

The One Piece Flag as a Silent Protest: A Semiotic Study of Popular Culture Symbolism in Contemporary Indonesia

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Abstract

The phenomenon of raising the One Piece flag, particularly the Straw Hat Pirates' Jolly Roger, in Indonesian public spaces has become a focal point in socio-cultural discussions. Originally a symbol from a Japanese anime, it has transcended its role as mere fandom expression to become a medium for conveying societal aspirations and frustrations, particularly among the younger generation, regarding Indonesia's socio-political realities. This study employs Roland Barthes' semiotic approach to analyze the denotative, connotative, and modern mythic meanings embedded in the symbol. Findings reveal that the One Piece flag not only represents freedom and adventure as in its fictional narrative but also symbolizes resistance against injustice, collective solidarity, and subtle critique of systems perceived as unresponsive to public needs. Social media plays a pivotal role in disseminating and normalizing the flag's new meanings while sparking diverse reactions from the public and authorities. Some view it as a threat to national unity, while others interpret it as a form of free expression and "silent protest." This phenomenon reflects a crisis of trust in national symbols and a shift in collective identity from state-led narratives to pop culture symbols that resonate more with youth aspirations. The study highlights the potential of popular culture as a tool for articulating identity and social change, emphasizing the need for a communicative approach to understand unconventional expressions in the digital era.

Keywords: One Piece flag, semiotics, popular culture, social expression, social media, Indonesia.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of hoisting the One Piece flag, specifically the Straw Hat Pirates' Jolly Roger, has become increasingly visible across various parts of Indonesia. This flag has been spotted in diverse settings, from humble roadside food stalls and private

homes to motorbikes and even more formal public environments. The presence of this fictional symbol in public spaces has garnered widespread attention, especially in the lead-up to Indonesia's 80th Independence Day celebration. The phenomenon has sparked public controversy and debate. Some parties, such as Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives Sufmi Dasco Ahmad, have expressed concern

that the display of the One Piece flag, particularly when flown alongside the national flag, may pose a threat to national unity and could even be interpreted as an act of subversion. On the other hand, contrasting views have also emerged. Deputy Chair of Commission XIII, Andreas Hugo Pareira, for example, regards this phenomenon as a form of freedom of expression and a human right to voice public sentiment and social anxiety. According to him, such actions may be interpreted as a form of "silent protest" against prevailing socio-political conditions something the government should reflect on rather than repress.

Social media plays a central role in disseminating and normalizing this symbol. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) have become the primary catalysts for the viral spread of the One Piece flag. Images and videos of the flag being raised quickly circulate, sparking debates and commentary that either reinforce or oppose its symbolic

meanings, thereby turning this phenomenon into a topic of national rather than merely local discourse. The core issue examined in this study is how a fictional symbol from popular culture specifically the anime One Piece has been adopted, reinterpreted, and transformed into a collective expression laden with social and cultural meaning, far beyond its original entertainment context. This transformation demonstrates how popular culture can serve as an effective medium for society, particularly young people, to voice aspirations, frustrations, and even veiled critiques of the social, economic, and bureaucratic realities they experience. In many cases, this flag has become a "substitute symbol" that channels dissatisfaction with existing systems, functioning as a smart and adaptive form of "silent protest."

This phenomenon reflects a deeper contestation of meaning between the state's official narratives and grassroots expressions. The viral spread of this symbol prompted swift responses from authorities who perceived it as a threat to national unity. Conversely, support from politicians and academics who interpret it as a

legitimate form of free expression and “silent protest” suggests that the flag has evolved into a symbolic battleground. This contradiction indicates a tension between the state's efforts to control symbolic narratives and the public's desire to express themselves outside of sanctioned frameworks especially when conventional channels of expression are seen as ineffective.

