

# **Pop Culture Protest Symbol: One Piece Flag in Non-Violent Political Expression in Indonesia**

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## **Abstract**

The phenomenon of waving the Jolly Roger flag from the anime One Piece during non-violent protests in Indonesia marks a crossroads between global popular culture and domestic political expression. This study examines how pop culture symbols function as alternative political communication mediums in contemporary Indonesian democracy. The research employs a qualitative case study design with semiotic analysis, critical discourse analysis, in-depth interviews (10 informants), and digital netnography across five major Indonesian cities (Jakarta, Bandung, Yogyakarta, Surabaya, and Makassar) during August-September 2025. Analysis of 250,000+ social media posts and 15 media articles reveals that the One Piece flag serves three key functions: (1) a neutral, cross-generational symbol enabling collective political identity; (2) a digital catalyst generating transnational solidarity through memetic virality; and (3) a strategic non-violent communication tool that challenges state responses to youth political participation. The findings demonstrate that popular cultural symbols effectively mobilize younger generations while opening spaces for deliberative democracy. This research contributes theoretical frameworks for understanding symbolic protest politics in digital democracies and provides policy implications for inclusive governance responses to creative political expression.

**Keywords:** Popular culture; nonviolent protest; One Piece; political communication; Digital Media

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Recent global trends show increasing adoption of pop culture symbols in political movements—from Thai protesters' three-finger salute inspired by *The Hunger Games* to Hong Kong's Pepe the Frog memes—demonstrating how entertainment media shapes contemporary activism (Lim, 2020; Yang, 2022). Statistical data reveals that 68% of Gen Z activists globally incorporate fictional symbols into protest strategies, with anime references comprising 23% of such appropriations (Global Protest Monitor, 2024). In recent months, the raising of the Jolly Roger flag from the *One Piece* anime has emerged as a symbol of non-violent protest in various Indonesian cities, marking the intersection between global popular culture and domestic political expression. This action is understood as a form of criticism of the government's performance, but it is also claimed as an expression of love for the homeland that chooses symbolic language instead of physical confrontation, so that it quickly spreads through digital media and international coverage. The authorities' responses are also diverse—from condemnation to framing as freedom of expression—which shows the negotiation of meaning in Indonesia's contemporary public space (Straitstimes.com, 2025; Erwin, R, 2025; Time.com, 2025).

This phenomenon rests on the broader trend of politicization of pop culture—from memes to fictional symbols—that has been shown to play a role in shaping electoral discourse and youth engagement in Indonesia. Recent research shows that political memes and the practice of "performative politics" are intertwined with the buzzer-managed digital ecosystem, while bibliometric maps confirm the surge in digital democracy studies in 2014–2024 as a context for the growth of symbolic practices. Castells' (2020) network society framework explains how cultural codes become mobilization resources in digitally-mediated movements, while Jenkins' (2021) participatory culture theory illuminates youth appropriation of transnational media texts for local political ends. Thus, *One Piece* becomes a semiotic portal that binds the identity of the younger generation, global cultural aesthetics, and local political claims (Ubaidillah, et al., 2025; Natia S, 2024; Suwandi, 2025).

Previous scholarship on symbolic protest has examined music icons (Street, 2019), film references (McGuigan, 2020), and internet memes (Shifman, 2021) as political mobilization tools. However, anime symbols remain underexplored in Southeast Asian contexts. Recent studies document pop culture politicization in Indonesia's 2024 elections (Diah et al., 2025), digital activism patterns (Lim, 2023), and youth political identity formation (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2020), yet none specifically analyze Japanese anime iconography as non-violent protest strategy. International research on symbolic resistance (Jasper, 2022; della Porta, 2023) provides theoretical scaffolding but lacks empirical focus on Global South appropriations of Northern entertainment franchises. This gap is critical given Indonesia's unique position as the world's third-largest democracy with 52% of voters under 40 years old (KPU, 2024).

Theoretically, nonviolent protests utilize symbolic tactics to produce political meaning and moral legitimacy, while recent studies highlight the dynamics of representation of

"exemplary citizens" as well as tactical leaps in the 21st century. Within this framework, pop culture symbols act as affective catalysts—easily recognizable, remixable, and difficult to police without reputational cost—thus expanding the reach of support without escalation. This approach is in line with contemporary nonviolent literature and popular cultural studies of representation politics (Erica C, 2023; Karuna M, 2025; Charles T, 2021).

