Decoding the Search Bar: Semiotic Ideologies of Google Trending Keywords in Indonesia

Deri Fikri Fauzi

Universitas Kebangsaan Republik Indonesia

*Corresponding author: derifikrifauzi@fasos.ukri.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study investigates how trending keywords on Google Indonesia reflect collective semiotic ideologies, moving beyond the traditional analysis of individual social media expressions. Unlike previous research that focuses on user-generated content, this study analyzes aggregated search behaviours from July 2025 to uncover broader socio-cultural narratives. Using a qualitative semiotic approach grounded in Keane's semiotic ideology and Barthes' denotation-connotation framework, the study examines the top 50 trending keywords. Results indicate a distinct tripartite division of public attention: Socio-political scrutiny (40%), Global sports fandom (35%), and Local entertainment (25%). The analysis reveals that keywords are not merely informational queries but "cultural signs": sports searches (e.g., "Chelsea vs PSG") construct a cosmopolitan identity, while political searches (e.g., "ijazah jokowi") function as tools of democratic auditing and skepticism. The findings suggest that Indonesian digital search practice has evolved from simple information-seeking to a complex negotiation of global modernity and local moral accountability.

Keywords*: Semiotic Ideology, Google Trends, Aggregated Search Behavior, Social Identity, Cultural Narratives.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The digital landscape has evolved into a critical arena for the expression and negotiation of social, cultural, and ideological meanings, particularly in rapidly developing nations like Indonesia, where internet penetration is surging. While users actively post on social media, their search behaviours often private and aggregated offer a raw, unfiltered glimpse into the collective consciousness. This study explores the semiotic ideologies embedded in trending Google search keywords in Indonesia, aiming to uncover how these keywords reflect and shape the collective identities, values, and concerns of contemporary Indonesian society. Search keywords are often viewed merely as functional tools for information retrieval. However, from a semiotic perspective, they serve as aggregated indicators of public interest and potent semiotic resources that encapsulate both global influences and localized narratives. The motivation for this study lies in the need to understand how these digital practices mediate the construction of meaning in a society navigating the complex tensions between tradition, modernity, and globalization.

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in the concept of semiotic ideology, which Keane (2003) defines as the assumptions and beliefs about signs and their roles in social life. This framework is particularly apt for analyzing digital search keywords. In this context, a keyword is not just text; it is a sign that indexes specific cultural anxieties or aspirations. Previous research

has extensively explored semiotic processes on social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, focusing on how individual users perform identity through hashtags and posts (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Wang & Hant, 2023). For instance, Zappavigna (2015) highlighted how social media hashtags serve as semiotic tools for community-building. However, the aggregated nature of search keywords, which capture collective rather than individual behaviours, remains significantly underexplored. Search trends represent the *"hive mind"* of the nation what people are curious about when they think no one is watching.

This study applies semiotic analysis to Google Trends data, a novel approach in the Indonesian context. The research contributes to the field in three keyways:

1. Shift to Aggregated Behaviour: It shifts the focus from individual expression (social media) to collective inquiry (search trends), offering a macro-level perspective on cultural negotiation.

2. Non-Western Context: It situates the analysis within the unique Indonesian digital landscape, addressing a gap in literature that often prioritizes Western or Chinese contexts (Zhang & Pentina, 2012).

3. Qualitative Depth: Unlike marketing studies that view keywords as mere metrics, this study uses qualitative discourse analysis to unpack the layered meanings of terms like "chelsea vs psg" and "ijazah jokowi".

Guided by these insights, the study addresses the following questions: How do trending Google search keywords in Indonesia function as semiotic signs to articulate social, cultural, and ideological meanings? What do these keywords reveal about the interplay between global influences and local controversies? By answering these, this study illuminates the role of digital search practices as a lens for understanding the evolving socio-cultural fabric of Indonesia.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

To ground the analysis of Google trending keywords, this study draws upon three interconnected streams of literature: the theoretical framework of semiotic ideology, the distinction between individual and aggregated digital expressions, and the specific socio-political dynamics of the Indonesian digital landscape.