The appropriation of a fictional symbol to articulate social and political grievances may also be seen as an indicator of a broader crisis of public trust in national symbols and institutions. The idea that the One Piece flag functions as a "replacement symbol" carrying the hopes and frustrations of the younger generation is significant. If members of society feel compelled to use a pop culture emblem to voice silent protest or critique “political elites who have hijacked the meaning of independence,” it suggests that national symbols like the Indonesian flag may be perceived as having lost

their resonance or authenticity in the context of everyday politics. This points to a disconnect between the ideals of national independence represented by state symbols and the socio-political realities experienced by citizens, prompting the search for alternative expressions that feel more relevant and legitimate.

This study does not aim to explore the entire landscape of the One Piece fandom in Indonesia, including fan community dynamics, media consumption habits, or platform-based interactions. Instead, the primary focus is on the transformation of the symbolic meaning of the One Piece flag, particularly the Straw Hat Pirates' Jolly Roger, as it is adopted and displayed in Indonesian social spaces leading up to the country's 2025 Independence Day. Within this context, the flag is analyzed as a visual sign undergoing semiotic rearticulation from a fictional narrative emblem into a form of collective social expression in response to socio-political conditions. Thus, the study emphasizes semiotic analysis, cultural meaning-making, and the role of social media in the reproduction and dissemination of this transformed symbol.

Based on this focus, the study sets out several key objectives: to identify and analyze the denotative and connotative meanings of the One Piece flag in Indonesian public spaces; to examine how local communities interpret and re-produce the symbol within their socio-cultural context; to explain the socio-cultural functions of adopting this fictional symbol in everyday life; and to uncover the formation of modern myths embedded within the One Piece flag as it circulates in Indonesian society. Accordingly, the research addresses the following guiding questions: What are the denotative and connotative meanings of the One Piece flag in Indonesian public space? How do local communities interpret and re-articulate this symbol? What socio-cultural functions does the adoption of this fictional emblem serve in everyday life?

Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory: Denotation, Connotation, and Myth

In semiotic studies, Roland Barthes developed an analytical framework that

distinguishes between two levels of signification: denotation and connotation, which subsequently lead to the formation of myth. Denotation refers to the first order of signification, indicating the most literal or explicit meaning of a sign. This meaning is direct and socially agreed upon, typically referencing an external reality. For instance, in the sentence “The flower grows beautifully in the village,” the word “flower” denotatively refers to a plant with beautiful petals.

Connotation, on the other hand, is the second order of signification. It arises through the interaction of a sign with emotional responses, cultural values, and shared experiences. Connotative meaning is implicit, indirect, uncertain, and open to interpretation. For example, in the phrase “She is the village flower,” the word “flower” connotatively refers to a beautiful and attractive young woman. This meaning may vary across social groups and can shift over time.

Barthes further proposed the concept of myth as a second-order semiological system, built upon connotation and denotation. A myth is not an objective reality but a system

of communication or message that functions to express and justify dominant cultural values within a particular historical context. A myth emerges when a sign's connotative meaning is reinterpreted as a new denotative meaning, thus forming a new sign that is perceived as natural, universal, and deeply entrenched. For example, an advertisement featuring a famous actress endorsing soap may literally present soap as a hygiene product (denotation), while connotatively linking it to beauty and attractiveness. The resulting myth is that bathing is incomplete without this specific soap and that it will make the user beautiful. Barthes' framework is especially relevant in analyzing popular culture, where visual and narrative signs are often saturated with layered connotative and mythic meanings that shape social perception.

Symbolism in Popular Culture: Fandom and Meaning-Making

Henry Jenkins, through his concept of fandom as a social practice, argues that fans do not consume popular culture

texts passively but actively participate in the production and interpretation of meaning. Fandom creates a space for collective identity and social expression, where fans interact, share, and develop their own interpretations of fictional works. Visual symbols from popular media such as flags can be adopted and re-signified by audiences, serving as markers of identity and group aspiration.

The Straw Hat Pirates' flag, or Jolly Roger, is the iconic symbol of Monkey D. Luffy and his crew in the One Piece series. This symbol encapsulates core values that resonate with fans and facilitate the symbol's adoption beyond its fictional context. These values include freedom, friendship, adventure, courage, and resistance against injustice and authoritarian systems. The Straw Hat crew is portrayed as a "supernova generation" challenging outdated systems, opposing inequalities such as slavery and racism, and advocating new values in a rigid world order.

