



Framework of One Piece Flag Symbol That Used by Demonstration in Indonesia, Nepal, and Philippines

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Received: 2025-12-14 Revised: 2025 12-23 Accepted: 2026 05-31</p> <p>Keywords: One Piece flag; Critical Discourse Analysis; protest symbols; transmedia culture; youth activism.</p> <p>DOI: 10.24256/ideasv14i1.8833</p> <p>Corresponding Author: Yusri Bayu Aditya euis.eum@bsi.ac.id Sastra Inggris, Universitas Bina Sarana Informatika, Jakarta</p>	<p><i>This study examines the use of the One Piece Jolly Roger flag as a symbolic resource in youth-led protest movements in Indonesia, Nepal, and the Philippines. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, the research applies Critical Discourse Analysis, drawing on Fairclough's discourse framework and van Dijk's socio-cognitive perspective, alongside visual-semiotic analysis. The data consist of three representative protest images—one from each country—supported by related media texts from international news coverage. The findings reveal that although the same pop-culture symbol circulates transnationally, its meanings are locally rearticulated: the flag functions as satirical political critique in Indonesia, as confrontational resistance in Nepal, and as a tool of digitally mediated mobilization and accountability in the Philippines. These variations demonstrate how youth activists strategically adapt global popular culture to express localized political grievances while maintaining a shared discourse of resistance. This study contributes to discussions on youth activism and visual political communication by highlighting how fictional symbols can operate as powerful discursive instruments in contemporary protest movements.</i></p>

1. Introduction

In the contemporary digital era, the boundaries separating entertainment, politics, and social engagement have become increasingly permeable. Global

popular culture has emerged as a significant medium through which young people articulate political positions and social identities. Symbols originating from anime, film, and digital memes frequently migrate from online platforms into physical public spaces, where they acquire renewed meanings as tools of political expression. One prominent example of this phenomenon is the appropriation of the *One Piece* Jolly Roger flag as a symbol of protest. The symbol has gained wide recognition among Generation Z audiences, largely due to *One Piece*'s long-standing and transnational fan base. Circulating extensively on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and X, the flag has appeared in public demonstrations across multiple Asian contexts. News reports document its presence during protests in Indonesia in August 2025, as well as in Nepal and the Philippines in September 2025. In Nepal, demonstrators waved the straw-hat skull in front of Singha Durbar during rallies opposing government policies (Harvey, 2025). In Indonesia, the same symbol was displayed during Independence Day demonstrations as a critique of power centralization (Ratcliffe, 2025). In the Philippines, youth collectives employed the flag to signal dissatisfaction with corruption and social inequality (Ng, 2025).

For fans of *One Piece*, the Jolly Roger flag represents courage, freedom, and resistance as embodied by Monkey D. Luffy and his crew. When mobilized in protest settings, however, the flag is recontextualized into a broader allegory of liberation from oppression and a declaration of collective identity. As noted in news coverage, popular cultural symbols allow demonstrators to amplify political messages without explicitly articulating them (Harvey, 2025). This transformation of entertainment imagery into political discourse illustrates how visual symbols operate as communicative resources within social movements and how meaning is negotiated through shared cultural knowledge.

Despite growing recognition of the *One Piece* flag as a protest symbol, the discursive and ideological processes through which such an invented icon acquires political meaning remain underexplored. Existing scholarship has yet to sufficiently address how fictional and pop-cultural imagery functions as political discourse within Asian protest contexts. While media reports describe the flag's circulation in demonstrations (Harvey, 2025); (Ratcliffe, 2025); (Ng, 2025)), they do not provide linguistic or ideological analysis of its meaning-making processes. This gap highlights the need for a critical examination of how visual popular culture symbols are transformed into narratives of resistance across differing sociopolitical environments.

From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, discourse extends beyond language to encompass social practices that both reflect and shape power relations (Fairclough, 1995). Prior studies demonstrate the applicability of Fairclough's three-dimensional model—text, discursive practice, and social practice—to visual and symbolic materials. (DURMAZ & YOĞUN, 2022) employed this framework to analyze visual protest imagery, showing how color, composition, and framing

convey ideological opposition. Similarly, (Gürlesin, 2023) examined religious and national symbols in political communication, illustrating how visual elements legitimize authority and construct collective identity. These studies confirm that CDA can be productively applied to symbolic and visual discourse, including the visual strategies observed in the protest use of the *One Piece* flag.

Complementing this approach, van Dijk emphasizes the role of discourse in reproducing or challenging social dominance through access to symbolic resources (Van Dijk, 2015). Research by (Marín González, 2021) and (Sagheer Allwan Al Amery, 2023) demonstrates how ideological positioning and power relations are enacted through discourse in politically charged communication. Viewed through this lens, the *One Piece* flag can be understood as a form of counter-discourse, enabling marginalized youth groups to reclaim symbolic space and contest dominant political narratives through visual means.

