

## THE IMPACT OF VIRTUAL SYMBOLS AND HASHTAGS ON THE PALESTINE-ISRAEL WAR PHENOMENA IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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**Abstract:** This study discusses the impact of virtual symbols and social media in the digital age, especially on the Israel - Palestine war. This topic is important to see the humanitarian movement in defense of Palestine voiced in various countries with cultural and linguistic differences bridged by the connectivity of visual symbols and hashtags of social media users. In particular, the impact of virtual symbols and hashtags has been a subject of discussion in the global community of political analysts such as researchers, scholars, practitioners, and policymakers. This phenomenon has its dynamics, some researchers consider that digital phenomena cannot affect global politics. On the other hand, massive social media users not only spread influence in cyberspace but also encourage humanitarian movements in the real world. This study uses a qualitative approach with descriptive methods using Qualitative Data Analysis Software (Q-DAS). The software used in this analysis is the Nvivo12 application. The results include several things, first, virtual symbols and hashtags on social media also affect the global politics of individual actors in the global community. Second, hashtags are used to share information on support movements to Palestinians around the world. Third, this movement on social media sparked protests in various countries.

**Keywords:** Digital Age, Virtual Symbol, Hashtag, Israel, Palestine

### Introduction

Israel continued its attacks on Gaza in the aftermath of the Hamas attack on Tel Aviv on October 7, 2023. Al Jazeera revealed more than 23,357 dead and 59,410 wounded on the Palestinian side. On the Israeli side, 1,139 people died and 8,730 were injured. The attacks that returned made these two parties heat up not only killing people but also damaging infrastructure and refugee villages (AJLabs, 2024). The roots of the Israeli and Palestinian conflict stem from a patch of land proclaimed as Israel a long time ago. In the Arab world, Israel is a form of colonialism. The Jews themselves experienced cruel discrimination in Eastern Europe until the Holocaust by Hitler, in 1880 they decided to move to Palestine (Ihsan et al., 2021).

The United Nations (UN) continues to move with Palestinian and Israeli peace resolutions but to nothing. The UN, the European Union, the United States, Arab countries, and even Russia and Turkey all have a leading role in ensuring that lasting solutions can be found (Danfulani et al., 2021). Conflicts over time from conventional news to the development of social media. This paper will not discuss the history of this conflict more deeply, this study will look at how social media and the internet affect the 2023 Israeli and Palestinian conflict.

Acceleration of information on the Palestinian and Israeli conflict quickly circulated with the internet and social media. The sentiment of social media users began to influence international relations, especially the movement of virtual humanity into the real world. Social media regulation limits violence, including this legendary conflict (Kuzmanović & Zogović, 2020). The use of visual symbols, hashtags, and mass appeal jargon spread quickly and widely with implied meanings. This message bridges language, cultural, and border differences between international communities. Uniquely, this visual symbol is also carried in the message of the humanitarian movement in actions on the streets around the world that affect global political dynamics.

The use of the internet and social media has increased in the community. Based on a survey released by the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII) in 2023, internet penetration reached 78.19 percent (APJII, 2012). This percentage has increased from the previous year. Internet users search for information on a variety of topics. It is also driven by community activities that have now shifted to the digital realm. Furthermore, spaces of interaction and connectedness are easy to create. Social media comes with the characteristics and distinctive features of each platform. Social media connects its users without geographical restrictions and offers real-time communication. This potential spawned the growth of online communities that came together because of common interests and preferences. Online communities have become a dynamic and important means of initiating and maintaining social relationships among strangers (Gibbs et al., 2019). In the Palestinian-Israeli context, groups of social media users show humanitarian solidarity through content, behavior, and virtual responses.

Users shared content about the Palestinian condition that spread on social media. The behavior of sharing content has become massive over the past few years. Users show deep sympathy for this condition. Social media has increased people's access to any kind of information, including news, essays, and other user activities. This is an important source of information and facilitates the process of disseminating information. (Yang et al., 2022) suggested the influence of information and social perception on individual sharing behavior and decisions on social media platforms.

