

The Semiotic Meaning of One-Piece Symbols: The Inspiration of Generation Z in the August 2025 Demonstrations

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Abstract

Semiotics refers to an analytical discipline concerned with understanding the mechanisms through which signs function and generate meaning. This study examines Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, which expands upon the fundamental concepts introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure, aiming to extend the application of sign analysis to broader cultural and communicative contexts. This semiotic research seeks to analyze the symbolic meanings within the anime One-Piece among Indonesia's Generation Z, focusing on their critical stance toward governmental arbitrariness. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach and a constructivist paradigm through Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, this study explores symbols such as the Straw Hat, Jolly Roger, Will of D, and Grand Line. The findings reveal that these symbols are not merely fictional elements but serve as representations of solidarity, courage, and resistance against corruption, parliamentary allowance increases, mass layoffs, and unjust tax burdens. Generation Z uses One-Piece symbols as expressions of political resistance, both in public demonstrations and through digital culture, establishing a new resistance narrative that reaffirms their role as agents of socio-political change.

Keywords: *One Piece, Generation Z, Semiotics, Roland Barthes, Solidarity, Political Resistance*

Introduction

The phenomenon of hoisting the One-Piece pirate flag beneath Indonesia's national Red-and-White banner in the lead-up to the 80th Independence Day triggered strong responses from the government. This act served as a form of public criticism and discontent toward government policies perceived as burdensome—such as tax increases, mass layoffs, and raises in parliamentary allowances. Generation Z perceives a decline in the government's credibility and accountability in the eyes of its citizens (Suryani, 2013). Born and raised during an era of globalization and digital revolution, this generation has grown up within an environment characterized by elite greed. Out of this disillusionment, a wave of political consciousness has emerged—one that cannot be ignored. Their perceptions of legislative institutions are also shaped by corruption scandals and the influence of social media (Azhari & Amaliyah, 2024). Based on Generation Z's critical stance toward government arbitrariness and legislative misconduct, this article explores the inspirations behind their involvement in the August 2025 demonstrations.

Initially, Generation Z's resistance took the form of viral WhatsApp messages and widespread calls across social media urging investigations into alleged corruption by the former seventh president, the impeachment of the vice president, and demands to dissolve the parliament for failing to perform its oversight functions (Amston Probel, 2025). The call intensified as government and legislative responses were seen as lacking empathy, transparency, and sensitivity to public grievances regarding salary and allowance controversies (Achmad Fikri, 2025; R. Wahyu Handoko, 2025; Syahnanto Noerdin, 2025). As a unifying symbol of resistance, the movement adopted imagery from Eiichiro Oda's anime and manga *One Piece*. The series, beyond its global entertainment appeal, carries symbolic meanings and a narrative of defiance against oppressive regimes, creating space for critical interpretation among its fans (Barthes, 1972; John Fiske, 2010). Key symbols in *One Piece*—such as *the Straw Hat* symbolizing dreams and solidarity, *the Jolly Roger* representing collective identity, *the Will of D* embodying courage against oppression, and *the Grand Line* as a metaphor for an arduous yet liberating journey—are interpreted through Roland Barthes' semiotic framework of layered meaning (Jenkins, 2012; Storey, 2021).

The relationship between popular culture symbolism and youth political attitudes has become increasingly relevant in Indonesia's contemporary context. Generation Z, known as digital natives, utilizes platforms such as Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube to cultivate a digital democratic space for political participation (Seemiller & Grace, 2018). These media foster interactive and personalized political communication—allowing direct storytelling, dialogue, and narrative building to shape political perception (Juditha & Darmawan, 2018). Ideally, such spaces foster organic and self-driven political engagement aligned with young people's interest in evolving issues.