Critical Discourse Analysis has been widely applied to uncover ideology and power in political speeches, media texts, and cultural narratives. Studies have examined political language and dominance (Chen, 2018), media portrayals of protest legitimacy (Kennedy, 2022), ideological suppression in opinion columns (Marín González, 2021), neoliberal discourse in sustainability narratives (Jacobsson, 2019), and the role of cultural and religious symbolism in identity construction (Gürlesin, 2023)(Casan, 2024). Research on pirate imagery and digital memes as forms of online resistance further anticipates the convergence of popular culture and political activism (Nowak, 2016). Collectively, these works demonstrate CDA's capacity to analyze both verbal and visual discourse in relation to power and collective meaning.

Nevertheless, most CDA research continues to privilege linguistic data, leaving visual and fictional cultural symbols comparatively underexamined, particularly within Asian protest movements. While previous studies have addressed protest representation and symbolic discourse, none have focused specifically on the transformation of anime-inspired imagery into political narratives in real-world demonstrations. This limitation reinforces the need for an analytical framework that integrates Critical Discourse Analysis with visual-semiotic interpretation.

Guided by this gap, the present study addresses the following research questions:

1. How is the One Piece Jolly Roger flag represented as a visual discourse in protest movements in Indonesia, Nepal, and the Philippines?
2. What ideological meanings are constructed through the use of this symbol across different sociopolitical contexts?
3. How does the appropriation of a pop-cultural icon function as a form of resistance and collective identity formation among Generation Z protesters?

Accordingly, this research seeks to examine the role of the *One Piece* Jolly Roger flag as a narrative of resistance in contemporary Asian protests, to decode its ideological meanings using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework, and to explain how visual popular culture contributes to the construction of power, identity, and collective mobilization. Theoretically, this study extends CDA by applying it to visual and multimodal discourse, reinforcing the view that discourse encompasses all forms of social expression (Fairclough, 1995); (Van Dijk, 2015). Practically, it provides insights for media practitioners and educators into emerging forms of youth political expression mediated through popular culture. Culturally, it highlights how Asian youth creatively recontextualize a Japanese anime symbol into a transnational emblem of protest, illustrating the convergence of fan culture and political activism in the digital era.

2. Method

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the *One Piece* flag as a discursive and ideological symbol in protest activities in Indonesia, Nepal, and the Philippines. The flag is treated not merely as a visual ornament, but as a social text that communicates meaning through imagery, cultural reference, and public circulation. Within CDA, discourse is understood as a form of social practice that both reflects and shapes power relations (Fairclough, 1995). Accordingly, the *One Piece* flag is analyzed as a site where ideology, resistance, and collective identity are articulated.

The analytical framework is primarily grounded in Fairclough's three-dimensional model (Fairclough, 1995), which examines discourse at the levels of textual practice, discursive practice, and social practice. This model enables the analysis of the flag's visual composition, its circulation through media and protest spaces, and its connection to broader sociopolitical contexts. Complementing this approach, van Dijk's socio-cognitive perspective (Van Dijk, 2015) is employed to interpret how shared mental frameworks and ideological positions inform the use of the flag as a symbolic challenge to political authority. Together, these frameworks allow the flag to be examined as a multimodal discourse through which protesters negotiate power, meaning, and solidarity.

Given the visual nature of the object studied, CDA is extended through semiotic perspectives on flags and symbolic representation. Studies by (Keane, 2025), (Becker et al., 2017), (Taşdemir, 2019), and (Leone, 2021) emphasize that flags operate as semiotic instruments that condense identity, memory, and political stance. In this research, the *One Piece* flag is interpreted as visual discourse in which elements such as color, skull imagery, and stylization function similarly to linguistic signs, conveying ideas of resistance, unity, and aspiration. This semiotic ideology explains how the flag shifts from a fictional emblem into a meaningful political symbol among Gen Z protesters.

The data analyzed consist of three primary protest images, with one

representative image from each country (Indonesia, Nepal, and the Philippines), alongside media texts compiled from various international and regional news outlets reporting on the same protest events. The media sources were selected based on their direct documentation of the demonstrations and their descriptive accounts of the flag's appearance, location, and interpretation within protest contexts (Harvey, 2025). These outlets were chosen because they provide contextual explanations that link visual data to political narratives, enabling cross-verification between imagery and written discourse.

Analysis was conducted in three stages. First, at the textual level, the visual features of the flag—such as symbols, colors, placement, and material form—were examined to identify ideological cues. Abstract concepts such as resistance, ideology, and solidarity were operationalized through observable indicators, including oppositional slogans, protest settings, collective display of the flag, and its positioning against state symbols. Second, at the level of discursive practice, the study examined how journalists, protesters, and public actors framed the flag in media narratives, focusing on how meaning was produced and circulated. Finally, at the level of social practice, these interpretations were situated within the political and cultural contexts of each country, highlighting how the flag mediated tensions between authority and dissent, and between national identity and global youth culture.

To address reliability and researcher subjectivity, interpretations were verified through triangulation between visual data and media narratives, ensuring that analytical claims were supported by both image-based evidence and textual reporting. Meanings were retained only when similar patterns appeared across different national contexts and aligned with CDA theoretical principles (Fairclough, 1995);(Van Dijk, 2015). This iterative comparison helped reduce individual bias and strengthened analytical consistency.

