



Disrupting Consensus: A Discourse-Theoretical Reading of Gen Z Protests in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Generation Z has emerged as a prominent force in Indonesian protest politics; however, existing scholarship has primarily addressed socioeconomic grievances, generational traits, and the mobilizing role of digital media. This article investigates how symbols, memes, and narratives construct collective identity and delineate antagonistic boundaries within Gen Z-led protests in Indonesia. Employing a qualitative interpretive methodology, the study analyzes purposively selected protest-related materials from 2024 to 2025, including news reports, academic commentary, and widely circulated protest symbols and narratives. These materials were examined through thematic coding and discourse-theoretical interpretation, drawing principally on Laclau and Mouffe's concepts of articulation, hegemony, nodal points, chains of equivalence, and antagonism, with additional insights from Foucault and Derrida. The findings indicate that memes, slogans, anime imagery, humor, and digital narratives integrate diverse grievances such as inequality, unemployment, corruption, political dynasties, parliamentary privilege, and police repression into a unified discourse of generational exclusion. These repertoires construct "Gen Z" as a contingent political subject and foster solidarity across both street and digital arenas. Furthermore, activists contest gerontocracy, authoritarian populism, and elite-driven consensus by rearticulating dominant signifiers: stability is reframed as stagnation, growth as inequality, harmony as exclusion, and democracy as captured democracy. The article concludes that digital-cultural repertoires function not only as communication tools but also as arenas of hegemonic contestation, where collective identities, political boundaries, and claims to democratic legitimacy are constituted.

Keyword: Democracy, Activism, Discourse, Protests, Hegemony

ABSTRAK

Generasi Z semakin terlihat sebagai kekuatan penting dalam politik protes Indonesia, tetapi penelitian terdahulu lebih banyak membahas keluhan sosial-ekonomi, karakter generasional, dan fungsi mobilisasi media digital. Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana simbol, meme, dan narasi membentuk identitas kolektif serta batas antagonistik dalam protes Gen Z di Indonesia. Dengan desain kualitatif-interpretatif, penelitian ini menganalisis secara purposif materi terkait protes pada 2024-2025, meliputi laporan media, komentar akademik, serta simbol dan narasi protes yang beredar di ruang publik. Data dianalisis melalui pengodean tematik dan interpretasi teori wacana, terutama menggunakan konsep artikulasi, hegemoni, titik nodal, rantai ekuivalensi, dan antagonisme dari Laclau dan Mouffe, dengan dukungan pemikiran Foucault dan Derrida. Temuan pertama menunjukkan bahwa meme, slogan, citra anime, humor, dan narasi digital menghubungkan beragam keluhan termasuk ketimpangan, pengangguran, korupsi, dinasti politik, privilese parlemen, dan represi kepolisian ke dalam wacana bersama tentang eksklusi generasional. Repertoar tersebut membentuk "Gen Z" sebagai subjek politik yang kontingen dan membangun solidaritas di ruang jalanan maupun digital. Temuan kedua menunjukkan bahwa para aktivis menantang gerontokrasi, populisme otoritarian, dan konsensus yang dikendalikan elite dengan mengartikulasikan ulang penanda dominan: stabilitas menjadi stagnasi, pertumbuhan menjadi ketimpangan, harmoni menjadi eksklusi, dan demokrasi menjadi demokrasi yang dikuasai elite. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa repertoar digital-kultural bukan sekadar alat komunikasi, melainkan arena perjuangan hegemonik tempat identitas kolektif, batas politik, dan klaim atas legitimasi demokratis dibentuk.