Social media thus serves as a central sphere not only for information exchange but also for civic expression, enabling Generation Z to critically engage with political and socioeconomic realities. However, this heightened connectivity has also triggered critical awareness among young citizens, leading them to reinterpret popular culture as a form of reflection and resistance against injustice (Tanuja & Winduwati, 2024). Studies on Generation Z's worldview further illuminate the erosion of Indonesian democracy, revealing structural constraints, agency struggles, and polarized public opinion (Devita Savitri, 2025; Warburton & Aspinall, 2019). Meanwhile, society faces mass layoffs affecting tens of thousands, signaling weak labor protection amid economic uncertainty (Mietzner, 2020; Nabila hanum, 2025). Concurrently, regressive tax policies burden lower- and middle-income groups, reinforcing perceptions of fiscal inequity and deteriorating trust in state institutions (Candraningrum et al., 2025; Surya Dua Artha Simanjuntak, 2025). These tensions culminated in nationwide demonstrations, some escalating into riots and destruction of public facilities—echoing Le Bon's theory that collective crowds, due to emotional contagion and suggestibility, often lose rational and independent judgment (in Mashuri & Zaduqisti, 2024).

Within this context, Generation Z interprets *One Piece* symbols not merely as entertainment but as a reflection of their struggle against authoritarian politics. Much like Luffy and his crew challenging the World Government, Generation Z expresses

resistance to corruption, rising legislative benefits, mass layoffs, and inequitable taxation through both street demonstrations and digital campaigns (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019; Jenkins, 2012). Hence, this research seeks to investigate how One-Piece symbols are interpreted by Generation Z and how these interpretations shape their critical attitudes toward governmental and legislative authoritarianism.

Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018) grounded in the constructivist paradigm (Lincoln Yvonna & Guba Egon, 1985) and utilizes Roland Barthes' semiotic framework (Barthes, 1972). The research emphasizes the interpretation of symbols through Barthes' three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. The aim of this study is to explore how Generation Z interprets key One Piece symbols (*the Straw Hat*, *Jolly Roger*, *Will of D*, and *Grand Line*) and connects these interpretations to their critical stance during the August 2025 demonstrations, which protested government arbitrariness, corruption, tax increases, and the rise in parliamentary allowances—issues seen as violations of ethical communication and governance principles.

The subjects of this study consist of three Generation Z participants (aged 18– 25) who are active One-Piece fans and engaged in public discourse on socio-political issues, both through social media and participation in the August 2025 demonstrations (related to parliamentary allowances, corruption, mass layoffs, and tax burdens). Participants were selected using purposive sampling, identifying individuals capable of providing rich, relevant insights.

Data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews using open-ended questions focused on the symbolic meanings of One Piece and their relationship to critiques of governmental and legislative policies. Online observation was conducted across digital platforms such as Twitter (X), Instagram, and TikTok, as well as fan forums, to analyze how anime symbols were employed in socio-political narratives.

Data analysis followed three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing, interpreting how One-Piece symbols reflect Generation Z's resistance to government oppression. To ensure data validity, the study utilized source and method triangulation, cross-verifying information from interviews, direct observation, and online observation to achieve a more accurate and objective interpretation.

Results and Discussion

The hoisting of Indonesia's national flag on the eve of the August 17, 2025, Independence Day celebration was solemn and symbolic. However, the subsequent act of flying the One-Piece pirate flag beneath it sparked intense debate, generating both supportive and critical responses. The government, represented by Coordinating Minister for Political Affairs Budi Gunawan and Defense Minister Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin, condemned the act—Budi Gunawan emphasizing the legal consequences, and Sjafrie stressing its impropriety and the importance of respecting

Indonesia's independence history (Muhammad Ikbāl Asra, 2025). Rather than suppressing dissent, these statements fueled public defiance, particularly among Generation Z, who felt compelled to protest rising unemployment and a shrinking labor market. The persistent increase in education costs without viable solutions has deepened economic hardship, leaving many citizens disillusioned.

Amid worsening economic conditions, the closure of major factories triggered a surge in unemployment and mass layoffs. Several government policies exacerbated public suffering, including broader tax enforcement, which extended to dormant savings accounts. Under the new policy, accounts inactive for three to twelve months could be temporarily frozen by financial service providers upon instruction from the Indonesian Financial Transaction Reports and Analysis Center (PPATK) (Muhammad Raihan Nugraha, 2025). Public reaction was divided, though many criticized the measure, arguing that PPATK should not block inactive accounts as it adds bureaucratic burden and wastes time (Watimpres, 2025). In response to these policies, symbolic defiance emerged through the display of the One-Piece flag, representing popular discontent. The following section includes interview excerpts that further illustrate how the anime's symbols became tools of political expression among Indonesia's Generation Z.