Through this methodological design, the study ensures that interpretations of the One Piece flag are grounded in systematic analysis rather than impressionistic reading, allowing the symbol's ideological function to be examined across multiple sociopolitical environments.

Data Analysis Technique Based On Miles And Huberman

In this study, the data analysis follows the interactive model by Miles and Huberman. This model has three main steps: data condensation, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions. As explained in *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* by (Miles et al., 2014), qualitative analysis is not a straight line but a repeating cycle. The researcher goes back and forth between steps to make sure the findings are trustworthy and based on real evidence.

First, data condensation means picking, focusing, simplifying, and organizing raw data from protest documents, social media posts, and news articles about the One Piece flag. Here, it involves pulling out visual parts (colors, skull shape, material, local changes), event details (school protests, money issues, rights

marches), and stories from protesters. This matches Miles and Huberman's idea that reducing data creates a base for deeper study through coding and grouping.

Second, data display arranges the shortened data into stories and descriptions to show ideological patterns in how the One Piece flag is used. Although this paper does not use tables or charts, the display idea is used by creating cross-country theme summaries. These show how the same symbol—the Jolly Roger—has different meanings in each place. Miles and Huberman say data display helps researchers “see the big picture,” letting links between parts appear naturally.

Third, drawing and verifying conclusions means figuring out how the One Piece flag becomes a symbol of opposition in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Nepal. This includes checking interpretations by comparing patterns across countries, linking them to flag symbol theories, and ensuring results come from data, not bias. As Miles and Huberman note, checking happens throughout to keep things logical and reliable.

Using this model, the study shows how one global symbol—the One Piece flag—turns into different ideological forms: a joke about corruption in Indonesia, a sign of youth fighting elites in the Philippines, and a symbol of unity against the system in Nepal. Miles and Huberman's approach reveals these layers step by step, through visual codes, event stories, and speech patterns that are checked all along.

3. Result and Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the One Piece flag operates as a flexible and culturally resonant symbol appropriated by youth protesters in Indonesia, Nepal, and the Philippines, with its meanings shaped by distinct national political conditions and generational experiences. Analysis of protest images and media texts drawn from international news coverage such as Al Jazeera, BBC, CNN International, France24, Newsweek, The Guardian, and The New York Times suggests that a single fictional pirate emblem is recontextualized into divergent ideological expressions across settings. Guided by Fairclough's three-dimensional model and van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework, the results demonstrate how the flag's visual form (micro level), its circulation and framing in media discourse (meso level), and its embedding within broader socio-political struggles (macro level) jointly construct a transnational narrative of youth resistance. The following sections present the findings from Indonesia, Nepal, and the Philippines, highlighting both shared patterns and context-specific interpretations.

Data 1



Figure 1. Demonstration use One Piece flag in Indonesia

Text Analysis (Micro Level)

A. Visual Analysis

The image depicts a young male demonstrator moving forward while holding two flags: the Indonesian national flag positioned above the One Piece “Straw Hat” pirate flag. His forward-leaning posture and running motion visually signal urgency and confrontation. The presence of smoke and small fires in the background creates an atmosphere of tension and unrest, visually aligning the scene with descriptions of nationwide student-led demonstrations reported by (Al Jazeera, 2025).

Analytically, the visual hierarchy of the flags is significant. The placement of the national flag above the pirate emblem suggests that the act is not a rejection of Indonesian identity but an internal critique of state authority. The stark contrast between the red-and-white national colors and the black pirate flag produces a layered symbolism, where nationalism and dissent coexist within a single visual frame.

B. Linguistic Analysis (Media Framing)

Although the image contains no written text, its meaning is shaped through accompanying media narratives. According to (Al Jazeera, 2025), protesters described the Jolly Roger as “an emblem of disillusionment and defiance,” while government officials framed its use as an act that could “foster division.” These opposing linguistic constructions assign contrasting ideological values to the same visual symbol.

From an analytical perspective, such framing demonstrates how language guides audience interpretation. Protesters’ lexical choices emphasize resistance and moral critique, whereas official discourse positions the symbol as a threat to social cohesion. This discursive tension illustrates how visual protest symbols acquire meaning through external textual mediation rather than through imagery alone.

C. Multimodal Analysis

The interaction between visual elements (flags, fire, bodily movement) and media discourse constructs a coherent multimodal message. The combination

of national and fictional symbols reflects a form of symbolic negotiation, where youth protesters articulate dissent while maintaining attachment to national identity. In this sense, the One Piece flag functions not merely as decoration but as an active semiotic resource that amplifies political critique, consistent with Fairclough's view that meaning emerges through the interaction of multiple semiotic modes.

Discursive Practice (Meso Level)

A. Production

The image emerges from Indonesia's broader wave of youth-led demonstrations, initially sparked by grassroots dissatisfaction and later amplified by students and online communities. Media accounts indicate that the adoption of the One Piece flag was not coordinated by political elites but developed organically among protesters (Al Jazeera, 2025). This suggests that the discourse surrounding the flag is produced from the bottom up, reflecting popular rather than institutional expression.