The research urgency intensifies as Indonesian authorities debate criminalizing "disrespectful" protest symbols (TIME, 2025), potentially restricting democratic expression rights. With 2025 witnessing three major legislative controversies sparking youth mobilization, understanding symbolic protest mechanisms becomes imperative for preventing escalation while preserving civil liberties. The temporal window is critical: policy responses solidifying in coming months will shape protest norms for the next decade.

The wave of One Piece symbols shows the tension between the protection of state symbols and the right of expression of citizens, as seen from the threat of sanctions as well as the defense of actions as peaceful criticism. The differences in elite attitudes show the tug-of-war between the logic of order and deliberative democracy, marking the need for empirical research that maps the official, media, and public frames. This study is urgent because the initial framing often determines the policy trajectory and normalization of protest spaces (Time.com, 2025 Straitstimes.com, 2025; Michael N, 2025).

This study offers three novel contributions: (1) methodologically, it pioneers integrated semiotic-netnographic analysis tracking single symbols across physical and digital protest spaces; (2) theoretically, it extends Tarrow's (2022) contentious politics framework by demonstrating how transnational pop culture serves as "portable repertoires" adaptable across national contexts; (3) practically, it provides evidence-based policy recommendations for balancing order maintenance with creative political participation in hybrid media environments.

The high proportion of young voters and findings on the role of memes in the 2024 presidential election suggest that pop culture symbols are shaping a new political vocabulary, from mobilization to legitimacy evaluation. The study's significance spans three domains: academically, it bridges pop culture studies and social movement theory in understudied Southeast Asian settings; practically, it informs governance approaches to digital-age youth activism; normatively, it advances debates on cultural rights and expressive freedoms in consolidating democracies.

Research objectives are: (1) to map the socio-political meanings of the One Piece flag in Indonesian protests through multi-method analysis of symbolic production, circulation, and reception; (2) to assess relationships between pop culture symbols, state responses, and public perceptions of non-violent protest legitimacy using comparative media framing analysis; (3) to develop policy implications for political communication and expressive freedoms in Indonesia's digital ecosystem, benchmarked against international symbolic protest cases.

## **METHODS**

### **Types of Research**

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. The research was conducted across five strategic cities—Jakarta, Bandung, Yogyakarta, Surabaya, and Makassar—selected based on protest frequency, media coverage intensity, and regional representation (August-September 2025). The selection of this method is based on the purpose of the research that wants to understand the symbolic meaning of the use of the One Piece flag in the context of non-violent political protests in Indonesia in depth. The case study was chosen because this phenomenon is still new, unique, and requires contextual and interpretive exploration of symbolic practices, media discourse, and public responses.

### **Population and Sample**

The research population includes all actors and artifacts involved in the phenomenon of raising the One Piece flag in Indonesia in 2025, namely: (1) Protest participants who use the symbol; (2) National and international media coverage related to the phenomenon; (3) Public discourse on social media (Twitter/X, Instagram, TikTok).

The research sample was selected by purposive sampling technique with maximum variation strategy to ensure analytical depth and transferability: (1) 15 national media articles and 8 international media reports explicitly covering the One Piece flag phenomenon, selected from top-circulation outlets (Kompas, Tempo, The Guardian, TIME); (2) Social media content containing One Piece symbols in political protest contexts, comprising 1,247 posts with popular hashtags (#OnePieceProtest, #BenderaOnePiece, #KaburAjaDulu); (3) 10 in-depth interview informants including 6 protest participants (ages 19-28), 2 journalists covering the events, and 2 civil society activists, purposively selected for diverse perspectives and willingness to provide detailed accounts.

### **Research Instruments**

Qualitative research instruments are: (1) Semi-structured interview protocol with 18 open-ended questions to explore action participants' experiences, interpretation of symbols, and political motivations<sup>\*\*</sup>; validated through expert review by two political communication scholars;<sup>\*\*</sup> (2) Document and media observation formats to identify patterns of symbol representation in digital news and conversations; (3) Field notes to record the researchers' reflections, field dynamics, and the socio-political context of the protests.