Identity and Representation: Stuart Hall

Stuart Hall, through his theory of representation, posits that meaning is not

inherent in objects or ideas but is constructed within and through language and systems of signs. Representation involves the ability to describe, visualize, and give meaning, and culture is always produced through language and meaning. Therefore, meaning is discursive generated through social practices and language.

Hall identifies three approaches to representation: Reflective, Intentional, and Constructionist. Reflective representation assumes that language mirrors an existing meaning; intentional representation reflects the speaker's subjective intention. Most relevant to semiotic analysis, however, is Constructionist representation, which explains how meaning is reconstructed through and within language. This aligns with Hall's encoding/decoding model in media studies, where messages are encoded by senders and decoded by receivers within cultural contexts.

In a broader sense, Hall also emphasizes the politics of representation, where social groups

use symbols to express identity and articulate aspirations. This is especially important for marginalized or underrepresented communities seeking to assert voice, claim visibility, and generate internal solidarity through symbolic forms.

The Indonesian Context: Symbolic Tradition and Digital Expression

Indonesia has a long-standing tradition of symbolic expression in public life, where symbols serve as tools for communication, collective identity, and socio-political commentary. However, in the digital age, modes of public expression have transformed significantly. Social media has opened new channels for expression, including forms of "silent protest" and the creative use of pop culture references such as anime or memes as unconventional yet powerful modes of communication.

The adoption of a fictional symbol like the One Piece flag can also reflect a crisis of public trust in national symbols. A common argument is that the Indonesian national flag (Merah Putih) has, for many, lost its authentic political resonance in the context of everyday political practice. This perceived

loss encourages the public to seek “replacement symbols” that are more aligned with their contemporary frustrations and aspirations.

By integrating Jenkins’ theory of fandom with Barthes’ semiotic framework and Hall’s notion of representation, we can better understand how the universal values embedded in One Piece freedom, resistance, and solidarity resonate within Indonesia’s social-political landscape, enabling the transformation of symbols. These core values such as courage, friendship, and resistance against injustice strongly relate to contemporary social issues in Indonesia, including inequality, bureaucracy, and dissatisfaction with the government.

As Jenkins notes, fans are active meaning-makers. When these values are encoded in the Jolly Roger symbol, they become decodable by Indonesian audiences as expressions of their lived aspirations. This is not merely a case of entertainment consumption but a demonstration of how powerful

fictional narratives provide emotional and cognitive frameworks for individuals to understand and express their real-world experiences, showcasing the potential of pop culture as a mirror and vehicle for social transformation.

In the digital and post-truth era where meaning is often fluid, fragmented, and contested pop culture symbols like the One Piece flag offer semantic flexibility, allowing for multiple interpretations and adaptations. This makes such symbols effective yet ambiguous tools of communication. The connotative meaning of the One Piece flag remains open to reinterpretation, enabling it to be seen simultaneously as a “threat” by some and a form of “free expression” by others. This flexibility, amplified by the speed and reach of social media, allows the symbol to adapt to a variety of sentiments and agendas without being confined to a singular, fixed meaning. Such ambiguity is characteristic of communication in the digital age, where messages are often deliberately encoded with strategic ambiguity to bypass censorship or engage diverse audiences.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach, which allows for an in-depth exploration of the meanings and subjective interpretations of social phenomena. Specifically, it employs visual semiotic analysis, focusing on the interpretation of visual signs and their systems of meaning within cultural contexts. This approach is particularly relevant for understanding how a visual symbol like the One Piece flag acquires new meanings within the socio-cultural landscape of Indonesia.

The primary objects of study in this research are photos and videos of the One Piece flag that have been uploaded and gone viral on social media platforms, particularly TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter), with a specific focus on the Indonesian context. These visual artifacts were selected as they represent the most concrete manifestations of the phenomenon under investigation.