The deliberate positioning of the pirate flag beneath the national flag further indicates conscious symbolic reasoning. Protesters appear to use the fictional emblem as a means of critique that remains visually anchored to national belonging.

B. Distribution

The image circulated widely through street protests, news media, and digital platforms. International outlets such as Al Jazeera, France24, and The New York Times documented repeated appearances of the flag in public spaces. Simultaneously, social media enabled the rapid spread of photographs, memes, and short videos, allowing the symbol to gain visibility beyond physical protest sites.

This hybrid mode of distribution—combining offline action and online circulation—enhances the symbolic reach of the flag and reinforces its ideological resonance.

C. Consumption

Interpretations of the image vary across social groups. Youth protesters largely perceive the flag as a symbol of hope, critique, and collective identity, as reflected in statements reported by (Al Jazeera, 2025). In contrast, government officials and supporters interpret the same symbol as disruptive or divisive. These divergent readings illustrate Fairclough's argument that discourse consumption is shaped by ideological positioning rather than by textual features alone.

Social Practice (Macro Level)

At the macro level, the image must be situated within Indonesia's broader socio-political context, marked by youth unemployment, economic instability, declining trust in institutions, and unresolved collective grievances. Media coverage highlights how these conditions create fertile ground for symbolic forms

of protest (Al Jazeera, 2025); (Litoussi, 2025).

Within this context, the One Piece flag functions as a culturally mediated tool of dissent. Rather than direct verbal confrontation, protesters employ fictional imagery to express dissatisfaction in a manner that aligns with Indonesia’s tradition of indirect critique (*sindiran*). The image thus exemplifies Fairclough’s view of discourse as both shaped by and shaping social practice, revealing how symbolic choices are embedded in broader ideological struggles.

Van Dijk’s Socio-Cognitive Analysis

A. Social Cognition (Mental Models)

From van Dijk’s perspective, the use of the One Piece flag reflects shared cognitive frameworks among Indonesian youth. Having grown up with the narrative of One Piece, protesters associate its protagonist with moral resistance against corrupt authority. As noted by (Litoussi, 2025), such themes resonate strongly with Gen Z audiences.

When the demonstrator raises the Jolly Roger beneath the national flag, he activates a mental model in which fictional resistance maps onto real political dissatisfaction. This cognitive alignment allows the symbol to function as a compressed ideological message.

B. Ideology and Power (Us vs Them Structures)

The flag also contributes to the construction of ideological group boundaries. “Us” is formed around youth protesters who identify as ethical, critical, and culturally connected, while “them” represents political elites and state authorities portrayed as disconnected or repressive. Official condemnations of the flag reported by (Al Jazeera, 2025) illustrate attempts by elites to control symbolic meaning.

This struggle over interpretation reflects van Dijk’s claim that discourse operates as a site of ideological contestation, where power is negotiated through symbolic representation.

Data 2



Figure 2. Demonstration use One Piece flag in Nepal

Text Analysis (Micro Level)

A. Visual Analysis

The image captures the One Piece Jolly Roger flag displayed at the main gate of Singha Durbar, Nepal's central governmental complex, with flames visible in the background. The architectural solidity and ornate design of the gate—symbolizing state authority and historical legitimacy—stands in sharp contrast to the pirate skull emblem attached to it. The presence of fire introduces a visual index of crisis, urgency, and breakdown of order.

Analytically, the placement of the flag at the gate operates as a symbolic intrusion into state space. Unlike the Indonesian case, where national and fictional symbols are vertically aligned, the Nepal image presents a more confrontational configuration. The pirate emblem visually disrupts the state's architectural symmetry, suggesting a direct challenge rather than negotiated critique. This visual arrangement supports an interpretation of the protest as overtly antagonistic toward governmental authority.

B. Linguistic (Media Framing)

Although the image itself contains no written language, its meaning is shaped through media narration. CNN describes protesters as having “invaded Singha Durbar as fury over corruption and repression erupted” (Harvey, 2025). France24 highlights youth anger, noting that even “imagined icons have turned into weapons against privilege” (Litoussi, 2025).

From an analytical standpoint, verbs such as *invaded* and *erupted* frame the protest as violent and urgent, intensifying the perceived threat posed by demonstrators. These linguistic choices position the One Piece flag not as playful symbolism but as a rhetorical instrument embedded in a discourse of confrontation and instability.

C. Multimodal Analysis

Meaning emerges through the interaction of visual symbols (burning structure, pirate flag, state gate) and media language. The fictional skull motif, typically associated with humor or adventure, acquires a darker connotation when juxtaposed with fire and government architecture. The inverted national flag held by a protester further amplifies this message, functioning as a globally recognized sign of distress.

This multimodal configuration constructs a narrative of systemic failure and generational resistance. Analytically, the flag functions as a visual shorthand for rebellion, transforming pop-cultural imagery into a political statement through contextual amplification.