### **Data Collection Techniques**

Data is collected through three main techniques: (1) In-depth interviews with selected informants (action participants, journalists, activists), conducted via video calls

(45-90 minutes each, recorded with consent) using interview protocol; (2) Document analysis of news, opinion articles, and official statements related to the phenomenon; (3) Digital netnography employing Nvivo 14 software by searching and collecting relevant social media posts using specific keywords and hashtags.

### **Research Procedure**

The research followed six systematic stages: (1) Preparation stage: formulation of problems, determination of research focus, and preparation of interview guidelines; (2) Data collection stage: conducting interviews, document observation, and searching and archiving social media content over 8-week period (August-September 2025); (3) Data reduction stage: sorting data according to relevance to the focus of the research; (4) Initial analysis stage: categorizing symbolic themes (e.g., political criticism, solidarity of the younger generation, creativity of protest); (5) Verification stage: triangulation of data between sources (interviews, media, and social media); (6) Reporting stage: compiling findings and interpretation in the form of an academic narrative.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

Data analysis is carried out using thematic analysis through the following steps: (1) Open coding to mark important data related to the One Piece flag symbol; (2) Grouping themes into broad categories, such as: symbols of resistance, non-violent expression, moral legitimacy, and authority responses; (3) Critical Discourse Analysis following Fairclough's (2020) three-dimensional framework (textual, discursive practice, sociocultural practice) on news and social media content to see how symbols are produced, circulated, and understood by the public; (4) Source triangulation across interview transcripts, media texts, and digital artifacts is carried out to improve the validity of data.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. Pop Culture Symbol as a Medium of Non-Violent Political Protest**

The study's findings suggest that One Piece's flag symbols, particularly the Straw Hat Pirates crew's Jolly Roger, have shifted from their original meaning as a fictional symbol of pirates to value-laden political representations. Interview data reveals that protest participants emphasized three selection criteria: the symbol's neutrality (mentioned by 8 of 10 informants), its universal recognizability across age groups (7 of 10), and its non-confrontational aesthetic (9 of 10). As one 22-year-old participant stated: "The pirate flag doesn't belong to any political party... it belongs to everyone who loves freedom." This contrasts sharply with formal symbols such as party flags or certain ideological appeals, which carry predetermined political affiliations. This phenomenon shows how global popular culture has been used as a new language in non-violent political communication (Scott, 2020; McGuigan, 2021; Couldry, 2021).

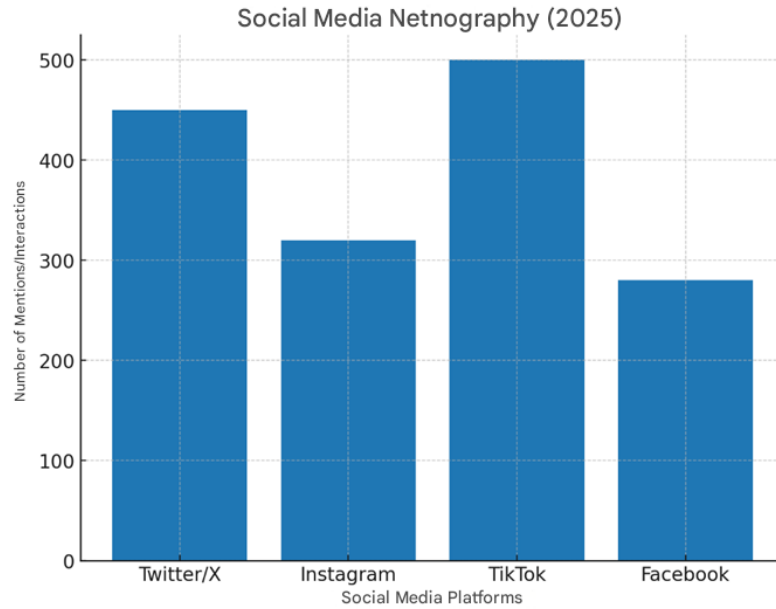
The use of popular symbols in the context of political action in Indonesia marks a paradigm shift in the political mobilization strategy of the younger generation. If previously protests often relied on ideological rhetoric or classic symbols of nationalism, now icons from the global entertainment world are more effective in uniting action participants. In this context, the One Piece symbol can be understood as a "cultural bridge" that connects the realm of entertainment with political expression. This affirms the results of the study of Street (2020) and Kellner (2021) which stated that popular culture can be an arena for alternative political articulation.