The social perception of social media also affects Muslims. The Internet is used to disseminate and obtain decisions and key points about current events and to disseminate information among a wider community. According to (Karim, 2004), Muslims use the Internet as a dissemination and networking tool to dialogue with each other and conduct research. The new technology has also become an important tool in the Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation, as it is used to rally support in the West Bank, Gaza, and other parts of the world. Internet users and Muslims often seek answers to questions about the practice of Islamic faith in contemporary society, including ethical issues common outside traditional Muslim societies (Zaid et al., 2022).

User behavior can also be seen from the appearance of 'watermelon' icon embedded as part of support for Palestine. The watermelon symbol also helps social media users map other users with similar preferences. It certainly does not escape the history of its relationship with the state of Palestine. Emoticons, or emojis, are characters used in text-based communication in digital media to express user emotions. This feature also helps convey emotional information to other users instead of face-to-face communication expressions (Kaye et al., 2016). However, the use of emojis is growing in the depiction of user emotions. The variety of emojis presented in the digital space encourages the creation of symbols that have a certain meaning. 'Watermelon' is both an emoji and a symbol in the whirlpool of digital society's response to the Palestinian-Israeli war. The presence of symbols is also considered an effort to avoid social media algorithm systems that tend to remove all forms of violent content.

Likewise, the use of the hashtag (#) in response to the situation. Various sentences begin with hashtags: #savepalestine, #fromtherivertothesea, and others. Hashtags are tools that social

media users use to connect with members of other virtual communities or public groups to support communication between members of their groups (Mulyadi & Fitriana, 2018). It means that hashtag users pay equal attention to an issue. In addition to visual symbols, hashtags also play an important role in social media to accommodate the spread of information. Some of the hashtags studied in this study are as follows:

**Table 1: Hashtags Description**

#SavePalestine	Showing support Palestine in war condition
#FreePalestine	Showing support Palestine to be free
#GazaUnderAttack	Showing that Gaza under attack
#BoycottIsrael	Showing to boycott Israel product
#JulidfiSabilillah	Showing to target IDF member social media

**Literature Review**

The first literature review was titled ‘Social Media Role to Support Palestinians in Palestine—Israel Conflict (2021)’. This paper elaborates on the impact of social media on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in 2021 (B et al., 2022). The study inspired the authors to further elaborate on the impact of social media on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in 2023. In addition, the new study will look at how visual symbols such as watermelons have meaning for the humanitarian movement to defend Palestine in 2023. Collaborate with articles on narrative, visual global politics, and digital media (Crilley et al., 2020). This study has a framework of thinking that will be used in the author's research: how the visual narrative of social media can have an impact on wider global politics.

Mulyadi & Fitriana (2018), in an article titled Hashtag (#) as a message identity in the virtual community, try to describe hashtags as a connecting sign of the online community on social media. The study focused on community members who shared a common interest and united in an online group (Mulyadi & Fitriana, 2018). Furthermore, the use of hashtags by related community members can be revealed as the implementation of user-generated content (UGC) in social media. It would be interesting to elaborate further. The authors see hashtags and other signs still described as a sign of activity and a form of internal posting of the group. The motives behind the use of hashtags and embedded words have not been discussed in the study. Hashtags that become trending indicators in response to global issues allow the use of hashtags by an unlimited number of social media users. So it is interesting if the research that the researchers did focused on the pattern of using hashtags, symbols, and words that follow them in the whirlpool of the Israeli-Palestinian issue in building support for the issue of global violence.

Hashtags in social media content influence users' online discourse. This is presented in an article titled How Symbols Influence Social Media Discourse by (Karell & Sachs, 2023). The study highlights how some social media features that involve content can influence user conversations. Specifically, the two examined how the symbolic meaning conveyed by The Return of Donald Trump's account on Twitter influenced the discourse of Twitter users. Results show that discourse is becoming more politicized, and discursive shifts are only short-lived. The author sees this article as an important point to be able to spark a more holistic discussion. This article has not touched on the socio-semantic dynamics of conversations in virtual spaces or the impact of such conversations. For this reason, the current research focuses on symbolic messages in the discourse on the issue of Israeli-Palestinian violence built by social media users and the continued impact of that discourse.

