

## **One Piece Flag as Symbolic Communication in Indonesian Digital Discourse**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the One Piece flag controversy on X during Indonesia's Independence Day period as a case of symbolic communication in digital public discourse. Rather than treating the debate merely as an anime fandom issue or viral digital expression, this article analyzes how Indonesian digital publics evaluated the legitimacy of a borrowed popular culture symbol in relation to national symbolism. Using a qualitative digital discourse design within a critical constructivist paradigm, the study analyzed 473 focused X posts selected from 1,596 crawled public posts and six semi-structured interviews with X users representing supportive, opposing, and conditional positions. Stuart Hall's theory of representation and encoding/decoding was used as the main analytical framework, supported by the concepts of symbolic reappropriation and transcultural identity. The findings reveal three interpretive patterns. First, some users legitimized the One Piece flag by translating it into a language of public criticism, solidarity, and social anxiety. Second, some users delegitimized the symbol as foreign, fictional, mistimed, or improper within the Indonesian national symbolic space. Third, some users negotiated its legitimacy by accepting the flag only when it remained visually and symbolically subordinate to the Red-and-White flag. The study argues that the controversy reflects a platform-mediated process of symbolic legitimacy-making, where meaning is not only produced but also publicly tested, corrected, rejected, and limited through digital interaction. This article contributes to communication studies by showing how representation, civic expression, and national belonging are negotiated through popular culture symbols in digital public discourse.

*Keywords: Digital Nationalism; One Piece Flag; Representation; Symbolic Communication; Symbolic Reappropriation*

## **1. Introduction**

During Indonesia's Independence Day period, the circulation of the One Piece flag on X generated public controversy because a fictional symbol from Japanese popular culture entered a national moment strongly associated with the Red-and-White flag. Some users interpreted the One Piece flag as a symbol of freedom, solidarity, resistance, and dissatisfaction with injustice, while others regarded its display as inappropriate, foreign, or disrespectful toward national symbols. This controversy is important because it shows that the debate was not merely about anime fandom, but about the legitimacy of public criticism, the meaning of nationalism, and the boundaries of acceptable symbolic expression in Indonesia.

The Independence Day period makes this case particularly significant for the study of digital nationalism because national symbols become more visible, emotionally charged, and closely scrutinized during commemorative moments. Existing studies show that nationalism in digital spaces is reproduced not only through official institutions, but also through everyday visual, affective, and participatory practices, while fandom research demonstrates that transnational popular culture provides resources for identity construction and collective expression (Fujita, 2025; Peng et al., 2022; Smutradontri & Gadavani, 2020). The One Piece flag controversy is therefore theoretically significant because it brings these processes into direct interaction, revealing how fandom meanings and public criticism are negotiated against the symbolic authority of the Red-and-White flag.

To understand how this symbolic conflict became possible, it is necessary to consider how cultural symbols move across digital contexts. Digital platforms enable cultural symbols to circulate beyond their original settings and acquire new meanings through posts, replies, hashtags, images, memes, and other forms of visual interaction (Abu-ayyash, 2024; Lister et al., 2009; Shifman, 2014). Within participatory digital culture, users do not merely reproduce meanings created by media producers, but reinterpret and reconnect global cultural references with local experiences and public concerns (Bruns & Burgess, 2013; Jenkins, 2006; Papacharissi, 2015). In Indonesia, this process brings global and local narratives into interaction, allowing foreign cultural symbols to become part of locally situated debates over identity, social conditions, and public expression (Pamungkas et al., 2024; Russo et al., 2024). This perspective helps explain

how the One Piece flag could move beyond its original fandom context and become a contested symbol on X.

Fandom studies and digital nationalism research approach cultural symbols from different analytical directions. Fandom scholarship emphasizes how audiences develop emotional attachment, cultural proximity, and identity through transnational media, whereas digital nationalism research focuses on how belonging, loyalty, and national boundaries are reproduced in online spaces (Jin, 2023; Peng et al., 2022; Smutradontri & Gadavanij, 2020). This is important because participatory media allows popular culture symbols to become shared materials for public conversation, affective expression, and collective meaning-making (Milner, 2016). Research on One Piece supports the first perspective by highlighting audience identification with values such as freedom, friendship, justice, and resistance to oppressive authority (Kharismawati & Wahidati, 2023; Kopper, 2020). Read together, these perspectives suggest a tension between users' attachment to a foreign popular culture symbol and the continuing authority of national symbolic boundaries, particularly when the symbol appears during the Independence Day period.

This tension requires an analytical framework that can explain both competing interpretations and the movement of symbols across cultural boundaries. Hall's encoding/decoding model provides a framework for examining how Indonesian X users assign competing meanings to the One Piece flag rather than treating their responses as fixed attitudes (Hall, 1980 ; Hall et al., 2005). Supportive readings refer to interpretations that legitimize the flag through freedom, solidarity, criticism, and resistance to injustice. Oppositional readings capture attempts to reconstruct it as foreign, fictional, mistimed, or disrespectful, while negotiated readings recognize its expressive value but impose conditions concerning placement, visual hierarchy, and its relationship with the Red-and-White flag. These positions reflect Hall's argument that meaning is produced through socially situated representational practices rather than being inherent in the symbol (Hall, 1997). Transcultural identity complements and modifies this framework by explaining how a Japanese popular culture symbol crosses cultural boundaries and is rearticulated through Indonesian social concerns, while remaining subject to national history, symbolic authority, hybridity, and culturally defined limits of acceptable expression (Jin, 2023; Kellner, 2007; Smutradontri & Gadavanij, 2020).

