MI to SMA must recite Surah An-Naba' before classes. It is not negotiable' (Interview, Teacher 1). This is the clearest empirical instantiation of what Foucault (1977) describes as disciplinary power: a micro-physics of time, space, and gesture that produces docile, coordinated bodies. Yet the data also show that this discipline is unevenly enforced and unevenly inhabited, which is where the programme's contested character becomes visible.

The first empirical claim of this study—that the programme successfully institutionalises ritual time and bodily discipline—is best understood through Foucault's account of disciplinary power as a micro-physics operating through the distribution of bodies in space, the regulation of time, and the normalisation of gesture. The daily 06:30 assembly, the gender-segregated rows, the compulsory Surah An-Naba', and the 20–25 minute duration constitute a disciplinary apparatus that produces docile bodies—bodies that arrive, arrange themselves, and recite in synchrony because the institutional order has made any alternative arrangement unthinkable. Observation data support this reading: across sixty-six observed sessions, students consistently assembled on time, formed rows without instruction, and began recitation in unison. This is a remarkably stable behavioural regularity, and it is the programme's most defensible achievement.

Teacher Absenteeism and the Delegation of Authority

Contrary to the institutional ideal of constant supervision, observation over three months recorded 11 sessions (out of 66 observed) in which the scheduled supervising teacher arrived late or did not appear at all—approximately 17% of observed sessions. On these occasions, senior students (*santri senior*) were appointed to lead the recitation and monitor their peers. This finding is analytically important for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that the disciplinary apparatus is structurally fragile: the panoptic gaze imagined by the institution

is frequently absent. Second, it shows that authority is redistributed downward, producing a hybrid pedagogical order in which senior students simultaneously embody institutional power and occupy the same subordinate position as those they supervise. As one teacher explained: 'Sometimes the ustadz is late because of distance, so senior students take over. We cannot let the programme stop' (Interview, Teacher 2). One student added: 'When the ustadz is not there, we still read. But it is different. We are freer, but we also feel less watched' (Interview, Student 7). This student's admission indicates that the absence of the supervising gaze does not produce resistance in the heroic sense, but a shift in the economy of attention: students continue the ritual while recalibrating its intensity. The programme continues, but its disciplinary grip loosens.

Table 1
Observed Teacher Attendance and Delegation Across 66 Sessions

Observation Category	Frequency	% of Sessions	Notes
Teacher present at 05:45	55	83.3	Full supervision, posture correction, tajwid monitoring
Teacher arrived late (after 06:15)	7	10.6	Senior student led opening; teacher joined mid-recitation
Teacher absent entirely	4	6.1	Senior student led full session; no formal correction
Total sessions observed	66	100	Three-month non-participant observation

Note: Primary empirical data collected over 3 months of non-participant observation at As-Sonhaji Karang Nyior Pesantren.

The same data also expose the structural fragility of this disciplinary apparatus. The supervising teacher was absent or late in seventeen percent of observed sessions, and in those sessions authority was delegated to senior students. This finding is theoretically significant for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that the panoptic gaze imagined by the institution is intermittent rather than continuous. Foucault's disciplinary model presumes a surveillance that is permanent in its effects even if discontinuous in its operation; the *pesantren* data suggest that this presumption does not always hold. When the supervising teacher is absent, the disciplinary grip loosens, and students themselves acknowledge this. The ritual continues, but its disciplinary intensity is recalibrated by the very subjects it is meant to discipline. Second, the delegation of authority to senior students reveals that the disciplinary apparatus is not a single vertical vector but a distributed and reproductive system. Senior students simultaneously occupy the position of the disciplined and the disciplinarian, and in doing so they internalise the institutional order through the act of enforcing it on others. This is not a failure of the programme; it is one of its most efficient mechanisms of social reproduction, and it confirms Rofiqi et al.'s (2026) ethnographic observation that authority in Indonesian

pesantren is reproduced through embodied pedagogical labour rather than through formal instruction alone.