Table 1. One-Piece Symbol

Symbol One-Piece	Meaning of Symbol
 Jolly Roger	Identity of the resistance group, Source: https://onepiece.fandom.com/wiki/Jolly_Roger?file=Jolly_Roger_Infobox.png
 Straw Hat	Symbolizing dreams and solidarity, Source: https://onepiece.fandom.com/wiki/Straw_Hat?file=Straw_Hat.png
 Will of D	Containing the meaning of Courage against oppression, source: https://onepiece.fandom.com/wiki/Will_of_D.?file=Will_of_D_Infobox.png

		As a metaphor for a challenging journey, source: https://onepiece.fandom.com/wiki/Grand_Line?file=Grand_Line_Infobox.png
	Grand Line	
		As the main character of the pirate captain from the Anime or the One-Piece manga, Source: https://onepiece.fandom.com/wiki/Monkey_D._Luffy
	Monkey D. Luffy	

Source: Author, 2025

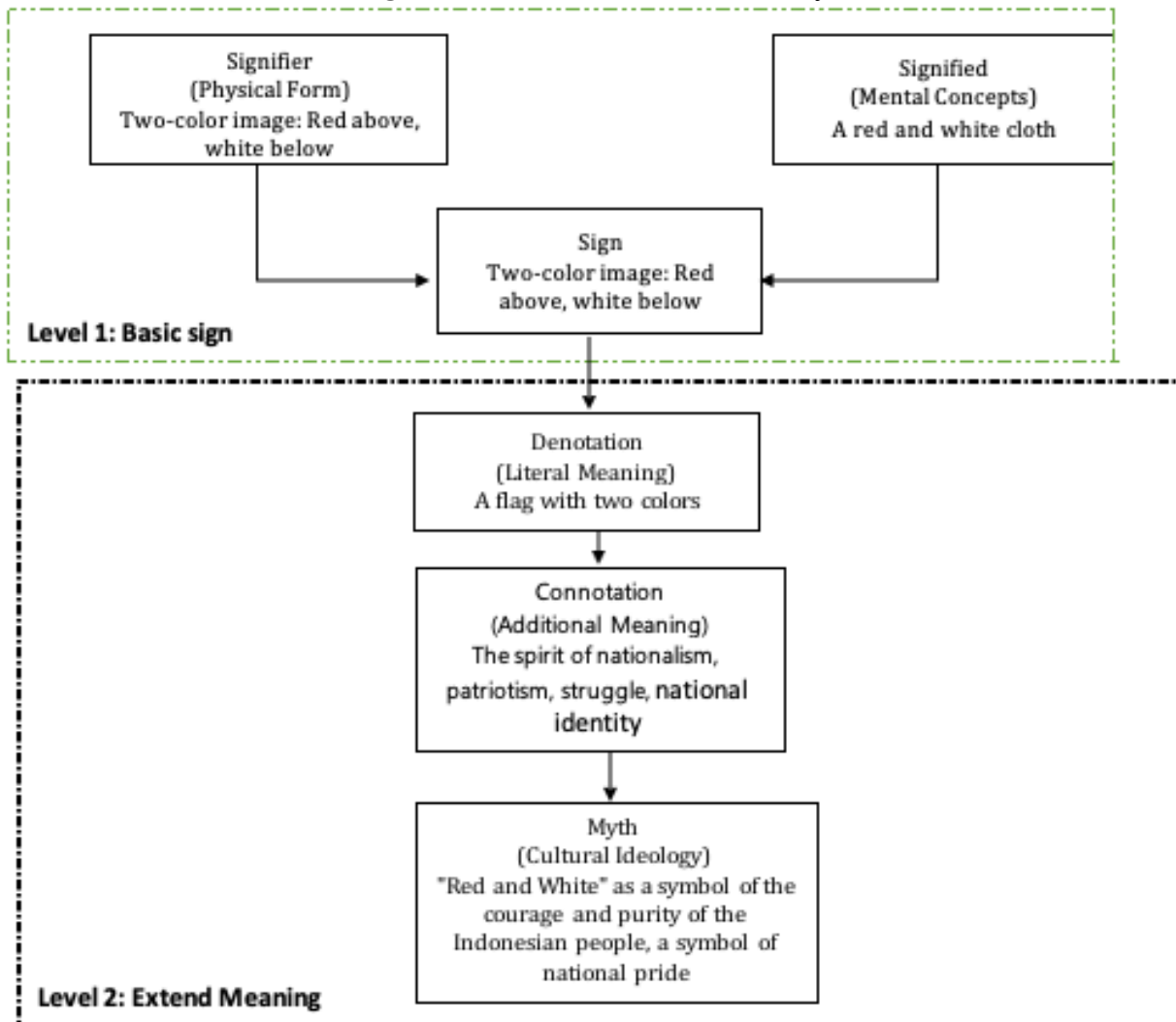
Roland Barthes' Semiotics

Roland Barthes is a seminal figure in semiotic studies who expanded Ferdinand de Saussure's foundational theory of signs. While Saussure conceptualized the sign as the relationship between the signifier and the signified, Barthes developed a more intricate analytical framework by introducing a second level of meaning—connotation and myth.

According to Barthes (Barthes, 1972), denotation refers to the literal or descriptive meaning of a sign, whereas connotation encompasses additional layers that carry cultural, emotional, or ideological dimensions. At the highest level, myth functions as a broad system of meaning in which signs serve to legitimize dominant ideologies within a society. In Barthes's view, myths transform historically constructed values into naturalized truths, making social hierarchies and power relations appear inherent and unquestionable.

Barthes's semiotic theory has thus become a critical tool for analyzing how symbols operate not merely as communicative signs but as vehicles of ideology—revealing how everyday objects, rituals, media, and cultural artifacts sustain and reproduce systems of meaning embedded in power structures.

Figure 1. Barthes's semiotic theory



Source: Author, 2025

Researcher's Question I:

Based on this study, the researcher investigates the relationship between the One-Piece flag and its associated elements. On August 17, 2025, Indonesians traditionally raise the red-and-white national flag; however, recent observations show that some individuals have begun hoisting the One-Piece pirate flag instead.

The researcher explored participants' views by asking: "How far does the narrative of One-Piece extend in shaping your perception?" and "Why do many people perceive One-Piece as something negative?"

Informant II's Response: "It might be because of the main character – since the anime highlights pirate figures, the background itself frames pirates negatively compared to the government. That's probably why the public views it as negative: the imagery of the flag, the skull emblem, and the way its characters are portrayed all contribute to that perception."