Despite these theoretical insights, existing studies have mainly shown that fandom supports identity formation through transnational popular culture, that digital nationalism reproduces national belonging in online spaces, and that circulating cultural symbols can acquire new political

meanings (Jin, 2023; McSwiney et al., 2021; Peng et al., 2022; Smutradontri & Gadavanij, 2020). These perspectives remain insufficiently connected to explain how a borrowed fictional symbol is publicly evaluated after entering a politically sensitive national context. The simultaneous acceptance, rejection, and conditional acceptance of the One Piece flag indicate that symbolic reappropriation does not end when a new meaning is assigned, but continues through public boundary-making over whether and under what conditions the symbol is considered legitimate. Without this explanation, the controversy risks being reduced to a simple opposition between nationalism and anti-nationalism, overlooking how criticism, fandom, cultural borrowing, and respect for national symbols may coexist.

This study examines how Indonesian X users accept, reject, or conditionally negotiate the One Piece flag during the Independence Day period. It also investigates how these interpretations construct symbolic boundaries between transcultural expression and the authority of Indonesian national symbols.

## **2. Method**

This study employed a qualitative digital discourse design within a critical constructivist paradigm. A qualitative approach is appropriate for examining how meanings are produced in complex and context-dependent digital phenomena, especially when users actively reinterpret cultural symbols within social and national discourse (Denzin, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Critical constructivism views social meaning as constructed through interaction while also being shaped by ideology, symbolic authority, and unequal power relations (Gergen, 2018). This paradigm guided the selection of the One Piece flag controversy as a case in which fandom, public criticism, and nationalism were contested. X posts were therefore examined not merely as individual opinions, but as discursive practices through which users legitimized, rejected, or restricted the use of a borrowed cultural symbol within Indonesian national discourse.

Data were collected from X between July 27 and November 30, 2025, using Tweet Harvest. The data collection period was selected to capture the debate before, during, and after Indonesia's Independence Day. July 27, 2025, marked the pre-commemoration period when the One Piece flag began to circulate in relation to public criticism and the Red-and-White flag. November 30, 2025, was used as the endpoint to include post-event discussions, when users continued to reinterpret, reject, or conditionally negotiate the symbol's meaning. The crawling process used the keywords

and hashtags “One Piece,” “Bendera One Piece,” “Jolly Roger,” “Bendera Bajak Laut,” “Bendera Anime,” #OnePiece, and #BenderaOnePiece. The initial crawling produced 1,596 public posts. The primary unit of analysis was each post or dataset row that contained a discernible position concerning the One Piece flag. Replies, quote-posts, reposts with comments, hashtags, and attached visual materials were examined as interactional extensions when they contributed to the meaning of the post.

Purposive sampling was used to construct the focused corpus because the study prioritized posts that directly addressed the research problem (Patton, 2015). Posts were included when they discussed symbolic legitimacy, foreign or fictional symbols, Indonesian nationalism, the Red-and-White flag, public criticism, support, rejection, or conditional acceptance. They were also required to use Bahasa Indonesia or clearly refer to Indonesia, the Independence Day period, or Indonesian national symbols. Posts were excluded when they were duplicated, spam-like, commercially oriented, unrelated to the controversy, or limited to anime, memes, merchandise, and general entertainment discussions.

A total of 1,123 posts were excluded during screening. The exclusions were recorded collectively because separate numerical counts for each exclusion category were not maintained during the initial screening. All screening decisions were conducted by the researcher, resulting in a focused corpus of 473 posts. Borderline posts were reconsidered by examining their textual, visual, and interactional contexts against the inclusion criteria.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six X users who had posted about or responded to the controversy. Informants were selected purposively to represent supportive, opposing, and conditional positions. They were initially contacted through direct messages on X and subsequently through WhatsApp. Individual interviews were conducted through WhatsApp calls between November and December 2025 and lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The interview guide explored how participants encountered the controversy, why they responded to it, how they interpreted the One Piece flag, and under what conditions they considered its use legitimate, inappropriate, or acceptable.

Recruitment ended after the sixth interview because the responses had reached thematic sufficiency (Braun et al., 2008), indicated by repeated interpretive patterns and the absence of substantially new explanations concerning acceptance, rejection, or conditional acceptance. Before each interview, participants received an informed consent form explaining the research purpose, voluntary participation, anonymity, audio recording, academic data use, and their right to refuse questions or discontinue

participation. All interviews were conducted individually, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim.

Because the interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and the article is presented in English, selected quotations were translated into English by the researcher. The translations were reviewed against the original transcripts to maintain semantic consistency and preserve the participants' intended meanings. Informants were anonymized using the codes I1 to I6.

Interview data were integrated with the X corpus to confirm, extend, or challenge interpretations developed from public posts. Interviews clarified positions that appeared briefly or ambiguously on X and revealed the conditions underlying acceptance, rejection, or conditional acceptance. When interview responses differed from online posts or introduced additional conditions, these differences were retained as divergent cases and used to refine the boundaries between themes.