Keyword: Demokrasi, Aktivisme, Wacana, Protes, Hegemoni



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1. Introduction

This study is guided by the central research problem of how Gen Z protests in Indonesia disrupt dominant political discourses and construct alternative visions of democracy. From this, two research questions are formulated. First, how do Gen Z activists employ discourse through symbols, memes, and narrative framings to articulate grievances and build solidarity? Second, in what ways do these discursive practices challenge hegemonic formations such as gerontocracy, authoritarian populism, and elite-driven consensus? These questions aim to illuminate both the micro-level symbolic strategies used by youth activists and the macro-level implications of their interventions in the democratic public sphere. The study contributes to scholarship on Indonesian politics and discourse theory in three main respects. Theoretically, it extends Laclau and Mouffe's framework to the domain of generational politics in post-Reformasi Indonesia, demonstrating how agonistic democracy emerges through youth-led mobilization. Empirically, it synthesizes episodes of street protests with digital repertoires of contention to show the creative yet precarious nature of Gen Z activism. Normatively, it positions these protests within broader debates over the meaning of democracy, legitimacy, and citizenship. The analysis proceeds by situating protest events within post-Reformasi political developments, outlining discourse-theoretical tools, examining discursive practices within the protests, and reflecting on their implications for democratic contestation.

Case selection rests on purposive and theoretically informed reasoning rather than statistical representativeness. Indonesia is a compelling site for examining youth politics due to demographic realities that Gen Z and Millennials now comprise the majority of eligible voters and its political trajectory marked by alternating democratic expansion and authoritarian resurgence. The 2025 protests, which escalated to the point of pressuring President Prabowo Subianto to replace five cabinet ministers including Finance Minister Sri Mulyani (Al Jazeera, 2025), represent a critical juncture in which youth mobilization visibly confronted the political establishment. Within these protests, episodes that prominently featured symbolic repertoires through memes, slogans, cultural references, and viral imagery were selected for analysis.

These developments form part of a broader Asian pattern of youth-led contention. Reports on protests in Nepal, the Philippines, and Thailand similarly highlight digitally connected young people, decentralized networks, and popular-cultural repertoires challenging corruption, gerontocratic authority, and restrictions on democratic participation (Muthiariny, 2025; Wong, 2025). These references demonstrate the wider relevance of Gen Z activism, but this article does not undertake comparative analysis. Indonesia remains the sole case; developments elsewhere provide contextual support only.

Key constructs are drawn from discourse theory and operationalized through identifiable signifiers and patterns of articulation. Hegemony is analyzed by tracing how dominant narratives such as "stability," "national harmony," and "economic growth" are invoked by state actors, and how activists contest or resignify them. Antagonism is examined through the construction of political frontiers, such as "youth versus corrupt elites" or "the people versus oligarchy." Consensus is understood as a depoliticizing discourse that Gen Z protests actively disrupt by foregrounding conflict as a democratic resource. Likewise, collective identity is operationalized by examining how "Gen Z" is articulated not merely as a demographic label but as a political subject forged through memes, slogans, humor, and emotionally charged storytelling. Floating signifiers such as "justice" and "democracy" are mapped to show contestation over meaning. While interpretive research treats validity and reliability differently from quantitative paradigms, credibility is enhanced through triangulation across multiple news outlets, academic commentary, and protest materials, as well as transparency in theoretical application.

Accordingly, this article asks: How do Gen Z protests in Indonesia disrupt dominant political discourses and construct alternative visions of democracy? Two research questions guide the inquiry: (1) How do Gen Z activists employ discourse via symbols, memes, and narratives to articulate grievances and build solidarity? (2) In what ways do these discursive practices challenge hegemonic formations such as gerontocracy, authoritarian populism, and elite-driven consensus? The contribution is threefold. Theoretically, the study extends Laclau and Mouffe's framework to generational politics in post-Reformasi Indonesia. Empirically, it synthesizes protest dynamics with digital repertoires of contention, highlighting creativity and

vulnerability. Normatively, it situates youth mobilization within broader struggles over democratic meaning, enriching debates on civil society, legitimacy, and participation.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design and Approach

A qualitative, interpretive design was employed, combining document analysis and discourse-theoretical analysis. Document analysis offers a systematic procedure for examining documentary materials as empirical evidence (Bowen, 2009). Gen Z protests in Indonesia are conceptualized as struggles over political meaning, with a focus on how activists articulate grievances, construct identities, redefine concepts, and establish antagonistic boundaries. Indonesia serves as a single case study. The empirical scope includes protest-related materials published between January 2024 and September 2025, with data collection conducted from 1 June to 31 September 2025. The research does not aim for statistical representativeness; rather, it reconstructs how youth mobilization becomes politically intelligible through representation (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

2.2. Analytical Framework

The primary analytical framework is Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, which conceptualizes political identities as contingent products of articulation rather than fixed categories (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014). Within this framework, "Gen Z" is treated not solely as a demographic label but as a political subject constructed through shared grievances, cultural symbols, and opposition to established elites. This approach elucidates how issues such as unemployment, corruption, inequality, political dynasties, rising living costs, and democratic decline are interconnected within a broader generational struggle (Howarth, 2000).