(Muhammad Alif Shafwan – MAS)

Informant I's Response: "In the One Piece world, the Jolly Roger is what they call their flag. Each pirate crew has its own design – for example, the Red- Haired Pirates' flag (Shanks) or the Beast Pirates' flag (Kaido). But the One Piece flag itself, the Straw Hat Pirates' emblem, is specifically known as the Jolly Roger." (Muhammad Rafie Fadillah – MRF)

Analytical Interpretation: Based on both informants' statements regarding the meaning of the Jolly Roger, the researcher concludes that their understanding operates primarily at the denotative level (literal meaning), referring to a flag featuring a skull-and-crossbones design. However, this literal perception extends into a connotative meaning—a secondary layer that conveys a negative association, where the pirate imagery is interpreted as rebellious or subversive, particularly in contrast to governmental authority.

Researcher's Question II:

The next question posed to the Generation Z informants concerns the extent to which their perceptions or interpretations of the Straw Hat symbol in One Piece relate to the demonstration phenomenon in August. In connection with the solidarity displayed by the demonstrators, the researcher asked, "To what degree do you associate this sense of solidarity with One-Piece?"

Informant I's Response: "Well, in the story, the main character is Monkey D. Luffy, right? His straw hat serves as his emblem, and in one scene, he burns the World Government's flag and replaces it with his own. That's because Luffy always fights against corrupt governments. The government system in One- Piece is broken, and Luffy constantly challenges that injustice – he always triumphs over those oppressive regimes. The solidarity he shares with his crew, known as Nakama (which means crewmates), is what unites them. We see ourselves, as demonstrators, as Nakama too – fighting together against the corrupt government. That's why the One-Piece flags were everywhere." (Muhammad Rafie Fadillah – MRF)

Informant II's Response: "I think the solidarity of the people truly represents Nakama – many allies and crewmates. In the anime, they are deeply loyal to their captain, and similarly, in Indonesia, the people are loyal to their shared demands. So yes, I believe it aligns perfectly." (Muhammad Alif Shafwan – MAS)

Informant III's Response (MRF): "Luffy's straw hat was a gift from the pirate Shanks when Luffy was a child. It has become a meaningful symbol for him and his crew, the Straw Hat Pirates. Luffy promised to return that hat once he became a great pirate. Even when the hat was lost or damaged, he always found a way to get it back – it's an inseparable part of his and his crew's identity."