The data were coded manually in Microsoft Excel and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, which treats coding and theme development as iterative rather than fixed sequential processes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each row in the coding spreadsheet recorded the post text, publication date, initial code, analytical category, coding rationale, and an internal confidence note. Initial codes included defending the symbol, resistance symbol, not anti-Indonesian, anime symbol, foreign symbol, inappropriate use, protecting the Red-and-White flag, acceptable within limits, fandom versus nationalism, and borrowed symbol.

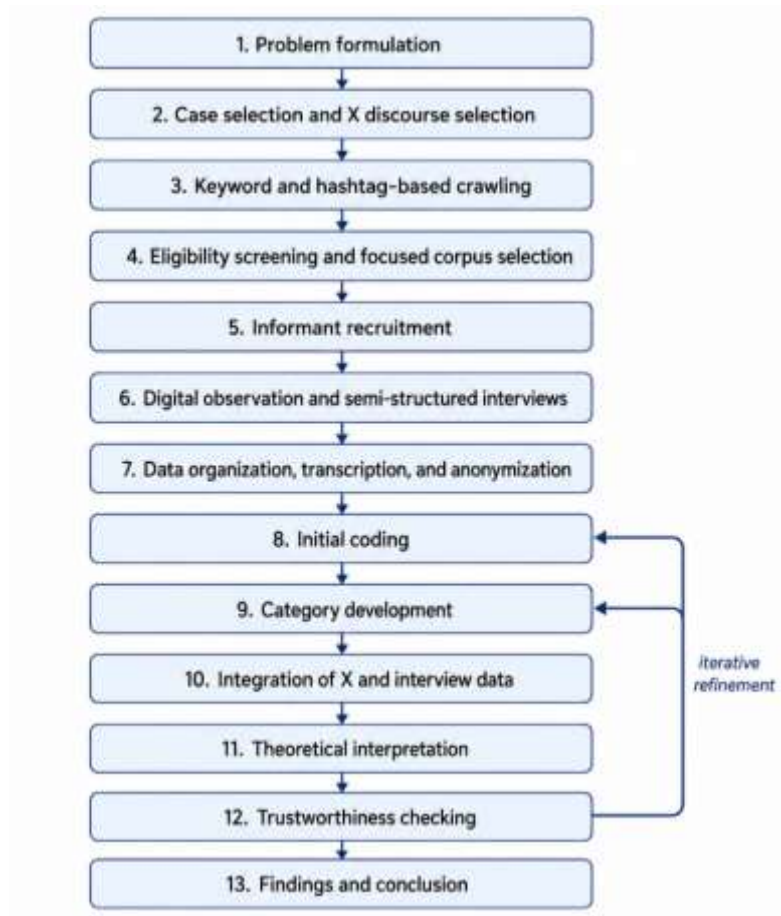
Posts containing more than one interpretive position received multiple initial codes and were not immediately forced into a single category. The researcher repeatedly compared the codes, textual emphasis, and interactional context before identifying the dominant interpretive position. The initial codes were then organized into three analytical categories: legitimizing the borrowed symbol, delegitimizing the symbol as foreign, fictional, or improper, and negotiating the symbolic boundary. Overlapping and contradictory posts were retained because they showed that users' positions could move between support, rejection, and conditional acceptance.

Hall's theory of representation and encoding/decoding was used to interpret how the One Piece flag acquired competing meanings through public discourse rather than possessing a fixed meaning (Hall, 1997). Legitimizing interpretations authorized the flag as a form of public expression, delegitimizing interpretations rejected its symbolic legitimacy, and negotiated interpretations accepted its expressive meaning while imposing limits related to national symbols. Transcultural identity was

used to examine how a Japanese popular culture symbol was localized, challenged, and restricted within Indonesian debates over nationalism and belonging.

Coding was conducted by one researcher. Therefore, inter-coder reliability was not calculated. Analytical consistency was maintained through repeated reading, coding-rationale notes, category revision, and the re-examination of ambiguous and contradictory posts. The Excel workbook functioned as a manual audit trail by documenting inclusion and exclusion decisions, initial codes, category assignments, and coding revisions (Nowell et al., 2017). Reflexive notes were also used to consider how the researcher's familiarity with One Piece, digital culture, and Indonesian nationalism could influence screening, coding, and interpretation.

Ethical safeguards were applied throughout the research process based on the principles of privacy, anonymity, informed consent, transparency, and responsible use of social media data. Only publicly accessible X posts were included, while protected accounts and private communications were excluded. Usernames, profile photographs, locations, and other identifying information were removed. Quotations were translated into English and, where necessary, minimally modified to reduce traceability without altering their substantive meanings. The collected data were used solely for academic purposes, while interview recordings, transcripts, and the screened dataset were stored securely and were accessible only to the researcher.



**Figure 1.** Research Workflow

### 3. Results

This section presents the empirical findings from the focused corpus of 473 X posts and six semi-structured interviews. The analysis does not treat the debate as a fixed division between pro and contra positions. Instead, the findings show three recurring interpretive patterns through which Indonesian X users legitimized, rejected, or conditionally accepted the One Piece flag as a borrowed cultural symbol during the Independence Day period.