Primary data was collected through visual documentation, including

screenshots and video recordings of social media posts featuring the One Piece flag. This data collection encompasses not only the analysis of the visual content of the flag itself, but also accompanying textual elements such as captions, hashtags, and user comments. Secondary data was gathered from public commentary on social media platforms relevant to the phenomenon, such as comment sections of viral TikTok videos. In addition, statements from public figures and politicians who have commented on this phenomenon were also analyzed to understand the diversity of perspectives and controversies surrounding the issue.

The collected data was analyzed using Roland Barthes' semiotic model, which distinguishes three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth.

- Denotative Analysis: Identifying the visual elements of the flag (skull, straw hat, crossed bones) and interpreting their literal meaning as the fictional pirate symbol from the One Piece anime.
- Connotative Analysis: Interpreting the implicit meanings that emerge from the

interaction of signs with Indonesian cultural context—such as freedom, brotherhood, rebellion, adventure, solidarity, humor, or social critique.

- **Myth Analysis:** Uncovering the "modern myths" formed around this symbol within Indonesian society, such as the pirate flag being viewed as a symbol of the common people's freedom and resistance against established power structures, or a narrative of the people versus the elite.

The use of visual semiotics, reinforced by social media documentation and public comment analysis, demonstrates the adaptation of academic methodologies to the dynamic landscape of digital culture. This methodological approach explicitly includes "social media documentation (TikTok, Instagram, X/Twitter)" and "public commentary as contextual support." It acknowledges that contemporary cultural phenomena often emerge and evolve within digital spaces.

Relying on data from social media is

not only practical but essential for capturing how symbolic meanings are produced, circulated, and collectively negotiated among users. It enables researchers to move beyond the analysis of static texts into the study of living digital cultural practices, offering richer insights into how symbols operate in digitally connected societies.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Denotation and Connotation of the One Piece Flag Symbol



Figure 1. The One Piece flag (Jolly Roger of the Straw Hat Pirates) displayed in a rural warung in Indonesia. The image illustrates the symbol's presence beyond digital platforms and into physical public spaces.

The One Piece flag, more specifically the Jolly Roger of the Straw Hat Pirates, is

denotatively a fictional symbol originating from the Japanese anime/manga series One Piece. Its visual elements consist of a skull wearing Monkey D. Luffy's signature straw hat and two crossed bones behind it. Literally, this symbol denotes the identity of Luffy's pirate crew within the fictional narrative.

Beyond its literal meaning, however, the flag carries rich connotative meanings, especially among fans and broader audiences when adopted into Indonesian social spaces. These connotations include:

- **Freedom and Adventure:** The flag reflects Luffy's spirit of seeking true freedom, exploring the world, and living without constraints.
- **Brotherhood and Solidarity:** It symbolizes the strong bonds among Straw Hat crew members, who support one another with unwavering loyalty through challenges.
- **Rebellion and Resistance Against Injustice:** The flag connotes an anti-authoritarian stance, embodying the

crew's fight against corrupt and oppressive systems.

- **Perseverance and Pursuit of Dreams:** It reflects Luffy's determination to become Pirate King and help his crew achieve their dreams despite overwhelming odds.
- **Humor and Satire:** In the Indonesian context, the flag also represents subtle social or political critique, using humor or irony to comment on current conditions.

Table 1: Margin specifications

Visual Element	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning (One Piece & Indonesian Context)
Skull	Traditional pirate symbol; death, danger	Courage, defiance of authority, resistance, revolutionary spirit
Straw Hat	Luffy's signature accessory; a gift from Shanks	Friendship, dreams, freedom, humility, symbol of a populist leader
Crossed Bones	Traditional pirate symbol; danger, threat	Unity, collective action, challenge to status quo, rejection of elite domination
Entire Flag	The straw hat pirates symbol in the One Piece Universe	Spirit of freedom, brotherhood, rebellion, dream pursuit, satire, social critique

The following table summarizes the denotative and connotative meanings of the One Piece flag:

Visual Element	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning (One Piece & Indonesian Context)
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Skull Traditional pirate symbol; death, danger Courage, defiance of authority, resistance, revolutionary spirit

Straw Hat Luffy's signature accessory; a gift from Shanks Friendship, dreams, freedom, humility, symbol of a populist leader

Crossed Bones Traditional pirate symbol; danger, threat Unity, collective action, challenge to status quo, rejection of elite domination

Entire Flag The Straw Hat Pirates' symbol in the One Piece universe
Spirit of freedom, brotherhood, rebellion, dream pursuit, satire, social critique



Figure 2. The Straw Hat Pirates' Jolly Roger, comprising a skull, straw hat, and crossed bones. Each element functions as a visual signifier that carries layered cultural meanings.