## Method

This study uses structured qualitative research methods. Data collection techniques are sourced from secondary sources in the form of documents, journals, and other scientific publications that support research. Data analysis using Miles and Huberman models. This model suggests the use of four interactive Power Analysis activities, namely data collection, data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion presentation. The next step is to conduct data analysis with data condensation, namely the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, and abstracting from interviews, transcripts, various documents, and records.

This study uses qualitative methods to analyze data using Qualitative Data Analysis Software (Q-DAS). This study focuses on visual symbols and hashtags circulating on social media Twitter and TikTok in the 2023 Israeli and Palestinian conflict. The steps are as follows:

- 1) Collecting Data: social media data (hashtags) became trending on Twitter and TikTok Palestine-Israel Conflict (2023) using N-Capture to grab the data.
- 2) Input data: after collecting the data using Ncapture, input the data used Nvivo12Plus as the analysis software tool.
- 3) The data analysis in these steps using Nvivo12Plus used three kinds of analysis: Cluster analysis, and Wordcloud analysis.
- 4) Presenting the data: after analyzing the data, presenting data from the analysis result and discussing and interpreting the analysis value.

This analysis used five hashtags as the primary data of social media related to the Palestine-Israel conflict 2023. The hashtags were trending on Twitter during the Palestine-Israel conflict from November 15 2023 to Januari 15 2024. The hashtags chosen are revealed in Table 1.

## Result and Discussion

### Visual Symbols in the Vortex of the Palestinian – Israeli issue on Social Media

The use of the symbol "watermelon" has recently been widely used by social media users for expressions of solidarity with Palestinians. This symbol arises from emojis in virtual interactions as an extension of non-verbal communication in face-to-face communication (Li & Yang, 2018). The watermelon symbol implies a form of social media users' support for the freedom of Palestinians against Israeli military attacks. This symbol also shows the individual alignments of social media users implicitly. Such alignments are not only used in personal statements but also on the scale of organizations and companies that embed the symbol "watermelon" as a form of statement of attitude and support for Palestinian freedom.

Symbols give you the latest information about Palestine quickly. Symbols or emojis do not take long to process the information they want to convey. Symbols or emojis in mediated social interaction also involve emotional aspects (Su & Chen, 2021). In Watermelon, emotions are formed through the sympathy of social media users who also pay great attention to the Palestinian-Israeli issue.

Symbolic properties such as these are meant to have meaning—the collective ideas, narratives, sentiments, and morals evoked by elements of the content, which can be lexical and textual, but also include things like images, badges of the accounts that share the content, and who owns the accounts (Karell & Sachs, 2023). The embedding of emojis in conversations and interactions that occur also has an attachment to the resulting meaning.



Figure 1: Illustration of a watermelon in the ruins of Gaza  
Source: Instagram @benzotibejo



Figure 2: Illustration of a watermelon and a Palestinian flag  
Source: Instagram @ammi\_agus

Social interaction on digital platforms has become the subject of many parties. Interaction patterns that support the creation of meaning and value quickly roll from one user to another. Digital society polarizes mass behavior by creating content and constructive responses.

### **Hashtags as a massive dissemination of information**

In addition to the “watermelon fruit” symbol, hashtags or hashtags also meet virtual conversations about the Palestinian-Israeli issue. If traced, the researchers found several sentences that began with hashtags for users to browse the issue, namely #savepalestina #freepalestina #gazaunderattack #boycottisrael, and #julidfisabilillah. Content and conversations created by social media users can be found easily through searching for these hashtags (Mulyadi & Fitriana, 2018).

Later, I found a hashtag containing the phrase julidfisabilillah. This Hashtag refers to Indonesian social media users or netizens carrying out repressive activities on the social media accounts of IDF (Israel Defense Forces) soldiers. For example, hate speech and repression. Social Media have become a stimulus for social change through various activism on social media. Social media platforms allow individuals to rally, support and mobilize like-minded individuals around the world, one of them through hashtag activism (Kaun & Uldam, 2018).