The themes were developed through repeated reading, manual coding, and comparison between X posts and interview data. Because some posts contained more than one interpretive position, the categories were not treated as completely exclusive. For example, a post could support the One Piece flag as a form of criticism while also insisting that the Red-and-White flag must remain higher. Such posts were coded with multiple initial codes

before the dominant interpretive position was determined. Interview data were integrated into each theme to clarify short or ambiguous posts, extend the meaning of online statements, and identify divergent explanations.

**Table 1.** Thematic Overview of Interpretive Patterns in the One Piece Flag Debate

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Analytical Weight</b>	<b>Representative Codes</b>	<b>Core Empirical Pattern</b>
<b>Legitimizing the borrowed symbol</b>	Most prominent pattern	public criticism, resistance symbol, solidarity, freedom, hope, not anti-Indonesian	Users connected the One Piece flag with criticism, solidarity, public anxiety, and values of freedom or resistance.
<b>Delegitimizing the symbol as foreign, fictional, or improper</b>	Prominent recurring pattern	only anime, foreign symbol, inappropriate timing, disrespectful, protecting the Red-and-White flag	Users rejected the One Piece flag because it was seen as lacking national legitimacy, especially during the Independence Day period.
<b>Negotiating the symbolic boundary</b>	Less prominent but analytically significant pattern	acceptable within limits, do not replace the Red-and-White flag, lower position, symbolic hierarchy	Users accepted the One Piece flag only when its use remained subordinate to the Red-and-White flag and did not challenge national symbols.

Source: Compiled by the authors (2026)

### 3.1 Legitimizing the Borrowed Symbol

The first theme shows how users legitimized the One Piece flag by translating it from a fictional fandom symbol into a language of public criticism, solidarity, and social anxiety. This theme appeared as the most prominent interpretive pattern in the dataset, although it was not treated as a fully exclusive category because some posts also contained conditional

statements about respecting the Red-and-White flag. Posts in this theme did not generally position the One Piece flag as a replacement for the Indonesian national flag. Instead, they framed it as an additional symbolic layer through which users could express disappointment, hope, and resistance against perceived injustice.

Several variations appeared within this theme. Some users connected the flag to values associated with One Piece, such as freedom, friendship, courage, and resistance to oppressive power. Others connected it more directly to Indonesian social conditions, including corruption, injustice, public disappointment, and the perceived distance between the ideal meaning of independence and everyday social reality. These variations indicate that the flag became meaningful not because users interpreted it uniformly, but because it provided a flexible symbol that could be attached to different forms of public anxiety.

One representative post from the Independence Day discussion stated:

“The Red-and-White flag remains the symbol of the people’s movement and represents Indonesian territory. The One Piece flag symbolizes resistance, such as resistance against corruption, nepotism, and a corrupt world government. It is a symbol of freedom, unity, and hope. Keep flying both.”

*(T1, public X post, 01/08/25, text-based post)*

This post is important because it does not replace the national flag with the One Piece flag. Instead, it separates the symbolic function of the two flags. The Red-and-White flag is maintained as the national symbol, while the One Piece flag is reinterpreted as a sign of resistance and hope. The phrase “keep flying both” shows that, for this user, criticism and nationalism are not mutually exclusive. The post, therefore, legitimizes the borrowed symbol by placing it beside, rather than above, the national symbol.

A similar pattern appeared in another post:

“The pirate flag in the One Piece anime does not mean insulting the Indonesian flag. Pirates have the concept that at sea and on land, we are equal and united as brothers.”

*(T2, public X post, 01/08/25, text-based post)*

This post responds to the possible accusation that the One Piece flag insults the Indonesian flag. The user does not deny that the symbol comes from anime, but redirects its meaning toward equality and brotherhood. The pirate image is therefore not read literally as criminality or rebellion. It is reinterpreted through values that can be connected to civic solidarity. This shows how users defended the symbol by translating its fictional meaning into a socially acceptable language of togetherness.

Another post connected the flag more explicitly to public anxiety: “The raising of the One Piece flag has become a symbol because Indonesia currently feels far from the meaning of independence due to the death of justice and the many corrupt rulers.” (*T3, public X post, 01/08/25, text-based post*)

This quotation links the One Piece flag to dissatisfaction with the perceived condition of justice and independence in Indonesia. The phrase “far from the meaning of independence” is significant because it connects the controversy directly to the commemorative context. The flag becomes a way to express the gap between national ideals and social reality. In this reading, the One Piece flag is not merely a fandom object, but a borrowed symbol used to articulate disappointment toward power and injustice.

Interview data strengthened this pattern while also showing why the symbol was considered useful by some users. I explained that young people often look for a more accessible language to express social concerns, especially when formal political language feels distant or ineffective. I2 similarly described the One Piece flag as a way to express criticism without relying only on demonstrations, political posters, or direct confrontation. However, both informants also emphasized that criticism should not be understood as hatred toward the country. This point is important because it shows that supportive interpretations were often accompanied by an attempt to distinguish public criticism from anti-national sentiment.

Overall, this theme shows that the legitimacy of the One Piece flag was produced through value translation. Users connected a Japanese popular culture symbol with Indonesian concerns about freedom, justice, solidarity, and disappointment. The supportive pattern, therefore, did not simply celebrate fandom. It used fandom as a symbolic resource for expressing civic anxiety during a national moment.