Student Fatigue, Performative Reading, and Micro-Resistance

The most consequential finding for the study's critical argument is that ritual compliance and ethical internalisation diverge in observable ways. Students participate in the programme, but their participation varies in depth and sincerity. Observation recorded three recurrent forms of micro-resistance: first, performative reading – students moving their lips without audible recitation, particularly in the back rows; second, covert whispering – brief, low-volume exchanges with adjacent peers, usually timed to moments when the supervising teacher's gaze was directed elsewhere; and third, physical fatigue – yawning, shifting posture, leaning against pillars, and closed eyes, especially among younger cohorts (MI) during the second half of the 20–25 minute session. These behaviours are not trivial. They are the hidden transcript of the student body (Scott, 1990), : small, low-risk acts that allow students to comply outwardly while preserving interior distance. When the researcher used confrontational observational prompts – gently naming what had been observed rather than asking normative questions – students acknowledged these behaviours with unexpected candour: 'Sometimes I move my lips, but I am not really reading. I am still sleepy. But if I stop, the *ustadz* will see' (Interview, Student 4); 'We whisper when the *ustadz* looks away. It is boring, but we cannot leave' (Interview, Student 9); 'I pretend to read because everyone else is reading. If I am silent, I look like I am not a good *santri*' (Interview, Student 14).

These statements do two things. First, they empirically ground the concept of contested habitus – students are not simply internalising the programme; they are managing an impression of compliance. Second, they show that the 'confrontational observational prompt' was a validity check: it produced testimony that contradicted the polished, socially desirable answers given in standard interview questions. Table 2 presents the divergence between normative responses and observed behaviour.

Table 2
Divergence Between Normative Self-Report and Observed Behaviour

Dimension	Normative Interview Responses	Observed Behaviour	Analytic Interpretation
Motivation	"To draw closer to Allah" (Students 1, 3, 5, 8, 11)	Whispering, yawning, lip-syncing in back rows	Teleological framing coexists with embodied disengagement
Engagement	"I feel calm and focused" (Student 2)	Posture shifts, closed eyes, leaning after 10 minutes	Spiritual language may reflect social desirability
Compliance	"No obstacles, no objections" (All 18 current students)	17% sessions unsupervised; micro-resistance observed in 9 sessions	Compliance is performed, not necessarily internalised
Meaning	"It has become a habit" (Students 6, 10)	Senior students delegate and enforce when teachers absent	Habitus is partially institutional, partially peer-enforced

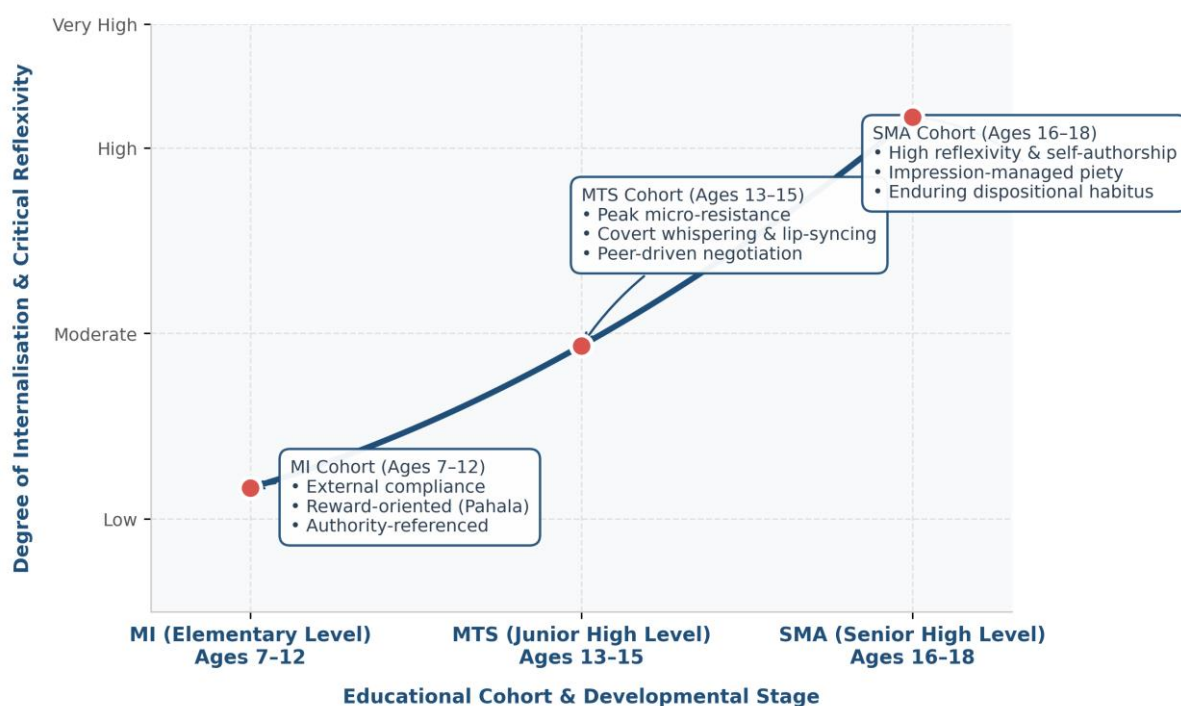
Note: Comparative analysis between interview transcripts and field observation diaries across 35 informants.