Analytical Interpretation: Drawing from the informants' statements, the researcher concludes that the meaning behind the use of the Straw Hat during the August 2025 demonstrations reflects what Barthes (Barthes, 1972) refers to as a secondary or connotative meaning. At the denotative level, the straw hat is understood simply as an ordinary headwear. However, at the connotative level, it functions as a symbol of freedom, resistance, and solidarity, mirroring how the Straw Hat Pirates resist oppression within One Piece. This symbolic reinterpretation resonates with Generation Z's collective identity and political activism, transforming a fictional emblem into a real-world narrative of defiance and unity.

Researcher's Question III:

The next question in this study explores how Generation Z develops an alternative identity that fuels their critical courage, evident in their criticism of government policies raising taxes and parliamentary allowances. This is in response to rampant corruption and pro-elite policies creating difficulties such as land ownership issues, deactivation of inactive savings accounts, and nationalization of land (Will of D).

Informant I's Response: "In the anime, Luffy is fearless in the face of threats or risks. For example, when the government put a 3 billion bounty on his head, he was still undeterred and kept fighting. There was even a scene where the government's top five leaders took direct action, usually the vice-admirals or admirals give orders, but here the highest officials got involved. Yet, Luffy stood strong, defeating even high-ranking officers like Goroce, the One-Piece general. It's like fighting the federal or parliamentary officials." (Muhammad Rafie Fadillah – MRF)

Informant I's Additional Response: "My view is that raising the One-Piece flag symbolizes peace. In the anime, Luffy's pirate crew battles corrupt governments. Although the public generally sees pirates as villains, in One Piece the government is corrupt, making the pirates the real heroes. The government appears good because of propaganda, yet it kills civilians without hesitation. The pirates are the protectors, in contrast. Still, ordinary people tend to side with the government due to this propaganda." (Muhammad Rafie Fadillah – MRF)

Informant II's Response: "In the anime, characters are extremely brave against governments because they understand government corruption and secrets. Similarly, Indonesians may sometimes resort to wrong methods like looting, but they know why the government is bad, so they remain courageous." (Muhammad Alif Shafwan – MAS)

Informant III's Response: "In my opinion, no, the government could not unite the people well even in the recent protest. We use the One-Piece flag to challenge the government that fears One Piece, aiming to unite the people against a corrupt regime." (Benedictus Kevin Sie – BKS)

Informant III's Additional Response: "Because in One Piece, Luffy and his pirate crew fear nothing, continuously determined to topple a corrupt government, just like in Indonesia where people are protesting a corrupt regime." (Benedictus Kevin Sie – BKS)

Researcher's Analysis: Based on statements from these informants concerning alternative identity related to the August 2025 demonstrations, the researcher concludes that these views align with Barthes' concept of myth (Barthes, 1972). For One Piece fans, the Will of D represents a universal symbol of collective courage resisting authoritarian power, specifically targeting corrupt government and legislative bodies. The courage of those bearing the "D" name in One Piece stems not from Devil Fruit powers but from an inherited spiritual determination. Devil Fruits confer extraordinary abilities but do not affect fundamental traits like courage. Thus, this bravery resonates with the attitudes of Generation Z protesters resisting governmental oppression.

Researcher's Question IV:

The next research inquiry regarding One Piece illustrates a sense of optimism

for change, even within rigid structures symbolized by the Grand Line. The researcher asked: "In your view, how is this movement connected to the real world?"

Informant I's Response: "Yes, I think it is optimistic and connected, especially now that there are rumors about Indonesia heading toward collapse. The recent rise in budget allocations and the outrageous behavior of parliament members dancing publicly – that's what triggered many of us. Eventually, we all felt compelled to act, leaving our classes behind to join the demonstrations out of solidarity." (Muhammad Rafie Fadillah – MRF)

Informant III's Response: "It could definitely happen. During the last protest, many Gen Z students skipped classes and took to the streets in front of the DPR building. If this movement continues growing, more students might participate to bring down the government." (Benedictus Kevin Sie – BKS)

Researcher's Analysis: Based on both responses, the researcher interprets the notion of the Grand Line as representing a journey and a series of trials symbolizing the people's resistance against governmental authority. Within Barthes' (Barthes, 1972) framework, this reflects a mythic ideology cultural narrative through which Generation Z redefines struggle and persistence as part of collective resistance against state power.