2.1 Semiotic Ideology and Material Signs

The core theoretical lens of this study is "semiotic ideology," a concept developed by Keane (2003) to describe the underlying assumptions and beliefs people hold about signs and their agency in social life. Unlike traditional semiotics which may view signs as static, semiotic ideology states that signs whether material objects or digital text play an active role in mediating social relations. In the context of this research, a search keyword is not merely a data point but a linguistic sign that reflects the *"cultural and ideological priorities"* of the user. As Irvine and Gal (2000) argue, linguistic differentiation processes allow these signs to map onto broader social identities, making them potent sites for ideological analysis.

2.2 Digital Expression: From Individual Performance to Aggregated Behaviour

Existing research on digital semiotics has predominantly focused on *performative* platforms. Studies by Marwick and boyd (2011) and Wang and Hant (2023) have extensively mapped how users construct personal identities on Twitter and Instagram through *"context collapse"* and

imagined audiences. Similarly, Zappavigna (2015) demonstrated how hashtags function as *"searchable talk,"* serving as semiotic tools for community alignment and ideological signalling. However, these studies focus on individual expression what users explicitly choose to broadcast to a network. This leaves a critical gap regarding *aggregated* search behaviours. Unlike social media posts, which are performative and curated (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), search keywords represent a *"collective consciousness"* an aggregation of private queries that reveal what society is seeking when unobserved. This study argues that applying semiotic analysis to this aggregated data offers a unique, macro-level perspective that individual-centric studies cannot capture.

2.3   The Indonesian Digital Landscape

The application of this framework is particularly relevant to Indonesia, a nation characterized by rapid digital adoption and complex socio-political tensions. Tapsell (2017) notes that the Indonesian media landscape is heavily influenced by digital disruption and oligarchic structures, creating a unique environment where digital platforms become battlegrounds for public opinion. Jurriëns (2017) further describes "Digital Indonesia" as a space of connectivity and divergence, where global pop culture intersects with local religious and political values. Within this context, trending keywords serve as a barometer for how Indonesians navigate the "tensions between tradition, modernity, and globalization", acting as digital artifacts of the nation's evolving social identity.

3.   METHODOLOGY

3.1   Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to explore the semiotic ideologies embedded in trending Google search keywords in Indonesia. The approach is grounded in interpretive semiotics, drawing primarily on Keane's (2003) notion of semiotic ideology and Barthes' (1977) distinctions between denotation and connotation, supported by discourse-analytic perspectives from Fairclough (2003). This design enables a detailed examination of how trending search terms function not merely as data points, but as cultural signs that reflect collective values, identities, and socio-political concerns within Indonesia's digital landscape.

3.2   Data Collection

Data were sourced from Google Trends, a publicly accessible platform that aggregates search frequencies relative to total search volume. The dataset covers July 2025, capturing the top 50 trending keywords in Indonesia to represent a focused case.
Data collection followed three systematic stages:

1. Daily Extraction: Trending keywords were archived using screenshots to account for real-time fluctuations and ensure traceability (Rogers, 2019).

2. Filtering: Generic navigational searches, such as *"Facebook login"* or *"Google Translate"* were excluded, prioritizing terms with substantive socio-cultural relevance (Tapsell, 2017).

3. Categorization: The remaining 50 keywords were grouped into three thematic domains i.e. *Sports*, *Entertainment*, and *Socio-political Issues* based on semantic content and contextual significance.

Representative examples include *"Chelsea vs PSG"* (Sports) and *"ijazah Jokowi"* (Socio-political Issues), selected due to their prominence and cultural resonance.

3.3   Data Analysis

Analysis proceeded in two interconnected phases to move from descriptive categorization toward interpretive depth.

3.3.1 Phase 1: Thematic Coding

Using NVivo, keywords were coded inductively to identify recurrent patterns and semantic clusters, following the thematic analysis procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Emerging clusters included themes such as *global fandom*, *celebrity culture*, and *political scrutiny*. Quantitative frequencies of theme occurrence informed the descriptive results.

3.3.2 Phase 2: Semiotic Interpretation

The second phase constituted the core analytical process, interpreting keywords as cultural sign systems. Drawing on Barthes' (1977) framework and Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding theory, the analysis examined each major keyword at three semiotic levels:

1.   First Order – Denotation: The literal referent of the keyword.
     (e.g., "Chelsea vs PSG" → a football match).

2.   Second Order – Connotation: Associated cultural meanings and values.
     (e.g., global connectivity, sports diplomacy, aspirational cosmopolitanism).