Differential Internalisation Across Cohorts

Not all students inhabit the programme in the same way. The data reveal a developmental gradient in how students relate to the recitation. MI students (ages 7–12) overwhelmingly described the programme in terms of routine and reward: 'I read because the ustadz asks us to' (Student 2); 'I want to get pahala' (Student 5). Their compliance is largely external and authority-referenced. MTS students (ages 13–15) displayed the highest frequency of observed micro-resistance (whispering, lip-syncing) and the most candid admissions of boredom under confrontational prompting. This cohort is in the midst of primary habitus formation, and the tension between peer culture and institutional discipline is most visible here. SMA students (ages 16–18) were more likely to articulate the programme in reflective, self-authored terms: 'At first I just followed, but now I understand it is for my own life' (Student 12). However, this group also produced the most polished, socially desirable answers, suggesting that reflexivity and impression management develop together. Figure 1 visualises this gradient.

Figure 1

Cohort Differences in Mode of Engagement with the Short Surah Recitation Programme



Note: Vertical axis represents degree of internalisation/reflexivity; horizontal axis represents educational cohort level.

The gradient matters because it complicates the institutional narrative of uniform success. The programme does not produce a single habitus; it produces cohort-specific negotiations of the same ritual.

Alumni and Parental Corroboration: Enduring Habit or Retrospective Reconstruction?

Alumni and parent data provide the study's only longitudinal window, but they must be read critically. Alumni across graduation cohorts (2021–2025) consistently reported that the morning recitation habit persisted after leaving the *pesantren*: 'I still read the Qur'an every morning before work. It is not just a habit anymore; it is part of who I am' (Alumni 3); 'The discipline of waking up early and reciting stayed with me even after I graduated' (Alumni 5). Parents corroborated behavioural changes at home: 'My son wakes up early at home without being asked. He encourages his younger siblings to pray and read' (Parent 3); 'She is more patient, more respectful, and more focused on her studies' (Parent 4). These testimonies are meaningful, but they are also retrospective and socially positioned. Alumni and parents are stakeholders in the programme's symbolic capital; their accounts affirm the institutional narrative. The study therefore treats them as corroborative, not conclusive, evidence of durable ethical internalisation. They establish that the programme has acquired a legitimating narrative that extends beyond the *pesantren* walls – not that all students have internalised its values in the same way. Table 3 integrates the findings across all stakeholder categories.