The analysis applies concepts such as articulation, nodal points, floating signifiers, chains of equivalence, antagonism, and hegemony to identify how meanings are connected, stabilized, and contested (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Articulation links demands and identities; nodal points organize meaning; floating signifiers refer to contested concepts such as "justice" and "democracy"; chains of equivalence connect grievances; antagonism constructs political frontiers; and hegemony establishes particular meanings as legitimate. (Foucault, 1980) concept of power/knowledge is employed as a supplementary tool to examine surveillance, censorship, disinformation, and the politics of visibility. Building on this analysis of power, Derrida's (1998) concept of deconstruction is used to interpret and destabilize hierarchies such as mature versus immature, serious versus playful, and political versus entertaining.

2.3. Data Sources and Selection

The corpus comprises secondary documentary data, including news reports, investigative journalism, research commentary, policy publications, and reproduced protest materials. The documentary corpus was drawn from news reports, investigative journalism, and research commentary published by Al Jazeera, BBC News, Tempo, Project Multatuli, New Mandala, The Jakarta Post, Fulcrum of the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, the Lowy Institute, the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, and Melbourne Asia Review. The materials encompass reports on demonstrations and state responses, quotations attributed to protesters, slogans, photographs or descriptions of banners, flags, and performances, as well as descriptions or reproductions of memes, hashtags, anime imagery, surveillance, censorship, and disinformation. Academic publications were primarily utilized for theoretical and contextual purposes.

Social media materials were included only when reproduced, quoted, or described by identifiable media, academic, or institutional sources. Consequently, the object of analysis was the mediated representation of digital protest practices rather than the original posts. Materials were purposively selected based on relevance, credibility, contextual clarity, and substantive information (Bowen, 2009). Items were excluded if they discussed Gen Z solely in demographic terms, duplicated other reports, lacked verifiable context, or relied on unsupported social media claims.

2.4. Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was conducted in four stages. First, public sources were searched using relevant keywords. Second, materials were screened by title, date, source, and relevance. Third, selected documents were read in full, and quotations, slogans, symbols, visual descriptions, and accounts of state responses were extracted. Fourth, materials were organized into categories such as inequality, corruption, generational exclusion, gerontocracy, oligarchy, representation, digital mobilization, surveillance, censorship, and repression.

The analysis integrated thematic coding with discourse-theoretical reconstruction. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns across the corpus (Braun & Clarke, 2022). First, descriptive codes were assigned to grievances, actors, symbols, and democratic problems. Second, contested signifiers such as “democracy,” “justice,” “growth,” “stability,” “youth,” and “elite” were identified. Third, nodal points and floating signifiers were located. Fourth, chains of equivalence were mapped to illustrate how grievances formed narratives of generational injustice. Fifth, antagonistic frontiers, such as youth versus the old elite or citizens versus oligarchs, were reconstructed. Sixth, hegemonic rearticulation was examined, including the framing of “stability” as “stagnation” and “growth” as “inequality.” Seventh, mediated representations of memes, flags, hashtags, humor, and popular culture were interpreted as political repertoires. Finally, recurring patterns were synthesized to address both research questions.

The transition from textual observation to broader interpretation followed Glynos & Howarth’s (2007) logic of critical explanation, linking social problems, discursive practices, and political consequences. The conclusions are limited to how digital protest practices were documented and represented in the selected news, academic, research, and institutional sources. Accordingly, the analysis makes interpretive claims about recurring discursive patterns rather than quantitative or causal claims regarding social media activity or the entire Indonesian Gen Z population.