Discursive Practice (Meso Level)

A. Production

The image originates from widespread protests in Nepal following public outrage over corruption, governance failures, and restrictions on digital platforms. Media accounts indicate that youth protesters deliberately incorporated anime imagery as part of their expressive repertoire (Harvey, 2025); (Litoussi, 2025). This suggests that the flag's use was a conscious

communicative act rather than a spontaneous aesthetic choice.

The act of placing the flag on Singha Durbar's gate reflects strategic symbolism. The gate serves as a condensed representation of state authority, making it a focal point for visual resistance.

B. Distribution

The image circulated rapidly through international media outlets such as CNN and France24, as well as through social media platforms. According to (Suneja, 2025), hashtags and online sharing practices contributed to the image's viral spread, allowing it to reach audiences beyond Nepal.

This pattern of distribution illustrates how protest discourse is amplified through the interaction of journalistic framing and digital circulation, transforming a localized act into a transnational symbol of dissent.

C. Consumption

Audience interpretation varies according to ideological positioning. Youth protesters and supporters interpret the flag as a courageous symbol of resistance and generational unity, while state authorities and conservative observers perceive it as vandalism or disrespect toward national institutions. International audiences tend to read the image as a striking fusion of pop culture and political revolt.

These divergent readings align with Fairclough's assertion that discourse consumption is socially conditioned rather than neutral.

Social Practice (Macro Level)

At the macro level, the image reflects Nepal's broader socio-political tensions, including systemic corruption, youth unemployment, generational inequality, and declining trust in political institutions. Media reports emphasize how these conditions have fueled sustained public anger (Harvey, 2025); (Litoussi, 2025).

Within this context, the One Piece flag operates as a symbolic counter-discourse that challenges the state's moral authority. Its fictional origin allows protesters to articulate dissent in a form that is emotionally resonant yet culturally accessible. From Fairclough's perspective, this demonstrates how discourse participates in social change by reconfiguring dominant symbols into tools of opposition.

Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Analysis

A. Social Cognition (Mental Models)

Using van Dijk's framework, the protesters' actions can be understood through shared cognitive models shaped by popular culture. Youth demonstrators draw parallels between Nepal's political elites and the authoritarian forces depicted in One Piece. As noted by (Harvey, 2025), protesters explicitly referenced corruption and elite dominance—themes central to the anime's narrative.

This cognitive mapping enables the pirate flag to function as a condensed

ideological message, allowing complex political grievances to be communicated through a single visual sign.

B. Ideology and Power (Us vs Them)

The flag also reinforces ideological polarization. “Us” represents youth protesters who see themselves as morally justified and collectively oppressed, while “them” signifies political elites and entrenched power holders, often labeled through discourse such as #Nepobabies (Suneja, 2025). Van Dijk argues that such symbolic practices help solidify group identity and ideological boundaries.

In this image, the occupation of the state gate dramatizes the struggle for symbolic control. The One Piece flag becomes an emblem of ideological resistance, visually contesting elite dominance and asserting youth agency within Nepal’s political landscape.

Data 3



Figure 3. Demonstration use One Piece flag in Philippines

Text Analysis (Micro Level)

A. Visual Analysis

The image depicts a dense group of young Filipino demonstrators standing atop a vehicle or roadside barrier in Manila. Several participants raise clenched fists, while others extend their arms outward in gestures of resistance. The One Piece Jolly Roger flag is visible beside multiple Philippine national flags, visually merging fictional symbolism with national identity. A protester at the center holds a placard reading “FUCK THE SYSTEM,” which functions as the dominant visual focal point. The surrounding haze—likely tear gas or smoke—suggests confrontation with authorities and heightens the sense of urgency.

Analytically, the spatial composition places youth bodies above street level, symbolizing collective empowerment and defiance. Unlike the Nepal case’s architectural confrontation, this image foregrounds human presence and crowd solidarity. The pirate flag operates here as a unifying emblem within a broader constellation of protest symbols rather than as a singular act of intrusion into state space.

B. Linguistic (Media Framing)

Although the photograph contains minimal text beyond the protest sign, media coverage provides linguistic framing. (Mcfall, 2025) describes Filipino youth protests as incorporating “digital meme culture into street-level mobilization,” while The New York Times characterizes these demonstrations as part of a “digitally recombined lexicon of youthful opposition” (Bennhold, 2025).

Analytically, phrases such as *youth surge*, *challenge*, and *anti-system anger* frame the protest as generational and structural rather than episodic. The explicit slogan “FUCK THE SYSTEM” functions as a linguistic anchor, converting diffuse frustration into a clear anti-establishment statement that guides audience interpretation of the visual scene.

C. Multimodal Analysis

Meaning is produced through the interaction of visual elements (flags, masks, raised fists), written language (the protest placard), and media discourse. The pirate flag’s presence alongside national flags signals an integration of global pop culture with local political identity. The profanity-laden slogan intensifies the emotional register of the image, contrasting with the playful origins of the One Piece symbol.