### **3.2 Delegitimizing the Symbol as Foreign, Fictional, or Improper**

The second theme shows how users delegitimized the One Piece flag by positioning it as foreign, fictional, mistimed, or improper within Indonesian national symbolic space. This theme appeared as a prominent recurring pattern in the dataset. The rejection was not always directed at anime or popular culture in general. Rather, users questioned whether an anime flag could appropriately enter a national commemorative context, especially during the Independence Day period or when displayed in relation to the Red-and-White flag.

Several variations appeared within this theme. Some users rejected the One Piece flag because it was seen as “only anime” and therefore lacking a historical connection to Indonesia. Others focused on timing and placement, arguing that the Independence Day period should prioritize the

Red-and-White flag. Another variation framed the flag as potentially provocative because it was perceived as disturbing national unity. These variations show that rejection was not based on a single logic. It involved different criteria of symbolic legitimacy, including historical relevance, national dignity, timing, and visual hierarchy.

One post stated:

Indonesia and Palestine have a history. One Piece is the only anime. The One Piece anime has nothing to do with Indonesia. This is approaching Independence Day, but what is being displayed is an anime flag.”  
(T4, public X post, 16/08/25, text-based post)

The phrase “only anime” is central to this rejection. It reduces the One Piece flag to its fictional origin and denies its capacity to carry legitimate public meaning in Indonesia. The comparison with Palestine is also significant because it shows that foreignness alone was not always the problem. A foreign symbol could still be accepted if it was understood as historically or politically meaningful. The One Piece flag, by contrast, was rejected because the user saw it as fictional and unrelated to Indonesian national history.

Another post questioned the timing of the flag:

“What is the urgency of raising the One Piece flag during Indonesian Independence Day? Why not on your birthday instead? Why specifically during the month and date of independence? That means there must be another intention and purpose, right?”  
(T5, public X post, 01/08/25, text-based post)

This quotation shows that meaning was shaped by timing. The user did not simply ask whether the One Piece flag could be used, but why it appeared during the month of independence. The repeated question “why” suggests suspicion toward the symbolic intention behind the act. In this reading, the flag became controversial because it entered a commemorative period associated with national respect, historical memory, and the Red-and-White flag.

A stronger form of rejection appeared in another post:

“The act of raising the One Piece flag is inappropriate because it is a form of provocation that has the potential to divide national unity, when we should be united in raising the Red-and-White flag this August.”  
(T6, public X post, 01/08/25, text-based post)

This post reconstructs the One Piece flag not as criticism or creative expression, but as provocation. The word “provocation” changes the symbolic frame from civic expression to social threat. The post also contrasts division with unity, suggesting that Independence Day should produce collective national attachment rather than symbolic disagreement.

In this interpretation, the One Piece flag was rejected because it was perceived to disturb the expected affective order of national commemoration.

Interview data clarified that this rejection did not necessarily mean hostility toward anime or fandom. I4 explained that anime symbols were acceptable in entertainment contexts, such as fan events, memes, clothing, or Japanese-culture communities. However, I4 rejected the use of the One Piece flag in public space during the Independence Day period, especially when it appeared close to the Red-and-White flag. This explanation shows that the objection was not simply anti-popular culture. It was tied to the perceived boundary between entertainment space and national symbolic space.

The rejection of the One Piece flag, therefore, operated through at least three different logics. The first was a cultural logic, in which the flag was rejected because it was considered “only anime” and lacked a historical connection to Indonesia. The second was a commemorative logic, in which the same symbol became problematic because it appeared during the Independence Day period and entered a space associated with the Red-and-White flag. The third was a political logic, in which the flag was interpreted as provocation rather than criticism. These logics did not always appear separately. Some posts combined them by treating the flag as fictional, mistimed, and politically disruptive at the same time. This overlap shows that delegitimization was not a single response to anime, but a broader attempt to define which symbols could legitimately appear in Indonesian national discourse.

This theme is important because it shows that rejection was also a form of meaning-making. Users did not merely misunderstand the One Piece flag. They actively reconstructed it as foreign, fictional, mistimed, or improper. Through this rejection, they reaffirmed the Red-and-White flag as a national symbol that should remain visually and symbolically protected during the Independence Day period. This provides a contrasting case against the supportive pattern and prevents the analysis from treating symbolic reappropriation as automatically accepted by digital publics.

### **3.3 Negotiating the Symbolic Boundary**

The third theme captures users who did not fully accept or fully reject the One Piece flag. Instead, they accepted its expressive function while placing limits on how it should appear in relation to Indonesian national symbols. This pattern was less dominant than the supportive and rejecting themes, but it is analytically important because it shows that the debate was not structured only by binary positions. Users in this theme

treated the One Piece flag as acceptable only when it did not replace, rival, damage, or visually exceed the Red-and-White flag.

This negotiated position appeared through several conditions. Some users accepted the One Piece flag as a symbol of criticism, but only if the Red-and-White flag remained higher. Others emphasized that the One Piece flag should not be treated as a state symbol. Another variation allowed the flag as a creative expression while rejecting any use that could be interpreted as degrading national dignity. These variations indicate that negotiated readings operated as a spectrum. Users could support the expressive meaning of the flag while still enforcing symbolic hierarchy and national respect.