3. Result and Discussion

The findings of this study are organized around three major themes that emerged from discourse-theoretical analysis of Gen Z protests in Indonesia during 2024-2025. These themes are: (1) the discursive construction of inequality and generational exclusion as antagonistic frontiers; (2) the symbolic repertoires of memes, digital aesthetics, and cultural signifiers as tools of hegemonic disruption; and (3) the ambivalent terrain of digital activism, where empowerment and surveillance intertwine. Together, these findings illustrate how youth protests disrupt elite-driven consensus politics, why they matter for Indonesia’s democratic trajectory, and how they resonate with broader debates in discourse theory.

3.1. Inequality and Generational Exclusion as Political Frontiers

A key finding of this study is the central role of inequality and generational exclusion as discursive frontiers in Indonesian Gen Z protests. Protest slogans and media coverage consistently emphasized wealth disparity, corruption, and the concentration of privilege among older political elites. The demonstrations in September 2025, which contributed to President Prabowo’s dismissal of five ministers including Finance Minister Sri Mulyani, were framed as a rejection of “politics for the few” (Al Jazeera, 2025). In this framing, inequality was articulated not only in economic terms but as a generational condition: activists depicted themselves as inheriting a democracy hollowed out by corruption and nepotism, identifying gerontocracy as a structural barrier to political transformation (Yague et al., 2025). This illustrates how material grievances acquire political force when reframed as generational antagonism.

Discourse analysis shows that protests constructed a frontier between “youth” and “the old elite,” consistent with Laclau & Mouffe’s (2014) argument that politics hinges on antagonism. The signifier “justice” was resignified to mean the redistribution of opportunity and the dismantling of entrenched hierarchies. This shift challenges elite narratives of “national harmony” and “stability,” revealing them as hegemonic strategies to suppress dissent. In this context, the protests enacted what Mouffe (2000) calls the transformation of antagonism into agonism, legitimizing dissent as a democratic necessity. This generational redefinition of

democracy parallels global patterns in which Gen Z increasingly regards formal institutions as exclusionary (Geser-Stark, 2025).

Table 1. Key Discursive Signifiers in Protest Coverage and Their Rearticulation by Gen Z Activists

Dominant Elite Signifiers	Protester Rearticulations (Gen Z)	Discursive Function
“Stability”	“Stagnation”	De-legitimizing elite rhetoric
“Growth”	“Inequality”	Reframing economic discourse
“Harmony”	“Exclusion”	Exposing generational injustice
“Democracy”	“Captured democracy”	Highlighting corruption and cooptation
“Justice”	“Redistributive justice”	Broadening beyond legalism to equity

The significance of this theme lies in its demonstration that Gen Z protests are not merely reactive outbursts but discursive interventions that challenge the hegemonic consensus of post-Reformasi politics. In addition, by reframing stability as stagnation and growth as inequality, activists destabilize the symbolic legitimacy of the state. As a result, this situation resonates with Foucault’s (1980) insight that discourse defines what can be said and thought; Gen Z protests push alternative truths into public visibility, thereby unsettling the taken-for-granted authority of elites.

3.2. Memes, Aesthetics, and Cultural Repertoires of Disruption

A significant finding of this study concerns the symbolic repertoires mobilized by Gen Z activists, particularly the strategic use of memes, pop culture aesthetics, and digital creativity as tools of political disruption. As Wong (2025) reported, protesters frequently invoked imagery from *One Piece*, especially the Jolly Roger pirate symbol, transforming globally recognizable cultural icons into markers of solidarity and rebellion. In addition, Muthiariny (2025) documented how memes, flags, and digitally designed banners were used to convey dissent, unify dispersed protest groups, and draw media and online attention. These repertoires exemplify what Della Porta and Diani (2009) describe as innovative cycles of protest, wherein each emerging generation introduces new tactical forms attuned to contemporary communication technologies. By appropriating familiar cultural symbols, Gen Z activists expand political expression beyond formal institutional settings, embedding dissent into everyday cultural forms that speak simultaneously to domestic and global audiences.