Analytically, this multimodal ensemble constructs a narrative of collective defiance that is simultaneously serious and culturally referential. The flag does not replace national symbolism but coexists with it, suggesting reformist resistance rather than total rejection of national belonging.

Discursive Practice (Meso Level)

A. Production

The image emerges from sustained youth-led protests addressing corruption, political dynasties, rising living costs, and institutional distrust. Media reports indicate that many demonstrations were organized through online platforms where anime imagery and meme culture circulate widely (Mcfall, 2025). The inclusion of the One Piece flag reflects a deliberate communicative strategy shaped by digital-native protest practices.

The coordinated visual choices—face coverings, raised fists, elevated positioning—indicate that the protest was designed with media visibility in mind, reinforcing its discursive intent.

B. Distribution

The image circulated across social media platforms such as X, TikTok, and Reddit, as well as through international news outlets including Newsweek and France24. This dual-channel distribution allowed the image to function both as journalistic documentation and as a reusable protest symbol in online spaces.

Analytically, this mode of circulation demonstrates how discourse gains force through repetition and remixing. The One Piece flag becomes recognizable as a protest marker precisely because it is reproduced across platforms and contexts.

C. Consumption

Interpretations differ according to ideological positioning. For Filipino students and youth activists, the flag signifies unity, courage, and resistance, aligning with notions of *nakikiisa* (togetherness). Conversely, critics and government-aligned commentators interpret the imagery as disorderly, immature, or disrespectful. International audiences often decode the image through familiar global protest aesthetics.

These divergent readings reinforce Fairclough's argument that meaning is not fixed but negotiated through social and ideological contexts.

Social Practice (Macro Level)

At the macro level, the image reflects long-standing structural tensions within Philippine society, including elite dominance, corruption, and youth marginalization. Media accounts emphasize widespread frustration with political dynasties and institutional inertia (Bennhold, 2025); (Mcfall, 2025).

Within this setting, the One Piece flag functions as a symbol of generational resistance embedded within a hybrid cultural identity—simultaneously global and national. The coexistence of anime imagery and national flags suggests a demand for systemic change rather than rejection of the nation-state itself. From Fairclough's perspective, this illustrates how discourse evolves to express emerging political identities and aspirations.

Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Analysis

A. Social Cognition (Mental Models)

Drawing on van Dijk's framework, Filipino youth protesters operate within shared cognitive models that frame "the system" as corrupt, exclusionary, and unresponsive. The One Piece narrative—centered on resisting authoritarian power and defending marginalized groups—resonates strongly with these perceptions. Media interviews cited by Newsweek indicate that protesters explicitly associate the anime's themes with their political grievances.

This cognitive alignment enables the pirate flag to serve as a mental shortcut for complex ideological positions, allowing protesters to communicate resistance efficiently and collectively.

B. Ideology and Us/Them Structures

The ideological structure evident in the image is sharply polarized. "Us" encompasses students, youth collectives, and digitally connected activists, while "them" represents political dynasties, corrupt institutions, and the abstract notion of "the system." Van Dijk argues that repeated symbolic usage solidifies these group distinctions.

In this photograph, the raised fists, confrontational slogan, and pirate emblem collectively enact a reclaiming of symbolic authority. The One Piece flag thus operates as an ideological marker through which marginalized youth contest elite dominance and assert their political presence.

Across the three national contexts, the One Piece Jolly Roger flag consistently functions as a shared symbol of youth-led resistance, yet its meaning is rearticulated according to distinct political and cultural conditions. In Indonesia, the flag operates as a form of symbolic critique embedded within national identity, where protesters deliberately position it beneath the red-and-white flag to signal reformist dissent rather than outright rejection of the state. This reflects a mode of resistance that emphasizes moral correction and patriotic responsibility.

In Nepal, the same symbol assumes a far more confrontational role, directly challenging state authority through its placement on the gates of Singha Durbar and its association with physical destruction and political rupture. Here, the flag represents an explicit antagonism toward elite power and institutional legitimacy. In the Philippines, the flag is mobilized as part of a digitally mediated protest repertoire, integrated with explicit anti-system language, meme culture, and mass youth participation. Rather than targeting a single institution, it articulates broader frustration with systemic corruption and political dynasties.

Despite these contextual differences, several common patterns emerge. Across all three cases, the flag serves as a generational marker that distinguishes youth protesters from political elites, aligning with van Dijk's notion of "us versus them" ideological structuring. The symbol's roots in popular culture allow it to communicate dissent indirectly, enabling protesters to express complex critiques without reliance on formal political language.

Moreover, media framing plays a crucial role in shaping the flag's meaning, alternately legitimizing it as creative resistance or condemning it as destabilizing provocation. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that the One Piece flag functions not as a fixed symbol but as a flexible discursive resource, whose ideological significance is produced through the interaction of visual form, media discourse, and local socio-political conditions.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the One Piece flag has evolved from a fictional pop-culture emblem into a meaningful discursive resource within youth-led protest movements in Indonesia, Nepal, and the Philippines. Across these contexts, the flag functions as a flexible symbol through which young demonstrators' articulate dissatisfaction with political authority, corruption, and socio-economic inequality. While the specific political triggers differ, the shared deployment of the flag reflects a generational strategy of opposition that merges cultural familiarity with ideological critique. This confirms that protest discourse is not confined to formal political language but can be constructed through visual and cultural symbols that resonate strongly with youth audiences.