One post stated:

“The One Piece flag is not a state flag or a state symbol that wants to stand above Indonesia. In my opinion, as long as it does not alter or damage the Red-and-White flag, there is no problem with raising it.”  
(T7, public X post, 03/08/25, text-based post)

This post rejects the interpretation that the One Piece flag necessarily threatens the state. The user separates a state symbol from an expressive symbol and allows the One Piece flag only within that distinction. The condition “as long as it does not alter or damage the Red-and-White flag” shows that acceptance depends on symbolic protection. The flag is permitted, but only when the authority and integrity of the national flag remain untouched.

Another post expressed the condition through visual hierarchy:

“It can be used for criticism. If it is placed beside the flag, that is okay, as long as Indonesia’s position is higher than the One Piece flag. Because of love, and at the same time, the lower part becomes a symbolic protest.”  
(T8, public X post, 01/08/25, text-based post)

This quotation demonstrates that negotiation was not only about whether the symbol could be used, but also about where it should be placed. The phrase “Indonesia’s position is higher” turns spatial arrangement into a moral and national condition. The user accepts criticism, but only when visual hierarchy continues to affirm the primacy of the Indonesian flag. The phrase “because of love” is also important because it reframes criticism as care rather than rejection of the nation.

A shorter post captured the same boundary-making logic:

“Well, if you want to use the One Piece flag, just place it below the Indonesian flag.”  
(T9, public X post, 01/08/25, text-based post)

Although brief, this post is analytically important because it condenses the negotiated position into a rule of placement. The One Piece flag is not

rejected outright, but it must occupy a lower symbolic position. This shows that the debate was not only about meaning, but also about visual order, hierarchy, and respect.

Interview data supported this negotiated pattern while also showing that the middle position was not always stable. I3 explained that the One Piece flag should not be fully rejected because it could function as a public expression, but it should also not be used in ways that degrade national symbols. I3 therefore located the issue at the boundary between freedom of expression and nationalism. Some responses from I1 and I2 also contained conditional elements. Although both informants generally supported the flag as criticism, they still emphasized that it should not replace, rival, or degrade the Red-and-White flag. This indicates that users could move between supportive and negotiated readings depending on the condition being discussed.

The negotiated theme, therefore, shows that symbolic acceptance was conditional and relational. The One Piece flag could be tolerated as a borrowed symbol of expression, but only when its position remained subordinate to Indonesian national symbols. This pattern demonstrates how users attempted to reconcile global popular culture, civic criticism, and national respect. Rather than simply choosing between fandom and nationalism, negotiated users constructed rules of symbolic boundary-making that allowed expression while maintaining the authority of the Red-and-White flag. This movement also shows that negotiated reading should not be understood as a fixed middle category, but as a shifting position in which users adjusted their acceptance depending on context, placement, and perceived respect for the Red-and-White flag.

After the three themes were presented separately, the analysis compared how each theme constructed the legitimacy of the One Piece flag. While Table 1 provides a thematic overview of the dataset, Table 2 has a different function. It explains the interpretive mechanisms through which users accepted, rejected, or conditionally accepted the symbol. The table also identifies supporting and divergent evidence, the boundary conditions used to judge the flag's legitimacy, and the theoretical reading position associated with each theme.

**Table 2.** Interpretive Mechanisms and Boundary Conditions Across Themes

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Interpretive Mechanism</b>	<b>Supporting and Divergent Evidence</b>	<b>Boundary Condition</b>	<b>Theoretical Reading Position</b>
<b>Legitimizing</b>	Users translated	Supported by T1, T2, T3, I1,	The symbol was	Supportive reading, in

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Interpretive Mechanism</b>	<b>Supporting and Divergent Evidence</b>	<b>Boundary Condition</b>	<b>Theoretical Reading Position</b>
<b>the borrowed symbol</b>	the One Piece flag from a fandom symbol into a language of criticism, solidarity, and public anxiety.	and I2. Divergent elements appeared when supportive users still emphasized that the Red-and-White flag should not be replaced.	considered acceptable when used as a public expression and not positioned as a substitute for the national flag.	which users accepted and rearticulated the flag as public criticism.
<b>Delegitimizing the symbol as foreign, fictional, or improper</b>	Users rejected the flag by emphasizing its fictional origin, foreignness, timing, and perceived impropriety in national symbolic space.	Supported by T4, T5, T6, and I4. Divergent elements appeared when rejection was directed not at anime itself, but at its use during Independence Day.	The symbol was considered unacceptable when displayed during a national moment or when perceived to challenge the dignity of the Red-and-White flag.	Oppositional reading, in which users rejected the flag's legitimacy in national symbolic space.
<b>Negotiating the symbolic boundary</b>	Users accepted the flag as an expression while limiting its placement, hierarchy, and relationship with	Supported by T7, T8, T9, I3, I5, and I6. Overlap appeared in I1 and I2, whose supportive views still included conditions of respect for the	The symbol was considered acceptable only when the Red-and-White flag remained primary, higher, and symbolically protected.	Negotiated reading, in which users accepted the expression but limited it through the national-symbol hierarchy.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Interpretive Mechanism</b>	<b>Supporting and Divergent Evidence</b>	<b>Boundary Condition</b>	<b>Theoretical Reading Position</b>
	national symbols.	Red-and-White flag.		