Discourse analysis demonstrates that memes often operate as what Laclau and Mouffe (2014) call “floating signifiers,” symbols whose meanings can be rearticulated across diverse grievances. A single anime meme may convey resistance to authoritarian rule, affirm youth solidarity, or express resilience through humor. This polyvalence allows memes to function as nodal points around which collective identities are constructed. Furthermore, Derrida’s (1998) notion of deconstruction is particularly instructive: memes blur the boundary between seriousness and play, revealing that humor can destabilize dominant political discourses. In this context, the distinction between entertainment and political critique becomes deliberately ambiguous, enabling resistance that is viral, participatory, and harder for authorities to suppress.

The broader significance of this aesthetic politics is underscored by research on digital media. Jalli, Unggraini, and Setianto (2025) show that TikTok’s algorithm amplifies content that is affectively engaging, which protesters leverage to ensure that their messaging circulates widely. However, such circulation unfolds within volatile digital ecosystems where platforms accelerate both credible information and misinformation (Faines, 2024). Despite this ambivalence, the aesthetic turn in Gen Z activism is deeply political: it challenges the linguistic and symbolic hierarchies of elite discourse and demonstrates how cultural creativity can reconfigure the terrain of democratic struggle.

3.3. Digital Activism as Empowerment and Surveillance

The third major theme concerns the double-edged nature of digital activism. On one hand, social media offers expanded opportunities for political mobilization, visibility, and transnational solidarity. Muthiariny (2025) highlights how decentralized online networks allow rapid coordination without centralized leadership, enhancing flexibility and resilience. Likewise, Project Multatuli (Pundir, 2025) shows how young activists use digital platforms to expose elite wealth and corruption, fueling shared anger and demands for accountability. These practices align with Rusfiana and Kurniasih's (2024) argument that digital activism in Indonesia represents a new extension of civil society strategies, where legitimacy is negotiated not only through institutions but also through digital narratives and public affect. In this sense, online spaces function not merely as tools but as contested arenas where political meaning is continuously shaped.

However, digital activism also renders activists vulnerable to surveillance, censorship, and repression. Wong (2025) documents state-directed disinformation campaigns and content suppression aimed at undermining protest momentum. This dynamic reflects Foucault's (1980) conception of power/knowledge, wherein the same platforms that enable resistance also serve as technologies of monitoring and control. The protests therefore illustrate what Mouffe (2000) terms the paradox of democracy: empowerment operates alongside constraint, visibility alongside vulnerability. Protest narratives on platforms such as Twitter/X demonstrate this ambivalence. Users described coordinated bot attacks designed to dilute protest hashtags and reported viral videos of police violence being removed or shadow-banned. These practices underscore that digital activism is not a neutral communication medium but a contested discursive battleground.

Table 2. Digital Activism as a Double-Edged Sword

Empowering Dimensions	Constraining Dimensions
Rapid mobilization and solidarity	State surveillance and monitoring
Transnational linkages (e.g., Milk Tea Alliance)	Algorithmic censorship/shadow-banning
Visibility and global amplification	Disinformation campaigns by elites
Creative repertoires (memes, art, music)	Risk of cooptation and depoliticization

The significance of this theme lies in its demonstration that Gen Z protests are simultaneously strengthened and weakened by their reliance on digital platforms. On the other hand, while digitality allows activists to bypass traditional gatekeepers, it also renders them vulnerable to new forms of control. Furthermore, this dialectic resonates with Derrida's (1998) notion of *différance*, as empowerment and repression are never entirely separable but exist in a deferred, unstable relationship. Hence, it also highlights the limits of purely digital mobilization: without institutional translation, visibility risks becoming ephemeral.

Although this study relies on secondary data, media accounts offer insight into the lived discursive practices of protesters. A Project Multatuli report quotes a young activist saying, "We live in a country where they tell us the economy is growing, but our wages stagnate and jobs disappear. For that reason, growth means nothing when it belongs only to the powerful" (Pundir, 2025). This statement rearticulates the dominant signifier of "growth" into one of "inequality," illustrating a clear antagonistic frontier. Similarly, students carried banners featuring popular anime characters alongside slogans such as "Justice is not a joke" (Muthiariny, 2025). Here, humor and irony are used as vehicles for serious political critique, reflecting Derrida's (1998) insistence that the boundary between play and politics is unstable. At the same time, activists interviewed by Wong (2025) described how their online coordination groups were infiltrated or surveilled, underscoring Foucault's (1980) argument that discourse is always entangled with power relations. These findings matter for three reasons. First, they show that Gen Z protests are coherent discursive interventions that redefine democratic expectations. Second, they demonstrate the central role of memes and digital aesthetics in building solidarity and visibility. Third, they highlight the ambivalence of digital activism, where platforms serve simultaneously as tools of empowerment and technologies of control.