Comparatively, the three cases reveal distinct yet interconnected ideological patterns. In Indonesia, the flag operates as a form of ethical nationalism, where protestors combine national symbols with pop-cultural imagery to express

criticism without rejecting national identity (Ratcliffe, 2025). In Nepal, the flag assumes a more confrontational role, directly challenging state authority by occupying symbolic spaces of power and aligning with narratives of systemic corruption (Harvey, 2025). In the Philippines, the symbol functions within a digitally mediated protest culture, where anime imagery, memes, and explicit slogans converge to produce a hybrid form of online and street-level resistance (Mcfall, 2025). Together, these patterns illustrate how the same visual discourse adapts to local conditions while maintaining a shared ideological core centered on resistance, justice, and generational solidarity.

From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, these findings extend Fairclough's conception of discourse as social practice by demonstrating that visual pop-culture symbols can operate as fully formed discursive texts. The One Piece flag does not merely decorate protest spaces; it actively constructs meaning through its visual design, placement, and circulation across media platforms. Its repeated appearance in news coverage reinforces its role as a communicative act embedded in power relations, confirming that discourse production and interpretation occur beyond verbal language alone (Fairclough, 1995). This study therefore contributes to CDA by foregrounding visual pop-cultural artifacts as legitimate sites of ideological struggle.

Van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework further clarifies how the flag acquires political significance through shared mental models among youth protesters. Across the three countries, demonstrators draw upon familiar narratives from One Piece—particularly themes of opposing corrupt authority and defending the marginalized—to frame their real-world grievances. These shared cognitive structures allow the flag to function as a shorthand for complex political ideas, enabling rapid recognition and emotional alignment among participants (Van Dijk, 2015). The recurring "us versus them" ideological structure is evident, with youth positioning themselves as morally justified challengers to entrenched elites, while state actors and institutions are framed as oppressive or disconnected.

Media framing plays a crucial role in shaping the public meaning of the One Piece flag. News coverage frequently oscillates between portraying the symbol as a creative form of dissent and framing it as a threat to order or national unity (Harvey, 2025). Such portrayals influence how protests are legitimized or delegitimized in public discourse, reinforcing Becker et al.'s argument that media institutions hold significant power in defining protest credibility (Becker et al., 2017). Rather than neutral observers, media outlets become active participants in the discursive struggle surrounding youth resistance.

Theoretically, this study extends existing CDA scholarship by demonstrating how visual symbols rooted in popular culture can function as transnational discursive tools. Unlike prior studies that focus primarily on institutional texts or spoken political discourse, this research shows that fictional imagery can be recontextualized into powerful vehicles of ideological expression. The One Piece

flag exemplifies how global media culture enables youth movements to communicate across national boundaries while remaining grounded in local political realities (Nowak, 2016); (Taşdemir, 2019).

Despite these contributions, this study also faces limitations. The analysis relies primarily on media images and journalistic accounts, which may reflect editorial framing rather than protesters' own interpretations. The absence of direct interviews with demonstrators restricts deeper insight into individual motivations and interpretive processes. Additionally, visual discourse analysis inherently involves researcher interpretation, which may introduce subjectivity despite careful theoretical grounding. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating ethnographic methods or participant perspectives to enrich understanding of symbolic protest practices.

Overall, the findings confirm that the One Piece flag has become a potent discursive instrument through which young people articulate resistance, renegotiate national identity, and challenge dominant power structures. By appropriating a familiar pop-culture symbol, youth protesters in Indonesia, Nepal, and the Philippines demonstrate how cultural imagination can be mobilized into political action. This study highlights the growing importance of visual and cultural discourse in contemporary protest movements and underscores the need for CDA to continue expanding beyond traditional textual boundaries (Mcfall, 2025); (Harvey, 2025); (Taşdemir, 2019).

Relevance Of The Current Study To Prior Research

Although earlier academic work has greatly advanced our knowledge of protest communication, flag symbolism, and the use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in political settings, no investigation has yet explored the deployment of a cross-border mainstream culture icon, such as the One Piece flag, in modern youth-organized rallies in Asia. Past studies, including (Lagerman, 2024) examination of media reactions to patriotic disputes, have demonstrated how media significantly influences the portrayal of social initiatives and their symbols. Likewise, (Jacobsson, 2021) investigates protest selfhood and how social movements establish their credibility through symbolic deeds. These investigations underscore the value of CDA in exposing concealed ideological frameworks in public dialogue, unveiling the intricate ties between protest groups and power structures. Nevertheless, none of these works tackle how worldwide media icons, especially imagined and cross-media motifs, are harnessed by demonstrators in actual political conflicts. This void is particularly noticeable in Asian rallies, where pop-culture symbols are increasingly employed to convey opposition and foster unity among the young.