**Table 2: Hashtags on social media in support of the Palestinian**

Hashtag	Mentions (max)	Reach (max)	Twitter (Source)	TikTok (Source)	Sentiment
#FreePalestine	20.191	45.739.991	3.269	3.1608	Positive
#SavePalestine	3.489	4.975.446	2.742	3.557	Negative
#GazaUnderAttack	3.644	11.398.685	3.152	4.276	Positive
#BoycottIsrael	3.518	5.089.610	2.974	3.072	Positive
#JulidfiSabilillah	1.752	10.709.324	1.559	1.354	Negative

(Source: Brand24, processed by the author)

The five hashtags studied had varying sentiments. #FreePalestine, #GazaUnderAttack, and #BoycottIsrael have positive narrative sentiments from Twitter and TikTok users. This Hashtag helps in spreading support for Palestine. #BoycottIsrael in particular, has an impact on the economic aspect (decreased interest from consumers) in the products of companies allegedly affiliated with Israel. Furthermore, this boycott of products by consumers has an impact on the stability of stocks until the production of these products. However, this will not be discussed in depth in this study.

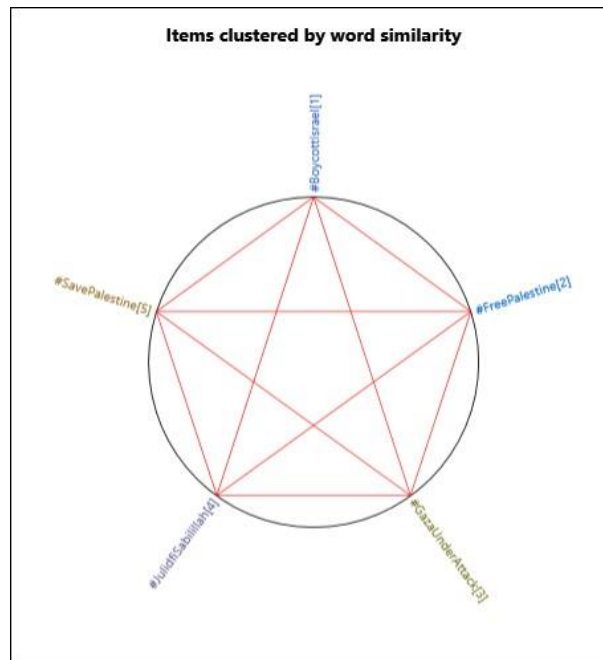


Figure 3: Clustered Diagram  
 (Source: Brand24, Q-DAS NVivo12)

Based on data from table 1, #FreePalestine ranked first with 45,739,991 hits to all Twitter and TikTok users. Second, #GazaUnderAttack with a reach of 11,398,685 followed by #JulidfiSabilillah with a reach of 10,709,324. The dominance of #JulidfiSabilillah was followed by social media users from Indonesia and Malaysia. #BoycottIsrael and #SavePalestine reached 5,089,610 and 4,975,446, respectively.



Figure 3: Word Cloud  
(Source: Brand24, Q-DAS NVivo12)

In addition to the five hashtags, many derivative hashtags participate in the dissemination of information supporting Palestine with negative and positive narratives. Hope-related hashtags such as ‘dreamsfromgaza’, ‘freepalestinefromisrael’ and ‘prayforpalestine’. There are also hashtags with narratives denouncing Israeli actions such as ‘israelcriminalwar’, ‘americaterrorist’ and ‘gazagenosida’.

**Conclusion**

In the end, visual symbol movements and hashtags on social media have an important influence on the dissemination of information on the 2023 Israel-Palestine conflict. The digital activism movement is gaining momentum due to the ease of access to social media and the ability to reach a global audience instantly. The movement uses repressive comments, memes, and harsh criticism as strategic tools to not only express disapproval but also attract global attention. In the digital age, social media technology has contributed to the radical transformation of diplomatic communication patterns, as well as the reconfiguration of political communication, the global economy, wars and conflicts, political protests, popular culture, and everyday life for billions of people around the world. The results of this study are first, virtual symbols and hashtags on social media also affect global politics, especially individual actors in the global community. Second, hashtags are used to share Palestinian support movement information around the world. Third, this movement on social media sparked protests in various countries.

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