3.   Third Order – Semiotic Ideology: Underlying shared assumptions and beliefs revealed through search behaviour.
     (e.g., participation in global cultural events as a marker of modern identity) (Keane, 2003).

Visual aids such as word clouds were used to synthesize patterns, while team-based cross-checking enhanced interpretive reliability (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.4   Ethical Considerations

The research complies with the Association of Internet Researchers' ethical guidelines (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). As Google Trends provides aggregated and anonymized data, no identifiable user information was accessed, and analysis focused on public behavioural patterns rather than private actions. A transparent research log was maintained to ensure traceability of analytical decisions (Rogers, 2019).

4.   RESULTS

4.1   Thematic Distribution of Keywords

Analysis of the top 50 trending Google search keywords in Indonesia for July 2025 reveals a distinct tripartite division of public attention. As identified through thematic coding in NVivo, the dataset clustered into three major domains: Socio-political Issues (40%), Sports (35%), and Entertainment (25%).

- Socio-political searches (e.g., *"ijazah Jokowi," "Riza Chalid"*) dominated the landscape, characterized by high volatility and controversy.

- Sports-related keywords (e.g., *"Chelsea vs PSG," "Timnas U23"*) peaked during specific match days but showed sustained volume, linking Indonesian users to global events.

- Entertainment keywords (e.g., *"Dangdut Academy 2025," "Andini viral"*) represented a consistent baseline of local cultural consumption and moral curiosity.

Figure 1 below illustrates this distribution, highlighting that while entertainment is often assumed to drive internet traffic, socio-political scrutiny was the primary driver of search behaviour during this period.
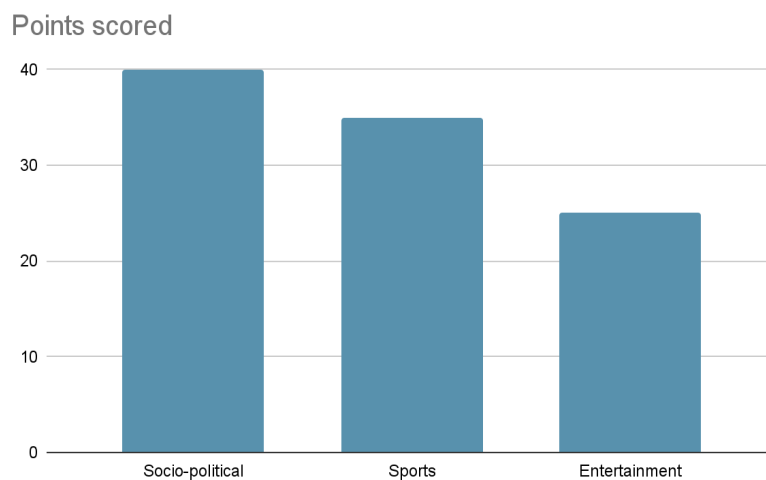
Figure 1. Thematic Distribution of Top 50 Trending Search Keywords in Indonesia by Semiotic Domain (July 2025).

4.2   Semiotic Decoding of Key Terms

Beyond frequency distribution, selected keywords were subjected to deep semiotic analysis using Barthes' (1977) order of signification and Keane's (2003) framework of semiotic ideology. This process moved beyond the literal meaning to uncover the "myths" or ideological assumptions governing these searches.

4.2.1 The Semiotics of Global Belonging

Keywords such as *"Chelsea vs PSG"* or *"Jadwal Liga Champions"* operate on a level of cosmopolitan simultaneity. Denotatively, these terms refer to specific sporting schedules. However, distinct from local searches, these keywords spike in the early hours of the morning (WIB), requiring physical discipline from the user. Connotatively, the act of searching signifies a refusal to be "left behind" by global time. The semiotic ideology here is one of participation: to be modern is to be synchronized with global events, even at the cost of local biological rhythms. The search bar becomes a portal to a global *"imagined community"* (Anderson, 2006).