Source: Compiled by the authors (2026)

Table 2 shows that the difference among the three themes lies not only in users' attitudes toward the One Piece flag, but also in the criteria used to evaluate its symbolic legitimacy. The first theme relied on value translation, where users connected a fictional symbol with criticism, solidarity, and public anxiety. The second theme relied on symbolic exclusion, where users rejected the flag because of its fictional origin, timing, and perceived impropriety in national symbolic space. The third theme relied on boundary negotiation, where users accepted the flag only under conditions that preserved the primacy of the Red-and-White flag.

The supporting and divergent evidence column is important because it shows that the categories were not completely fixed. Some supportive users still introduced limits, while some rejecting users objected less to anime itself than to its appearance during Independence Day. The boundary condition column clarifies how users judged whether the symbol could legitimately appear in Indonesian public discourse. Finally, the theoretical reading position column connects the empirical patterns to Hall's encoding/decoding model by showing how users produced supportive, oppositional, and negotiated readings of the same symbol.

### **3.4 Cross-Theme Interpretation: Symbolic Legitimacy and Transcultural Boundary-Making**

Across the themes, the One Piece flag became significant because its legitimacy was publicly contested. The flag moved from a fandom symbol into national discourse through three connected mechanisms: value translation, legitimacy evaluation, and boundary-making. Value translation occurred when users connected the flag with criticism, solidarity, and public anxiety. Legitimacy evaluation appeared when users questioned whether those meanings were appropriate during Independence Day. Boundary-making emerged when users defined the conditions under which the flag could appear without challenging the authority of the Red-and-White flag.

The categories were not fixed because users' positions could shift depending on context. Some supportive users still limited the flag's use by insisting that it should not replace or degrade national symbols. Some opposing users did not reject anime itself, but objected to the flag's timing,

placement, or perceived disrespect in national symbolic space. Negotiated users could move between acceptance and restriction depending on visual hierarchy and perceived respect for the Red-and-White flag. This overlap shows that symbolic reappropriation remained unstable and open to correction, limitation, and reinterpretation.

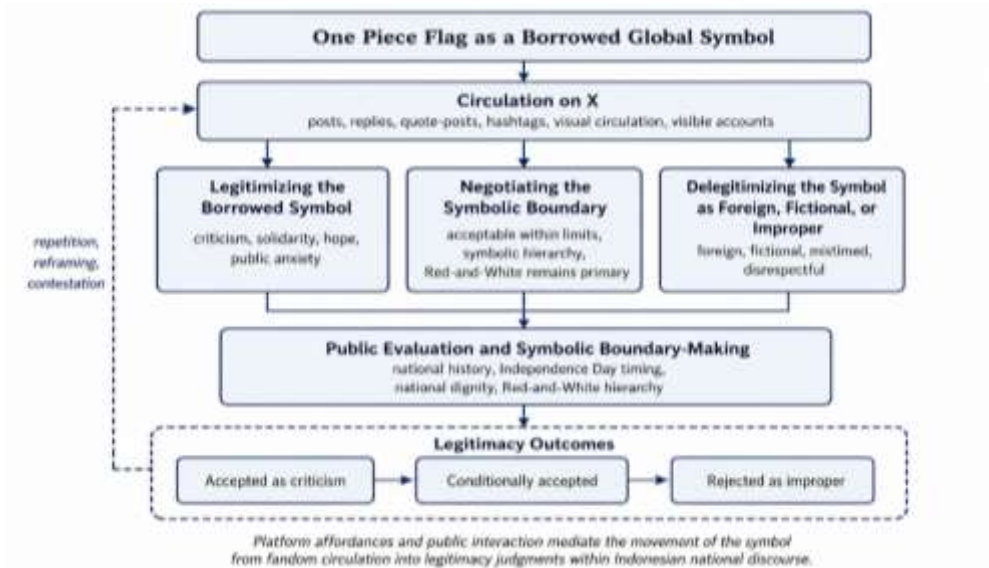
X shaped this process by making the symbol visible, repeatable, and contestable. Posts, replies, quote-posts, hashtags, visual circulation, and visible accounts allowed users to reframe the same symbol across networked publics. Quote-posts enabled direct response and correction, while hashtags and repeated visuals connected individual posts to wider public debate. Although this study did not conduct algorithmic or network analysis, the repeated circulation of similar frames suggests that platform visibility influenced which meanings became more prominent. Therefore, X should not be treated as a neutral space, but as a platform that mediated the movement of a fandom symbol into national symbolic debate.

Overall, the debate shows that transcultural identity is formed not only through cultural mixing but also through symbolic boundary-making. The One Piece flag became meaningful because users competed to define whether a borrowed global symbol could express public criticism without violating national belonging. This cross-theme interpretation, therefore, links the empirical themes to a broader argument about symbolic legitimacy in Indonesian digital nationalism.

#### **4. Discussion**

This study shows that the One Piece flag controversy reflects a process of symbolic legitimacy-making in Indonesian digital nationalism. The debate was not only about how users interpreted the flag, but also about whether a global popular culture symbol could legitimately represent public concerns during Independence Day without challenging the authority of the Red-and-White flag.