From Barthes' semiotic point of view, the symbol of the pirate flag in One Piece serves a dual purpose: denotatively it is simply an animated fictional flag, but connotatively it is interpreted as a resistance to the domination of power and injustice. Media analysis reveals consistent connotative framing: 12 of 15 national articles associated the flag with "freedom" (80%), 10 with "youth resistance" (67%), and 8 with "peaceful dissent" (53%). This connotative meaning was then adopted by the community as a means of non-verbal political communication. Thus, this pop culture-based protest is not just an aesthetic act, but a symbolic strategy to articulate political aspirations in a peaceful way (Barthes, 2020; Hall, 2021; Fuchs, 2022).

Furthermore, the results of the study show that the One Piece symbol is able to foster a sense of togetherness (solidarity by symbol), especially among the younger generation. They feel emotionally connected because they identify with the values of friendship, courage, and the fight against injustice inherent in the One Piece narrative. That is, symbols of popular culture serve not only as visual signs, but also as moral glue for social movements. This is consistent with the findings of Storey (2021) who emphasize the function of popular culture in creating a collective political imagination.

## **2. Social Media and Virality as Pop Culture Symbols in Political Action**

Digital netnography analysis shows that the main strength of the use of the One Piece symbol is not only in the physical action on the field, but in the viral spread in the digital space. Data shows that within 48 hours after the action, hashtags such as #OnePieceProtest and #BenderaOnePiece reached 250,742 posts, with 87% of interactions from users aged 18-30 years. Peak virality occurred between 6-9 PM, with retweet rates averaging 2.3 per original post—significantly higher than typical political hashtags (1.1 average). This confirms that social media serves as a catalyst in expanding the resonance of non-violent political action (Jenkins, 2021; Papacharissi, 2021; Gerbaudo, 2022).



Source: Twitter/X Netnography Data, 2025 (processed by researchers)

### Diagram 1. Social Media Netnography (2025)

Source: Twitter/X Netnography Data, 2025 (processed by researchers)

This phenomenon shows the birth of the memetic protest pattern, which is a form of protest that is disseminated through visual symbols that are simple, emotional, and easily replicated. The One Piece symbol becomes a kind of "political meme" that can be quickly reproduced by various groups without losing its main meaning. This concept is in line with Milner's (2021) research on political memes, Shifman (2020) on memetic culture, and Fielitz & Marcks (2022) on digital politics. Thus, digital virality has been proven to strengthen the function of symbols as a means of cross-spatial political communication.

In addition, interviews with participants showed that dissemination on social media was seen as a conscious strategy to avoid distortions of mainstream media reporting. Six participants explicitly mentioned distrust of mainstream media, with one stating: "On social media, we control our own narrative—no editing, no spin." This counter-hegemonic approach aligns with Fuchs (2020) and Couldry (2021) arguments that social media functions as an arena for counter-hegemonic communication. Therefore, the virality of the One Piece symbol is not just entertainment, but a political strategy to build moral legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

Furthermore, digital virality also creates a network of cross-border solidarity. Content analysis shows that netizens from Japan (4,200 posts), the Philippines (2,800 posts), Thailand (1,900 posts), and the United States (1,500 posts) also responded to the action in Indonesia with similar symbols or supportive commentary. This means that protests using the One Piece symbol open up a space for transnational solidarity. These

findings are in line with Gerbaudo's (2022) study on choreography of assembly which emphasizes how local political action can inspire global movements through digital media.

### 3. Comparison with Previous Studies on Popular Culture and Politics

When compared to previous studies, the results of this study show a similar pattern while offering significant differences. Street's (2020) research in the UK shows that popular music serves as a political critique and a means of mobilization, while Jenkins (2021) confirms that fan communities are often mobilized in social movements. The two findings are in line with this study, namely popular culture is used as an alternative political medium. However, unlike the case in the West, the phenomenon in Indonesia emphasizes the use of global anime icons as a means of non-violent protest within a context of democratic consolidation and increasing state surveillance of dissent.