4.2.2 The Semiotics of Suspicion

In the socio-political domain, the keyword *"ijazah Jokowi"* (Jokowi's diploma) illustrates a shift in the semiotic agency of the citizen. Historically, official state documents were accepted as truth.

However, this search trend indicates a *"hermeneutics of suspicion"* (Ricoeur, 1970). The user searches not to learn the university's name (informational), but to verify the legitimacy of the leader (forensic). Here, the Google algorithm is treated as a higher authority than state archives. The underlying ideology is that truth is no longer given by institutions but must be "audited" by the digital collective.

4.2.3 The Semiotics of Precarity and Hope

A significant cluster of keywords, such as *"link saldo dana gratis"* (link for free digital wallet balance), reveals the economic ideology of the digital underclass. Unlike searches for "jobs" or "investment," these keywords denote a desire for instant, effortless liquidity. Semiotically, this treats the internet not as a marketplace but as a magical resource. The ideology reflects a *"gamification of survival,"* where economic relief is viewed as a matter of algorithmic luck or finding the right *"link,"* reflecting the deep precarity of the informal economy.

Table 1 below summarizes this decoding process across the dataset, mapping the transition from denotative signs to their broader ideological implications. Collectively, these keywords demonstrate that the Google search bar is not a neutral repository of information but a space of ideological contestation. Whether navigating the complexities of global sports fandom, scrutinizing political legitimacy, or seeking economic relief, Indonesian users are engaging in a process of active meaning-making. As the semiotic decoding in Table 1 illustrates, each search query acts as a linguistic index, pointing toward deeper societal tensions between the desire for cosmopolitan belonging and the anxieties of local precarity. These findings provide the empirical foundation for the following discussion on how these digital practices construct contemporary Indonesian identity.

Table 1. Semiotic Analysis of Top Trending Keywords

Keyword (Signifier)	Denotation (Literal Meaning)	Connotation (Cultural Meaning)	Semiotic Ideology (Collective Value/Belief)
"Chelsea vs PSG"	A football match between English and French clubs.	Global connectivity; participation in world events.	**Cosmopolitanism:** Identity is constructed through participation in global modernity rather than just local events.
"Ijazah Jokowi"	A query regarding the President's university diploma.	Skepticism; verification; political gossip.	**Hermeneutics of Suspicion:** The citizen's role is to "audit" authority; trust is replaced by verification.
"Andini Viral Video"	A specific viral video content (scandal).	Taboo; private life made public; voyeurism.	**Moral Panopticon:** Collective policing of morality; anxiety over the "uncontrollable" nature of digital content.
"Link Saldo Dana Gratis"	A search for free digital credit/financial aid.	Economic struggle; hope for instant liquidity; precarity.	**The Commodification of Hope:** Economic survival is navigated through luck and algorithmic opportunity.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Communal Rituals and Imagined Communities

The prominence of sports-related searches illustrates how sporting events function as digital arenas for communal emotional expression. These search trends operate beyond informational retrieval; they signify forms of collective participation in what Anderson (2006) calls "imagined communities." By searching for *"Jepang vs Cina"* or *"Timnas,"* users are not merely looking for scores but are performing a synchronised ritual of national and global belonging.

Unlike the reading of a morning newspaper—Anderson's original example of simultaneous consumption the search bar facilitates a real-time, pulse-like connection. This suggests that the "nation" is no longer just imagined through print capitalism, but actively constructed through algorithmic synchronicity, where the shared act of searching validates one's membership in the global modern public.

5.2   The Hermeneutics of Suspicion: Auditing Authority

The high volume of searches related to *"ijazah Jokowi"* and *"BSU batch 4 kapan cair"* reveals a profound shift in the citizen-state relationship. These keywords represent what Hall (1980) classifies as negotiated readings: citizens actively test the veracity of political claims rather than accepting them passively. This reflects a semiotic ideology of *"democratic suspicion,"* where the public no longer accepts authority figures as opaque entities but treats them as subjects of digital audit. In the Indonesian context, where trust in institutions has historically been volatile, the search engine has evolved into a tool for "forensic citizenship." The public uses Google to bypass official state narratives, seeking raw data to verify the legitimacy of leaders and the delivery of social aid. This marks a transition from a passive electorate to an actively skeptical *"auditor"* class.