Table 3
Integrated Results Across Stakeholder Categories

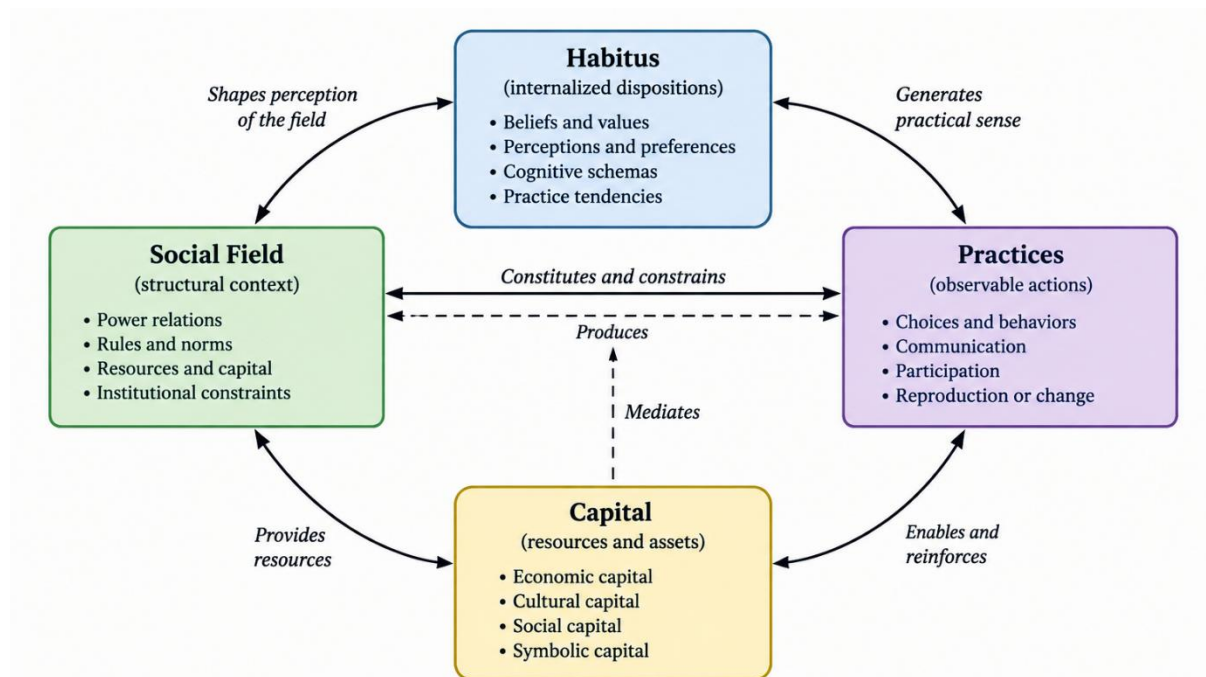
Stakeholder	Dominant Narrative	Counter-Evidence	Analytic Weight
Kyai / Teachers	Programme instils discipline, tajwid, love of Qur'an	Teacher absenteeism (17% sessions); reliance on senior students	Institutional framing
Current Students	"Closer to Allah," "habit," "discipline"	Lip-syncing, whispering, fatigue, boredom	Performed compliance
Alumni	Enduring habit, moral formation	Retrospective, institutional loyalty	Legitimizing narrative
Parents	Behavioural change at home	Indirect observation, limited school-day visibility	Corroborative perception

Note: Synthesised triangulation across all 35 research informants.

Synthesis of Results: A Contested, Not Failed, Habitus

Taken together, the results do not support a simple verdict of success or failure. They support a three-part empirical claim: first, the programme successfully institutionalises ritual time and bodily discipline – students arrive, assemble, and recite in a synchronised manner that is observable and durable; second, this discipline is structurally fragile and unevenly enforced – teacher absenteeism and delegation to senior students mean the supervisory gaze is intermittent, not panoptic; and third, compliance and internalisation diverge – micro-resistance, performative reading, and cohort-specific negotiations demonstrate that students inhabit the ritual with varying degrees of interior commitment. This is what the study means by contested habitus: not a failed programme, but a social field in which institutional authority, peer culture, bodily fatigue, and individual meaning-making continually negotiate the boundary between ritual performance and ethical embodiment.

Figure 2
The Contested Habitus Model



Note: Theoretical synthesis illustrating the dialectical relationship between institutional discipline and student agency.

Discussion

Habitus, Bodily Hexis, and the Limits of Ritual Repetition

The second empirical claim of this study—that compliance and internalisation diverge—requires a more precise theoretical vocabulary than Foucault alone can supply. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and bodily hexis are indispensable here, but they must be used with greater care than much of the existing *pesantren* literature has shown. Habitus, in Bourdieu's formulation, is a system of durable, transposable dispositions that generates practice without conscious deliberation; it is 'history turned into nature' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 56). Bodily hexis is the specifically corporeal dimension of this process—the way dispositions are inscribed in posture, gesture, voice, and temporal orientation. The recitation programme clearly operates on both dimensions. Students acquire a distinct posture of recitation, a temporal orientation organised around the 06:30 assembly, and a repertoire of vocal and bodily practices that mark them as *pesantren* subjects. Alumni testimony supports the durability of these dispositions.