Discussion

Inequality, Generational Exclusion, and the Crisis of Post-Reformasi Democracy

The results of this study must be contextualized within the broader literature on discourse theory, youth activism, and democratic struggle in Indonesia and Asia. In this way, Gen Z mobilization, as revealed in the findings, is not only an eruption of discontent but also a discursive struggle that destabilizes the hegemonic consensus, rearticulates the signifiers of democracy and justice, and insists on the recognition of youth as legitimate political subjects. Hence, to develop these implications, this section compares the findings to existing research, synthesizes evidence with theory, elaborates the impact on scholarship and policy, and reflects on the limitations of the study.

The centrality of inequality and generational exclusion as antagonistic frontiers aligns closely with recent scholarship on youth protests across Asia. Pundir (2025) argues that wealth inequality lies at the core of youth revolts, while Yague and colleagues (2025) emphasize the role of entrenched gerontocratic systems in fueling generational frustration. These claims resonate strongly in the Indonesian context, where protesters framed elite privilege and age-based authority as exclusionary structures. Yet, this study extends these insights by showing that such grievances are discursively constructed into political frontiers. Inequality, for instance, was not merely experienced as stagnant wages or limited opportunities and it was resignified as evidence of a democracy betrayed and captured by elites. In this sense, inequality became more than a socioeconomic reality; it became a symbol of political antagonism.

To understand the potency of this antagonism, it must be situated in Indonesia's post-Reformasi landscape, where hopes of democratic renewal have frequently collided with oligarchic continuity. Gen Z critiques of gerontocracy therefore represent more than resistance to age hierarchy; they express broader disillusionment with a system perceived as dominated by dynastic power and oligarchic networks (Wijaya et al., 2025). Media reports consistently showed protesters referring to the "old elite" as responsible for corruption and exclusionary political processes, a public perception backed by Dewi and Fuady's (2024) analysis of how traditional pathways to political power reproduce and protect elite dominance. In this light, generational antagonism is not symbolic posturing but a structural critique that reveals the failure of post-Reformasi democracy to realize its emancipatory promise.

Empirical findings deepen this interpretation. Pusat Hukum & Kebijakan Indonesia reports that oligarchic influence constrains public participation in policymaking (Argama, 2025), while Wijaya and colleagues (2025) demonstrate how economic power consolidates into political dynasties, narrowing civil society's capacity to contest governance. Consequently, generational conflict should be read not as youthful impatience but as a substantive revolt against oligarchy (Ridha, 2025). From a discourse-theoretical perspective, this revolt reactivates democratic antagonism by exposing hegemonic claims of stability as mechanisms that conceal entrenched domination.

Aesthetic and Digital Repertoires of Mobilization

This discursive struggle becomes more evident when contrasted with earlier waves of youth mobilization in Indonesia. The 1998 Reformasi movement, which played a decisive role in overthrowing Suharto's authoritarian regime, relied heavily on hierarchical student organizations, centralized leadership, and campus-based coordination structures rooted in a long-standing tradition of student activism (Tehusjarana, 2023). By contrast, Gen Z protests are characterized by decentralized organization, horizontal communication, and reliance on digital networks rather than formal structures. As Aspinall (2025) explains, contemporary mobilization occurs through fluid, networked forms of coordination rather than directive leadership, reflecting broader transformations in how political action is organized in the digital era. A similar dynamic is visible in digital labor struggles across Asia, where fragmented and precarious workers build coalitions through online networks rather than traditional unions (Della Porta et al., 2023). Thus, the shift from 1998 to 2025 represents a movement away from direct anti-authoritarian confrontation toward what Gramscian theorists call a "war of

position”, a prolonged struggle to reshape meaning, legitimacy, and political common sense across cultural and communicative terrains.