5.3   Viral Culture and the Moral Panopticon

The recurrence of keywords like *"Andini viral video"* highlights the tension between privacy and the public gaze. While denotatively referencing specific incidents, these searches connotatively signal a *"moral panopticon"* where private transgressions are consumed as public spectacles. This aligns with Keane's (2003) argument that semiotic ideologies guide how communities evaluate signs in this case, producing anxieties over what should be seen, shared, or judged. The search trend reveals a societal paradox: users simultaneously condemn the immorality of the scandal while actively fuelling its algorithmic virality through their searches. This suggests that the Indonesian digital sphere functions as a theatre of morality, where "shame" is not just a social sanction but a consumed commodity.

5.4   Economic Precarity and the Algorithmic "Lottery"

A unique finding in this study is the prevalence of economic survival keywords, such as *"link saldo dana gratis"* (free credit links) and *"saham CDIA"*. These searches connote a mix of aspiration and desperation, pointing toward a digital economy characterized by precarity. Unlike the cosmopolitanism of sports, these keywords reveal the "underbelly" of the digital promise. Semiotically, the search for "free links" or instant stock tips represents a form of *"magical thinking"* regarding the economy. It suggests that for the digital underclass, economic mobility is not viewed as a result of structural labor, but as a matter of finding the right "link" or algorithmic loophole. This reflects a deep anxiety regarding financial stability, where the internet is navigated as a space of potential rescue amidst real-world uncertainty.

5.5   Synthesis: The Search Bar as a Cultural Battleground

Taken together, these four domains reveal that the Google search bar in Indonesia is a site of cultural contestation. It is where the tension between the *"Global Self"* (who watches European football) and the *"Local Subject"* (who needs social aid) is negotiated daily. The semiotic ideology governing these searches is one of active navigation: Indonesian users are not passive receivers

of information but are constantly using the search bar to audit power, define morality, and seek economic survival in a rapidly changing world.

6.   CONCLUSION

This study investigated the semiotic ideologies embedded in Indonesia's trending Google keywords during July 2025. By moving beyond the traditional view of search data as merely functional or informational, the analysis demonstrates that these aggregated keywords function as culturally encoded signs that map the nation's collective anxieties, aspirations, and identity negotiations.

The findings reveal that the Indonesian digital public is deeply engaged in a tripartite negotiation of identity:

1. Cosmopolitan Belonging: Through sports and global entertainment searches, users enact a modern, globally connected self that transcends local geography.

2. Democratic Auditing: Through high-volume political queries (e.g., *"ijazah Jokowi"*), citizens exercise a "hermeneutics of suspicion," utilizing the search engine as a forensic tool to verify and challenge state authority.

3. Economic Survival: Through searches for financial aid and algorithmic loopholes, the digital underclass navigates the precarity of the modern economy, viewing the internet as a resource for "magical" financial rescue.

In line with Keane's (2003) theorization of semiotic ideologies, this study confirms that digital search behaviour is constitutive of social meaning. The Google search bar in Indonesia is not a neutral repository but a cultural battleground where the tensions between tradition (local morality), modernity (global participation), and democracy (accountability) are played out daily.

6.1   Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides a novel semiotic snapshot, it is limited by its cross-sectional nature, capturing only one month of data (July 2025). Digital trends are highly volatile; thus, the specific keywords analysed here are ephemeral, even if the underlying ideologies are persistent.
Future research should address these limitations by:

1. Longitudinal Designs: Conducting multi-year analyses to track how these semiotic ideologies shift during critical events, such as national elections or economic crises.

2. Cross-Platform Triangulation: Comparing Google Search data (private/aggregated) with Twitter/X or TikTok data (public/performative) to see if the *"private self"* of the search bar differs from the *"public self"* of social media.

3. Algorithmic Influence: Investigating how Google's autocomplete algorithms might co-construct these ideologies by nudging users toward specific controversial or popular terms.

In sum, this research highlights that to understand the contemporary Indonesian subject, we must look not only at what they say on social media, but what they silently seek in the privacy of the search bar.

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