B. Fictional Symbols in Indonesia's Local Social Spaces



Figure 3. Screenshot from TikTok showing the One Piece flag captioned with social critique. This highlights how humor and satire are embedded in visual expression.

The widespread appearance of the One Piece flag on roadside stalls, homes, and motorcycles shows that it has transcended its fandom origins. The flag no longer functions merely as a marker of anime fandom but has been recontextualized as a type of "household flag" adopted by broader communities, including individuals who may not be devoted fans of the franchise.

This symbolic adoption is shaped by Indonesia's unique socio-cultural context,

where the flag functions as a medium for various forms of expression:

- **Solidarity Expression:** The flag symbolizes unity among individuals who share similar experiences or aspirations, forming a communal bond across geographical boundaries.
- **Humorous Commentary:** In some instances, it serves as a form of lighthearted satire, reflecting the creative ways in which Indonesians engage with their environment.
- **Social Critique:** Most significantly, the flag has become a medium for expressing dissatisfaction with economic hardship, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and perceived government failures. It represents a form of “silent protest” that channels public frustration in ways that are non-confrontational yet clearly critical. Social media comments often criticize the government for focusing on symbolic issues instead of addressing real concerns such as corruption, unemployment, and infrastructure.

This phenomenon gained further

political dimension when Vice President Gibran Rakabuming Raka was seen wearing a pin of the Straw Hat Pirates’ symbol during his 2024 presidential campaign. This gesture added a political layer to the symbol and intensified public discourse regarding its meaning, illustrating how popular culture symbols can be internalized into formal political arenas.

C. Myth and Cultural Representation of the One Piece Flag

In Indonesia, the One Piece flag has evolved into a “modern myth” a symbol representing the freedom of the common people and their resistance against entrenched systems. This myth draws from the narrative of rebellion and freedom found in the anime and is recontextualized within Indonesia’s social reality.

The myth resonates with narratives of the masses resisting elites who are seen as having hijacked the meaning of independence itself. It reflects the disappointment of younger generations with the current system and their longing for liberation from social and economic constraints. The flag’s presence also points

to a “crisis of public trust in state symbols”, where the Indonesian national flag (Merah Putih) is perceived as having lost its authentic meaning in everyday political practice. In this light, the One Piece flag serves as a “replacement symbol” capable of representing unaddressed aspirations and frustrations.

The following table outlines the myths that have formed from the One Piece flag symbol in Indonesia:

Table 2: Relevance table

Emergent Myth	Expressed Values	Relevance to Indonesian Socio-Cultural Context
Myth of the People's Resistance	Anti-authoritarianism, social justice, autonomy	Critique of inequality and dissatisfaction with perceived oppressive governance
Myth of Absolute Freedom	Unrestricted freedom, rejection of constraints	Desire for liberation from bureaucratic, economic, and social limitations
Myth of Collective Solidarity	Unity, mutual support, togetherness	Quest for identity and belonging among marginalized or disenfranchised communities
Myth of Hope and Adventure	Optimism, courage, vision for a better future	Young generation's desire for positive change amidst social and economic challenges

The use of the One Piece flag as “silent protest” or “satirical symbol”

exemplifies how popular culture provides a safe and coded channel for voicing dissent without directly confronting authority. Politicians' acknowledgement of the flag as a “silent protest,” along with TikTok comments suggesting the use of English to evade pro-government buzzers, reflects a deep awareness of expressive risks. As a fictional symbol, the One Piece flag offers an umbrella of strategic ambiguity, allowing messages to be encoded without openly violating laws or disrespecting national emblems. This is a clever strategy in societies with restricted freedom of expression, where dual meanings protect participants from direct accusations while still delivering the intended message to those who can “read the code.”