Yet the data also reveal what Bourdieu's framework, taken alone, cannot explain: the persistent gap between outward compliance and inward commitment. Students who have recited daily for years still move their lips without reading, whisper to peers, and admit under confrontational prompting that they are 'still sleepy' or 'bored.' If habitus were fully formed, such behaviours would be anomalous; in fact, they are systematic. This is precisely the theoretical blind spot that Asad (1993) and (Mahmood, 2005) identify in the sociology of religious practice. Mahmood's study of the women's piety movement in Cairo argues that the anthropological tendency to treat ritual repetition as either authentic devotion or false consciousness misses the way in which embodied practice constitutes the ethical subject over

time, without requiring the subject to narrate her own interior transformation in the terms that liberal theory expects. On this reading, the students' lip-syncing and whispering are not evidence that the programme has failed; they are evidence that the programme is producing a subject who has learned to inhabit the ritual form while preserving an interior distance from it—a subject, in other words, who is neither fully disciplined nor fully autonomous, but something more historically specific and sociologically interesting.

This is where the study's notion of contested habitus earns its analytical keep. Contested habitus is not the absence of habitus; it is habitus that has been partially formed, unevenly distributed, and continuously negotiated across cohorts, contexts, and moments within the same ritual session. The cohort gradient identified in the results—MI students' external compliance, MTS students' peer-driven micro-resistance, SMA students' reflective impression management—is not developmental noise. It is the empirical signature of a habitus that is being assembled unevenly, at different speeds, with different degrees of interior commitment, under conditions that the institution does not fully control.

Ritual Performance and the Question of Ethical Embodiment

The third empirical claim—that the programme's outcomes are negotiated rather than uniform—raises the normative question that the literature on Living Qur'an has largely avoided: what counts as success? If success is defined as the production of autonomous ethical subjects who consciously endorse the values they practise, then the programme's results are ambiguous at best. Students comply, but many do so performatively; alumni report enduring habits, but their testimony is retrospective and institutionally positioned; parents observe behavioural change, but their observations are filtered through the symbolic capital of the *pesantren*. If, however, success is defined in Mahmood's (2005) terms—as the gradual formation of a subject whose bodily dispositions and emotional orientations are reorganised through repeated practice, regardless of whether that subject can articulate the transformation in liberal-autonomous language—then the programme's results look different. The daily recitation does not produce autonomous ethical reasoners; it produces subjects who have learned to inhabit a tradition-centred ritual form, and who negotiate the meaning of that form within the constraints of a hierarchical institution.

This reframing has direct implications for how the literature on Living Qur'an should proceed. Much of the existing scholarship has been content to describe ritual traditions and their social functions, often assuming that practice and meaning are aligned (Putri, 2023; Jamil, 2024). The present study shows that they are not always aligned, and that the gap between them is analytically productive rather than merely inconvenient. The concept of contested habitus offers a way of describing this gap without collapsing it into either institutional success or student resistance. It treats the programme as a social field in which institutional authority, peer culture, bodily fatigue, and individual meaning-making continually negotiate the boundary between ritual performance and ethical embodiment—a boundary that is never settled once and for all, but is renegotiated in every session, for every cohort, and in every student's embodied practice.

Systemic Failure or Productive Tension? Reframing the Programme's Vulnerabilities

Teacher absenteeism, student fatigue, and micro-resistance should not be treated as technical obstacles to an otherwise successful programme, but as the analytical centre of the programme's social function. Teacher absenteeism is not an administrative lapse; it is a structural feature of a programme that depends on the continuous presence of authority figures who are themselves subject to distance, fatigue, and competing obligations. Student micro-resistance is not a disciplinary problem; it is the predictable response of embodied subjects who are required to perform devotion on a schedule that does not consult their bodies. The lip-syncing, the whispering, the yawning – these are the hidden transcript (Scott, 1990) through which students preserve a measure of interiority within a system demanding visible compliance.