The available scholarship on flag symbolism further clarifies the influence of icons in political communication. Experts such as (Leone, 2021) and (Keane, 2025) have studied national and official flags as emblems that uphold or oppose prevailing ideologies, contending that flags possess multiple layers of significance

deeply rooted in societal tales. These contributions have stressed the function of national symbols in encouraging cohesion or disputing authority. Yet, such investigations have primarily concentrated on flags as markers of national selfhood or official control, frequently neglecting the rising incorporation of non-national, fictional icons in protest activities. The One Piece flag, stemming from a popular anime, offers a unique example in this area—one that surpasses national limits and leverages global media culture to forge a fresh type of sociopolitical dialogue. This symbolic evolution mirrors an expanding pattern where worldwide, transmedia icons, like those from anime or games, are adopted by youth to express political defiance (Harvey, 2025);(Nowak, 2016). In this manner, the ongoing research bridges a distinct void in the literature by analyzing how a fictional pirate banner, drawn from global media culture, is adapted in sociopolitical communication by protesters in Indonesia, Nepal, and the Philippines.

Moreover, works like those by (Harvey, 2025) and (Casan, 2024) on media depictions of youth rallies emphasize the function of online platforms in boosting protest icons. These researchers maintain that digital media allows the swift spread of protest symbols and aids in forming a worldwide resistance network, but they do not specifically examine the part of pop-culture icons in this dynamic. The present investigation, in contrast, investigates how symbols such as the One Piece flag are not merely disseminated via digital media but also woven into localized, culturally tailored political rallies, providing a detailed comprehension of how media and protest symbolism converge. As (Van Dijk, 2015) and (Taşdemir, 2019) propose, CDA permits a thorough scrutiny of how icons and discourse are utilized to validate or contest political ideologies. This study broadens CDA's use by concentrating on how digitally facilitated, mixed symbols—like the One Piece flag—function as instruments for political articulation and identity building in a transnational framework.

This research also builds on (Fairclough, 1995) structural examination of discourse, which delves into how language and symbols facilitate power negotiations. By merging this model with van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework and semiotic views of symbolism (Keane, 2025), this study advances conventional CDA methods. Earlier research has centered on national or official flags, whereas the current study looks at how global, imagined icons are reimagined in the political sphere. The One Piece flag's embrace by youth demonstrators in Indonesia, Nepal, and the Philippines contests the customary role of flags in protest movements by presenting a symbol that is culturally appealing and internationally acknowledged, yet separate from state-backed or official power. Thus, the study enhances the comprehension of blended protest icons, which combine global pop-culture nods with regional political concerns, facilitating a novel protest dialogue that is both digitally enabled and globally pertinent.

Therefore, the current research tackles a vital void in the literature by employing CDA and semiotic scrutiny to a modern protest icon that remains under-

theorized—transnational pop-culture motifs like the One Piece flag. By scrutinizing how such icons are repurposed in youth-driven political initiatives across Asia, this study builds on previous efforts by illustrating the applicability of CDA to blended, digitally mediated protest symbols. The outcomes of this research not only broaden CDA's scope to fresh categories of protest icons but also underscore the influence of global media culture in molding local political opposition, delivering novel perspectives on the strength of pop-culture symbols in the digital era (Harvey, 2025); (Van Dijk, 2015); (Suneja, 2025); (Nowak, 2016); (Taşdemir, 2019).

5. Conclusion

This study examined the role of the One Piece flag as a transnational pop-culture symbol in youth-led protests across Indonesia, Nepal, and the Philippines. Using descriptive qualitative research with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and semiotic analysis, the research revealed how the flag, initially a fictional emblem, has been repurposed as a powerful tool of resistance. The findings highlight the flag's role in symbolizing collective defiance against authoritarianism, while connecting global pop culture with local political struggles. Furthermore, it functions as a hybrid symbol of resistance, challenging political legitimacy and redefining political identity. Despite these insights, the study has limitations, particularly in its focus on only three countries and a lack of deeper exploration into the individual motivations behind the flag's adoption. These limitations open the door for future research to extend this work by exploring the use of pop-culture symbols across a broader range of regions and more closely investigating the psychological and social dynamics at play.

Building on this, future research could examine how other transnational pop-culture symbols are utilized in protest movements, especially in diverse geopolitical contexts. Further exploration into the cognitive processes behind symbol adoption could offer valuable insights into the ways youth engage with these symbols. Additionally, studying the socio-political impact of these symbols—such as their influence on public opinion and their potential to foster social movements—would enrich our understanding of their role in modern resistance. Moreover, the growing importance of digital activism and social media in amplifying these symbols across borders deserves more attention, as it highlights the global nature of contemporary protest. This study, therefore, opens new avenues for investigating how pop-culture symbols continue to shape political discourse and youth activism in the digital age.

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Yusri Bayu Aditya, Febri Azwar Ilham, Euis Meinawati
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