Researcher's Question V:

The subsequent question in this study addressed the lootings that occurred during the August 2025 demonstrations. The researcher asked: "In the end, when stolen goods were returned by the looters, do you consider that act a reflection of One- Piece values – or just a strategic performance by the characters? For instance, when demonstrators raided houses of irresponsible legislators, do you think that was part of a larger moral transformation?"

Informant I's Response: "Yes, in the film, after pirates win a battle, they often engage in looting – like Roger and Whitebeard once did." (Muhammad Rafie Fadillah – MRF)

Researcher's Analysis: From the informant's account, the researcher interprets the incident of looters returning stolen goods to officials' homes as part of a mythic ideological narrative (Barthes, 1972). Within this myth, One Piece viewers and protesters alike embody the belief that "ordinary people still possess conscience, while the political elite act deceitfully." The media and public discourse perpetuate this myth, transforming civic unrest into a moral commentary on integrity and justice.

Researcher's Question VI:

The study's final question concerns the research title "The Semiotic Meaning of One-Piece Symbols among Generation Z: Their Attitudes toward Governmental Authoritarianism and Legislative Behavior during the August 2025 Demonstrations." The researcher asked: "When connecting this phenomenon to individuals, who do you think best represents this profile – Gen Z members, or perhaps individuals from older generations?"

Informant III's Response: "Well, One Piece has been around for a long time. Even my uncle watched it from the very beginning. So perhaps older generations are also familiar with it and participate in these movements." (Benedictus Kevin Sie – BKS)

Informant III's Additional Response: "Most of the protesters were Gen Z, though. The older generations may have followed One-Piece, but it's Gen Z who popularized it now. Many of them watch anime, and One Piece has become such an iconic series today." (Benedictus Kevin Sie – BKS)

Informant II's Response: "To me, it's not directly about One Piece, but more about their hype – their enthusiasm and shared energy. The anime's ideas might have influenced them, but the unity came from their collective spirit." (Muhammad Alif Shafwan – MAS)

Researcher's Analysis: Based on these statements, the researcher concludes that One Piece's popularity in the August 2025 demonstrations reflects a cultural ideology or generational myth (Barthes, 1972). The One-Piece spirit of resistance has transcended generations, symbolizing an inherited cultural energy supported by media coverage and public discourse. This phenomenon demonstrates how pop culture narratives can synchronize intergenerational solidarity and serve as metaphors for political resistance and moral reform.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that symbols in One Piece—including the Straw Hat, Jolly Roger, Will of D, and Grand Line—possess complex meanings for Generation Z in Indonesia. Through Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, it was found that these symbols are not only understood at the denotative level as representations of fictional characters, but also at the connotative level as signs of courage, solidarity, and resistance against injustice. At the mythic level, these symbols are further reconstructed into grand narratives that affirm Generation Z's role as "agents of change" in confronting governmental authoritarianism.

In the context of August 2025 demonstrations—sparked by issues such as increases in parliamentary allowances, widespread corruption, mass layoffs, and high tax burdens—Generation Z employed One Piece symbols as a form of political communication. This generation engaged in a process of symbolic "meaning hunting" (Roland Barthes), actively "hijacking" popular culture to articulate resistance against the government, while simultaneously constructing new spaces for participatory culture that reinforce social solidarity.

Moreover, the use of One-Piece pirate symbols within these protests illustrates that popular culture is not merely a medium of entertainment, but also a political arena, as Barthes asserts. Generation Z deploys these symbols as "cultural weapons" to challenge state hegemony, generate counter-narratives to official government discourse, and affirm their alignment with values of social justice.

Thus, this study concludes that the meanings of One-Piece symbols among Generation Z constitute both a cultural and political practice—combining popular entertainment, critical consciousness, and collective action. Popular culture, through fictional symbols, functions as a medium of resistance that reveals how young people construct identity, pursue justice, and oppose structural injustice in contemporary Indonesian political life.

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