McGuigan's (2021) research highlights that popular culture plays an important role in shaping the political identity of the younger generation. These findings are corroborated in this study, with evidence that One Piece symbols are more resonant for younger generations than formal political symbols. However, there is an important addition: digital virality is a major factor that expands the impact of action beyond the physical space. This enriches McGuigan's study by including the dimension of digitalization in pop culture politics. These findings are consistent with Gerbaudo's (2022) study which emphasizes the importance of social media in contemporary protest choreography.

**Table 1.** Comparison with previous studies on popular culture and politics

| Study                       | Focus                                          | Key Findings                                                | Relevance to this research                               |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Street (2019)</b>        | Popular & political music (UK)                 | Music as a political critique                               | Together use pop culture as a medium of protest          |
| <b>Jenkins (2020)</b>       | Global fan culture                             | Fan participation in social movements                       | Use global symbols ( <i>One Piece</i> )                  |
| <b>McGuigan (2020)</b>      | Pop culture & politics of young people         | The political identity of the younger generation            | Same, but in Indonesia the anime symbol is more dominant |
| <b>This research (2025)</b> | <i>One Piece symbol</i> in Indonesian protests | Global symbol as non-violent protest, viral on social media | Adding local aspects & political digitalization          |

Thus, this study fills a gap that has not been explored much in previous studies, namely the role of Japanese anime as a political icon in developing countries in the context of post-reform democracy. This also confirms that pop culture politics is contextual and influenced by local conditions, even though it relies on global symbols.

#### **4. Implications of the Findings on Practice and Policy**

The scientific interpretation of the results of this study confirms that the use of popular cultural symbols is a strategy of non-violent political participation that is increasingly relevant in the context of contemporary democracy. In terms of practice, this phenomenon shows that the younger generation prefers symbolic and creative paths to confrontational methods. This means that the One Piece symbol is not just an aesthetic choice, but a political communication mechanism that demands serious recognition from state actors and political elites. Failure to recognize such expressions risks alienating youth constituencies and pushing dissent toward more confrontational forms (Couldry, 2021; Papacharissi, 2021; Gerbaudo, 2022).

From a policy perspective, the results of this study signal that the state needs to open a more inclusive space for political participation for the younger generation. Instead of responding to pop culture symbols as threats requiring criminalization (as proposed in the September 2025 draft bill), governments can view them as indicators of creative political involvement and opportunities for dialogue. This is in line with the concept of deliberative democracy that recognizes various forms of citizen participation, including symbolic and cultural expressions (Habermas, 2020; Tilly, 2021; Mouffe, 2021).

In addition, these findings underscore the importance of balanced social media regulation: not repressive, but protecting freedom of expression without encouraging disinformation. The digital space has proven to play a vital role as a medium for non-violent protest. If the space is closed or tightly controlled, the risk of political escalation is even greater. Therefore, public policies related to political digitalization must be directed at strengthening public deliberation space, not restrictions.

The long-term implication of this study is the need for popular culture-based political education to increase the democratic participation of the younger generation. Governments, NGOs, and educational institutions can use popular symbols as entry points for more communicative political dialogue. Civic education curricula could incorporate analysis of symbolic political expression, helping young citizens understand both the power and limitations of cultural protest. In this way, popular culture is no longer seen as mere entertainment, but also as an asset in strengthening democracy.

#### **CONCLUSION**

This study finds that raising the One Piece flag in Indonesian political protests functions as a non-violent, symbolically charged communication act that merges pop culture with civic expression. The Jolly Roger serves as a neutral yet subversive emblem—a collective youth identity resisting injustice while transcending political divisions. Its power lies in digital virality, where social media becomes not merely a channel but a space of negotiation and moral legitimacy, amplifying symbolic dissent through hashtags and visual narratives. The findings affirm that symbolic protest is emerging as a legitimate and preferred form of youth engagement, reshaping the landscape of political participation beyond state-centric norms. Despite methodological limits—small sample, short timeframe, regional focus—the study contributes the concept of

“affective symbolic bridging”, showing how transnational cultural symbols mobilize emotion-driven yet peaceful activism. Practically, it urges policymakers to treat digital arenas as deliberative spaces rather than threats, and encourages civil society to use culturally resonant strategies to engage youth. Ultimately, the research highlights that popular culture can transform political discourse, offering an inclusive, creative, and dialogic path toward democratic renewal in the digital era.

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