The findings extend Hall's encoding/decoding model by showing that digital audiences do more than produce different readings (Hall, 1980, 1997). On X, meanings were publicly negotiated through posts, replies, quote-posts, hashtags, and visual circulation. Users defended, challenged, restricted, and rejected interpretations, suggesting that symbolic meaning was shaped through ongoing public evaluation of legitimacy.



**Figure 2.** Platform Symbolic Legitimacy-Making in the One Piece Flag Debate

Figure 2 illustrates the process of platformed symbolic legitimacy-making in the One Piece flag debate. The model shows that the One Piece flag first entered Indonesian digital discourse as a borrowed global symbol circulating on X through posts, replies, quote-posts, hashtags, visual circulation, and visible accounts. This circulation produced three competing interpretive patterns: legitimizing the flag as criticism, negotiating its symbolic boundary, and delegitimizing it as foreign, fictional, or improper. These readings were then evaluated through national symbolic criteria, including Independence Day timing, national dignity, and the hierarchy of the Red-and-White flag. The outcomes were not final because acceptance, rejection, and conditional acceptance could return to public circulation through repetition, reframing, and contestation.

The findings also refine symbolic reappropriation and transcultural fandom studies. They confirm previous arguments that transnational popular culture can provide symbolic resources for identity, solidarity, and public expression. However, this study extends that literature by showing that reappropriation is not completed when a global symbol is borrowed and given a new meaning. In this case, the One Piece flag could be rearticulated as criticism, solidarity, and hope, but that meaning remained unstable because other users challenged it through arguments about history, timing, national dignity, and symbolic hierarchy. This challenges celebratory views of transcultural identity as merely fluid cultural mixing.

Instead, transcultural identity is also produced through boundary-making, where users define how far a foreign fandom symbol may enter local political expression before it is seen as inappropriate.

The controversy further demonstrates that digital nationalism does not necessarily involve rejecting foreign culture. Many users accepted anime as popular culture but questioned the use of the One Piece flag during Independence Day. Nationalism operated through symbolic regulation, determining when and how a foreign symbol could enter national public discourse.

Finally, the Indonesian context highlights the importance of national symbolism in shaping interpretation. The Red-and-White flag carries strong historical and emotional significance, particularly during Independence Day. As a result, the same One Piece flag could be interpreted as civic criticism, symbolic disrespect, or acceptable expression depending on how users positioned it in relation to national symbols. Overall, this study shows that representation in digital nationalism involves not only the production of meaning but also public struggles over symbolic legitimacy and the boundaries of acceptable political expression.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study concludes that the One Piece flag controversy reveals a platform-mediated process of symbolic legitimacy-making in Indonesian digital nationalism. The central finding is that a borrowed popular culture symbol does not become politically meaningful only because users reinterpret it, but because digital publics evaluate whether it can legitimately represent civic concern within a national symbolic context. In this case, symbolic legitimacy was produced through value translation, public contestation, and symbolic boundary-making. This synthesis shows that the debate was not simply about support or rejection, but about the conditions under which a global symbol could enter Indonesian national discourse.

The study's main conceptual contribution is the argument that Hall's encoding/decoding model needs to be extended to platformed digital publics. Decoding is not only a matter of producing supportive, oppositional, or negotiated readings, because meanings on X were publicly tested, corrected, rejected, and restricted through posts, replies, quote-posts, hashtags, and visual circulation. This means that decoding was followed by legitimacy evaluation, especially when a symbol entered a politically sensitive national moment such as Independence Day. The study, therefore, contributes to representation theory by showing that

meaning-making in digital nationalism is shaped by both interpretation and public judgment over symbolic authority.

The findings also contribute to debates on digital nationalism and transcultural fandom. The case shows that nationalism is not always expressed through the rejection of foreign popular culture, but can also operate through symbolic ranking, conditional acceptance, and regulation of visual hierarchy. The One Piece flag could be accepted as criticism, but only when it did not disturb the authority of the Red-and-White flag. This suggests that transcultural identity is shaped not only by cultural mixing but also by the boundaries that users draw around national symbols, public criticism, and acceptable expression.

Practically, the findings suggest that public debates involving popular culture symbols should not be reduced to a simple conflict between nationalism and anti-nationalism. Cultural institutions, public communicators, educators, and platform moderators need to recognize that symbolic conflict may emerge when visual culture, fandom references, national symbols, and public emotion circulate together. This requires stronger symbolic literacy and clearer public communication around national symbols, especially during commemorative national moments. It also suggests that platform governance should be sensitive to cultural and political context rather than treating symbolic disputes as ordinary content disagreements.

The claims of this study should be read within its limitations. The focus on X means that the findings reflect a platform shaped by visibility dynamics, quote-posts, hashtags, public confrontation, and possible algorithmic amplification, so they cannot be generalized directly to other platforms or offline public opinion. The study also focused on one Independence Day controversy, relied on publicly accessible posts, and involved a small number of self-selected interview informants, leaving less visible users, private discussions, deleted posts, and offline interpretations outside the analysis. Future research could address these limitations through longitudinal studies across different Independence Day periods, cross-platform comparisons of X, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, network analysis of quote-post chains and influential accounts, or comparative studies of borrowed popular culture symbols in Southeast Asia.

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