Comparative research reinforces this difference in strategic orientation. Asih and colleagues (2025) show that while the 1998 activists sought immediate regime change, Gen Z activism is oriented toward long-term discursive and cultural transformation. This aligns with the broader role of civil society as a space where citizens articulate alternative visions outside state and market institutions (Rusfiana & Kurniasih, 2024). Gen Z extends this tradition by transforming digital platforms into civic arenas where identities are formed, grievances are collectivized, and alternative futures are imagined. Rather than prioritizing formal negotiation, coalition-building, or institutional advocacy, Gen Z activists emphasize visibility, disruption, and symbolic intervention as key strategies of political action.

The aesthetic and cultural dimension of these protests further illustrates this shift. Memes, digital art, cosplay, and pop-cultural references have emerged as central repertoires of mobilization. Jalli, Unggraini, and Setianto (2025) find that TikTok radically reshaped political communication during the 2024 election by privileging emotional resonance, humor, and visual storytelling. Muthiariny (2025) and Wong (2025) likewise document protesters reappropriating anime characters, K-pop fan banners, and gaming references to express indignation and solidarity. These practices reflect Lau and Wihardja’s (2024) observation that Indonesian electoral culture is increasingly structured around personality, affect, and performative language rather than ideological debate. Within this context, memes operate as what Laclau and Mouffe (2014) describe as “floating signifiers”, symbols whose openness allows diverse grievances to be linked into a common chain of struggle, whether concerning tuition fees, corruption, or climate crisis. Snir’s (2023) Rancièrian reading helps clarify the political stakes of this move: youth do not wait to be recognized by official institutions but instead assert themselves as speaking subjects, moving from what Rancière (2012) calls “noise” to “speech.”

Yet, digital activism remains ambivalent. While social media amplifies marginalized voices and accelerates mobilization, it simultaneously exposes activists to forms of surveillance, censorship, and algorithmic manipulation. Foucault’s (1980) analysis of power/knowledge suggests that visibility is never neutral; to be seen is also to be governed. Sebastian and Pratama (2024) demonstrate how Indonesian online activism is often undermined by bot attacks, narrative disruption campaigns, and platform moderation biases. Derrida’s (1998) concept of *différance* captures this unstable, undecidable condition: digital activism both empowers and restricts, reveals and obscures, liberates and contains. Thus, Gen Z resistance emerges within and against the very digital infrastructures that shape its conditions of possibility. In refusing to wait for representation or validation from older elites, Indonesian youth embody Rancière’s (2012) argument that political subjects “stage themselves,” asserting equality in the present rather than in a deferred democratic future.

Synthesizing these insights through discourse theory suggests that Indonesian Gen Z protests perform three key political functions: destabilizing hegemony, staging dissensus, and constructing new political subjectivities. First, they destabilize hegemony by resignifying dominant political signifiers. For example, “stability” promoted by the Prabowo administration was reframed as stagnation; “growth” was recoded as inequality; and “justice” shifted from procedural legality to redistributive fairness. As Laclau and Mouffe (2014) argue, hegemonic power rests on fixing meanings, and protesters exposed the contingency of these meanings. Elite responses such as the cabinet reshuffle (Al Jazeera, 2025) can thus be understood as attempts to restore discursive stability rather than structural reform.

Second, Gen Z protests enact dissensus in Rancièrian terms. By occupying streets, campuses, and digital publics, youth disrupted the assumption that political authority naturally belongs to older elites. This disruption transformed previously dismissed “youthful noise” into recognized political speech (Rancière, 2012; Snir, 2023). Third, these practices construct new political subjectivities. Gen Z becomes a political subject not by demographic category but through shared precarity, affect, and the refusal of consensus. This aligns with Mouffe’s (2000) claim that democracy requires conflict to remain alive. Ultimately, the synthesis of discourse theory, power/knowledge, *différance*, and dissensus reveals that Indonesian Gen Z protests are not ephemeral disturbances but ongoing struggles over the meaning of democracy itself.