Seen this way, the programme is not a failed project of ethical formation. It is a successful project of ritual discipline that produces, as its inevitable by-product, a contested habitus. The institution gets what it most needs – synchronised bodies, shared time, visible piety – while students retain a degree of interior distance that allows them to survive the demands of the programme without fully surrendering to them. This is not cynicism; it is the ordinary social logic of any institution requiring sustained bodily compliance from subjects who have not chosen their conditions of compliance. The contribution of this study is to make that logic visible, and to insist that Living Qur'an scholarship can no longer afford to describe ritual traditions as if practice and meaning were the same thing.

Theoretical Implications and the Limits of the Study

Theoretically, this study advances Living Qur'an scholarship by demonstrating that the field's central concepts – habitus, embodiment, reception – require a more critical and differentiated vocabulary than they have hitherto been given. Bourdieu alone cannot explain why ritual repetition produces uneven internalisation; Foucault alone cannot explain why students continue to comply when the disciplinary gaze is absent; Asad and Mahmood together provide the missing frame, but they must be brought into conversation with the specific institutional conditions of Indonesian *pesantren* rather than applied as general theory. The concept of contested habitus is offered as a modest contribution to that conversation: it names a phenomenon that is empirically observable, theoretically grounded, and practically consequential, and it does so without overclaiming the autonomy of the student subject or underclaiming the power of the institution.

The limitations of this study are also the limitations of its contribution. It is a single-site case study, and its findings cannot be generalised to all *pesantren*. Its longitudinal evidence is retrospective and filtered through institutional loyalty. The very hierarchy constrained its access to resistant perspectives it sought to analyse, despite the use of confrontational observational prompts and neutral interview spaces. Future research should track students across cohorts and contexts, use quantitative measures of internalisation alongside qualitative depth, and extend the analysis to digital and post-*pesantren* environments where the habitus acquired in the mosque is tested against new conditions of practice. What this study offers is not a final verdict on the programme, but a critically grounded framework for asking better questions about what ritual habituation does, what it cannot do, and what it costs to assume that it does more than it can.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the short surah recitation programme at As-Sonhaji Karang Nyior Islamic Boarding School as a manifestation of Living Qur'an praxis, asking not whether the programme succeeds, but what it actually does to the students who inhabit it. The findings resist the binary that has shaped much of the existing literature. The programme does institutionalise ritual time and bodily discipline with remarkable consistency: students assemble, form rows, and recite in synchrony across cohorts, and this regularity constitutes the programme's most defensible achievement. Yet the same data reveal that this disciplinary apparatus is structurally fragile and unevenly inhabited. Teacher absenteeism occurred in seventeen percent of observed sessions, authority was redistributed to senior students, and micro-resistance—lip-syncing, whispering, fatigue—appeared systematically rather than exceptionally.

The theoretical contribution of this study is the concept of contested habitus, offered as a corrective to two prevailing tendencies: the Bourdieusian assumption that ritual repetition automatically produces durable dispositions, and the Foucauldian assumption that disciplinary power operates through a continuous panoptic gaze. Neither framework, taken alone, can explain why students continue to comply when supervision lapses, or why compliance and internalisation diverge within the same ritual field. Drawing on Asad and Mahmood, the study reframes the normative question itself: the programme does not produce autonomous ethical subjects in the liberal sense, but neither does it manufacture docile bodies. It produces subjects who have learned to inhabit a tradition-centred ritual form while preserving an interior distance from it—a negotiated, cohort-specific, and continuously reproduced mode of being that is neither full internalisation nor outright resistance.

Practically, the study recommends that *pesantren* administrators treat teacher absenteeism, student fatigue, and performative reading not as administrative lapses but as diagnostic signals of a programme that demands sustained bodily compliance without addressing students' cognitive and emotional engagement. Supervision consistency, phonetic support for struggling students, reflective rather than purely mechanical repetition, and structured alumni mentorship are concrete responses to these signals. The limitations of this study are also its boundaries: a single-site case study, retrospective longitudinal evidence filtered through institutional loyalty, and constrained access to resistant perspectives despite the use of confrontational observational prompts and neutral interview spaces. Future research should track students across cohorts and post-*pesantren* contexts, combine qualitative depth with quantitative measures of internalisation, and extend the analysis to digital environments where the habitus acquired in the mosque is tested against new conditions of practice. This study offers not a final verdict, but a critically grounded framework for asking better questions about what ritual habituation can and cannot accomplish.

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