The phenomenon also marks a shift from state-dominated identity representations toward transnational symbols from popular culture that feel more resonant with the aspirations and frustrations of the youth. If the One Piece flag emerges as a “replacement symbol” due to the perceived loss of authenticity in the national flag, it indicates an unmet need for expressive representation. Younger

generations, raised in the age of globalization and digital media, may feel more connected to universal narratives of freedom and resistance than to outdated or compromised national narratives. This reflects a transformation in the construction and expression of collective identity from top-down (state-led) to more bottom-up and transnational (pop culture-driven).

D. The Role of Social Media in Meaning Reproduction and Normalization

Social media particularly TikTok, Instagram, and X (Twitter) has played a key role in the rapid dissemination and normalization of the One Piece flag symbol. Videos featuring the flag went viral quickly, expanding its visibility across Indonesia. These platforms enable the exponential spread of symbols and information, transcending geographic and demographic boundaries.

Captions and comments on social media posts are crucial in reinforcing

the “everyday people with Luffy’s spirit” narrative. Users actively participate in meaning-making, adding personal and collective interpretations that tie the symbol to social issues. For instance, comments recommending the use of English to avoid government-aligned buzzers demonstrate strategic awareness of the symbol’s political potential and the tactics used to navigate digital censorship. This highlights social media as a strategic tool for veiled political communication.

The viral spread of the symbol not only enhances its visibility but also shapes public perception and elicits reactions from authorities further solidifying its status as a socially significant phenomenon. Social media functions not just as a dissemination platform, but as an active mediator and amplifier of symbolic meaning, transforming what may begin as a local event into national and even international discourse.

The viral success of the One Piece flag on platforms like TikTok and Instagram shows that these platforms are not merely passive channels. Features such as comments, likes, and shares create interactive spaces where meaning is negotiated, reinforced, and

normalized collectively. When a video of the One Piece flag goes viral, it is not just viewed it triggers deep social and political conversations, turning a cultural expression into a national issue that demands governmental response and global attention. This underscores the role of social media as a powerful mediating force in shaping and spreading cultural meaning.

5. Conclusion

The One Piece flag in Indonesian public spaces has evolved from a mere fandom emblem into a social symbol imbued with local and covert political meanings. Through the lens of Barthes' semiotics, this study reveals that beneath its denotative identity as a fictional pirate flag lies a strong connotative association with freedom, brotherhood, and resistance to injustice. These connotations have crystallized into a "popular myth" reflecting the collective desire—particularly among the youth—for freedom, justice, and solidarity amid socio-political challenges.

This study demonstrates how symbols from popular culture can be adopted and recontextualized into "modern myths," functioning as "substitute symbols" for expressing public aspirations and disillusionment with existing systems—especially when national symbols are perceived as losing their relevance. The phenomenon exemplifies an intelligent and adaptive form of "silent protest," utilizing symbolic ambiguity to convey critical messages without inviting direct repression. It also signals a shift in the representation of collective identity—from state-dominated symbols to transnational ones that resonate more deeply with the aspirations of the younger generation. Social media plays a crucial role in mediating and amplifying the symbolic meanings of such phenomena, transforming local gestures into national and even global discourses.

These findings not only broaden the semiotic study of popular cultural symbols but also illustrate how social media has reshaped the landscape of symbolic articulation in developing democracies. This reflects a paradigm shift in cultural political communication, where non-conventional

expressions and entertainment symbols can be transformed into legitimate and effective forms of social language. Thus, the study advocates for a more empathetic, communicative, and interdisciplinary approach to understanding public expression, which often emerges outside formal frameworks.

Suggestions for Further Research

- Comparative studies on the adoption of other popular cultural symbols within socio-political contexts in Indonesia or other countries to identify patterns and variations in meaning-making.
- In-depth analysis of governmental responses and

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