Staging Dissensus and Constructing Youth Political Subjectivity

For educators, Snir's (2023) insights about schools as both sites of hierarchy and resistance suggest that campuses can become democratic laboratories rather than authoritarian extensions. Additionally, for digital platforms, ethical responsibility necessitates greater transparency in content moderation to prevent silencing dissent while combating disinformation. At a normative level, the findings challenge liberal theories that see consensus as the ideal of democracy. Echoing Mouffe (2000), they argue that conflict is constitutive of democracy. Ultimately, Indonesian Gen Z protests illustrate this by reopening contested questions: who governs, who benefits, and who belongs. Far from undermining democracy, such dissensus revitalizes it.

As Rancière (2012) warns, radical rhetoric can lapse into empty convention. In this context, memes and hashtags, while initially disruptive, risk becoming commodified or ritualized. Thus, future research should explore whether Gen Z discourses retain their disruptive power or become absorbed into mainstream culture. Ultimately, subsequent qualitative research could examine the shifting meanings and interpretive negotiations that occur as these symbols are applied across various social contexts. In-depth discourse analysis, digital ethnography, and visual semiotics could reveal how the affective and political charge of these signifiers evolves, weakens, or is reactivated through everyday acts of communication and resistance.

The significance of these findings is twofold. First, they show that Indonesian Gen Z protests are discursive struggles that redefine democracy, justice, and legitimacy. As a result, they destabilize hegemonic meanings, stage dissensus, and construct youth as a political subject. Second, they enrich theory by integrating the work of Laclau & Mouffe, Mouffe, Foucault, Derrida, and Rancière into a synthesis that foregrounds digital aesthetics and generational politics. Hence, the protests demonstrate that dissensus, not consensus, is the lifeblood of democracy. Moreover, they reveal that equality must be asserted, not awaited. And they underscore that digital politics, while ambivalent, remains central to contemporary struggles. In this sense, Gen Z protests in Indonesia are not only local events but also contributions to global debates on democracy in the 21st century. Therefore, they remind scholars and practitioners alike that politics is not the closure of conflict but its continual renewal.

4. Conclusion

The initial research question addressed how Gen Z activists employ symbols, memes, and narratives to articulate grievances and foster solidarity. The findings indicate that memes, slogans, anime imagery, humor, and digitally circulated visuals connect diverse concerns including unemployment, inequality, corruption, political dynasties, parliamentary privilege, and police repression within a unified narrative of generational exclusion. These forms function not only as communication tools but also as discursive mechanisms that link grievances through chains of equivalence and organize them around nodal points such as "justice," "democracy," "the people," and "Gen Z." Their familiarity and emotional resonance enable dispersed actors to identify as participants in a collective struggle across physical and digital spaces.

The second research question investigated how these practices contest gerontocracy, authoritarian populism, and elite-driven consensus. The analysis demonstrates that activists construct antagonistic boundaries between young citizens and political forces characterized as corrupt, oligarchic, exclusionary, or authoritarian. Dominant signifiers are redefined: "stability" is reframed as stagnation, "growth" as inequality, "harmony" as exclusion, and formal democracy as captured democracy. Through these reversals, Gen Z activists reveal elite consensus as a hegemonic arrangement that suppresses conflict and preserves established privilege. Their critique further challenges the presumption that age, seniority, and institutional position inherently confer political authority.

From a theoretical perspective, the study demonstrates that generational political identity is contingent, relational, and produced through processes of articulation. Laclau and Mouffe's concepts of nodal points, floating signifiers, chains of equivalence, hegemony, and antagonism elucidate how heterogeneous grievances are temporarily unified without eliminating their differences. The findings further indicate that memes and popular-cultural symbols serve as sites of political meaning-making through which collective subjects, political boundaries, and claims to democratic legitimacy are constructed.

This study has several limitations. Its reliance on documentary and secondary materials results in a reconstruction of public discourse rather than an examination of activists' internal deliberations. Media framing may influence the available evidence, and highly visible digital content may overshadow less visible offline organizing. Additionally, the study does not establish a direct causal relationship between discursive interventions and policy change. Future research should integrate discourse analysis with interviews, digital ethnography, and visual semiotics. It should also investigate regional, class, gender, and organizational differences within Gen Z, as well as the conditions under which digital solidarity evolves into enduring organizations, coalitions, and institutional reforms.

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