

ASEAN PEOPLE-CENTERED REGIONALISM AND STRATEGY TO BUILD ITS PEOPLE'S IDENTITY THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA DISCOURSE

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Introduction

Since its inception in 1967, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has undergone substantial institutional reforms. A pivotal change in the organization's cooperative direction took place between 1998 and 2007, specifically in 2003, during a period of transition and recovery. The ninth ASEAN Summit, held in Bali in 2003, led to the promulgation of the "ASEAN Concord II" (commonly referred to as Bali II). One of the key outcomes of this agreement was the establishment of an ASEAN Community. The declaration articulates:

"The ASEAN Community will be constituted by three interwoven and mutually reinforcing pillars: political and security cooperation, economic cooperation, and socio-cultural cooperation. These pillars aim to ensure enduring peace, stability, and shared prosperity in the region" (ASEAN Concord II Declaration).

In the wake of the Bali Concord II declaration, the concept of a "people-centered ASEAN" has gained prominence within the region. This term has consistently featured in the themes, reports, and vision statements of subsequent high-level ASEAN meetings, including the annual leaders' summits (Morada, 2008).

Institutional reforms persisted with the endorsement of the Vientiane

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Action Plan in 2004. This plan deepens the understanding of community development in ASEAN by identifying critical norms, principles, and programs designed to operationalize the three foundational pillars. Further strengthening occurred with the adoption of the ASEAN Charter at the eleventh ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur, from December 12 to 14, 2005. This charter aspires to serve as a constitutional document, outlining the basic principles, goals, objectives, and organizational structure requisite for effective ASEAN cooperation. Importantly, the new ASEAN Charter legalizes the organization as a formal entity.

Within the framework of the ASEAN Community's pillars, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) plays a strategic role. Its objective is to cultivate a socially responsible, community-oriented populace that fosters enduring solidarity and unity among both the people and member states of ASEAN (ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, 2017). The ASCC seeks to encourage interactions among ASEAN citizens that are mindful of their historical connections and cultural heritage, aiming for a shared regional identity. To attain this, the ASCC developed an action plan targeted at bolstering the foundations of regional social cohesion, with the goal of realizing a cohesive ASEAN Community by 2020. The community, expected to materialize through regional integration by 2020, will consist of people who, despite diverse historical and cultural backgrounds, share a common regional identity. This sense of shared identity and solidarity is projected to evolve over time, facilitated by ongoing interactions across various social, economic, and political sectors, as well as at the community, governmental, and civil society levels (The ASCC Plan of Action, 2012).

Building on its community framework, ASEAN has evolved into a model of identity-based regional cooperation. In this model, the region is conceptualized as possessing a collective and intersubjective identity (Elliott, 2003). Establishing such a regional identity is not only of specific interest to ASEAN but also crucial in spite the critical importance of forming this identity, awareness of an ASEAN identity remains relatively low in member countries, even among the elite and in countries with long-standing membership (Narine, 2004) how its member states envision their collective future (E. Jones, 2004). However, deg).

In this context, ASEAN serves as a significant force capable of shaping both identities and norms that guide and regulate the conduct of its constituent nations and their citizenry (Eaton & Stubbs, 2006). Consequently, this study posits that ASEAN should proactively take on the role of an agent in fostering a shared identity among its member nations and their populations. Seen through the lens of new regionalism, ASEAN is not merely an alliance

of countries; it is also an imagined community where citizens are expected to develop an understanding of one another's social, cultural, economic, and political contexts. In this constructed social landscape, ASEAN could serve as an instrumental agent, mainstreaming the ASEAN identity through an ongoing discourse facilitated by various media channels.

This study examines the role of the ASEAN Secretariat in utilizing social media—particularly Facebook—to cultivate a sense of ASEAN community and identity. It further investigates the efficacy of these efforts in heightening awareness about ASEAN identity. The rationale behind focusing on Facebook emanates from the platform's inherently interactive and participatory nature, as well as its capability to facilitate many-to-many text flows (KhosraviNik & Zia, 2014). Such interactive communication features make social media a potent instrument for establishing consensual perspectives among its users on specific topics, such as the ASEAN identity in this context.

Social networking platforms, often referred to as social media, have emerged as pivotal agents in shaping collective identities. Research by KhosraviNik and Zia (2014) demonstrated how Iran's national identity is both reconstructed and represented through Facebook pages that Iranians refer to as the "Persian Gulf." Similarly, Kulyk (2018) work highlights the significance of the Russian language in demarcating social identity among Ukrainian Facebook users, setting them apart from native Ukrainians. Additionally, Facebook has been identified as an impactful medium for both fostering immigrant identities and facilitating the proliferation of xenophobia in Europe (Ekman, 2019).

Based on previous studies, social media—particularly Facebook—plays a crucial role in shaping a community's identity. For instance, a study conducted by Al-Dheleai & Tasir, (2017) indicates that students view Facebook as a valuable platform for academic interaction. Therefore, these same mechanisms can also be effective for fostering regional identity. For example, the "types of student interaction" identified in the study, such as direct questions, information sharing, commenting, and initiating discussions, are also methods through which young people might engage with content related to regional identity. Consequently, based on this evidence, Facebook presents a significant opportunity for ASEAN to cultivate public awareness of its regional identity. This opportunity is particularly noteworthy given that ASEAN represents the largest collective of internet users globally. Data sourced from ASEAN UP in January 2017 revealed that out of ASEAN's population of more than 338.79 million, 305.47 million were active social media users..

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach to examine how ASEAN utilizes Facebook to shape public awareness of its collective identity. The research methodology adopted was netnography, a form of anthropological inquiry conducted online, using publicly accessible data where individuals are free to express themselves on social media platforms. The primary data source for this study was the official ASEAN Facebook page, accessible at the ASEAN Secretariat's Facebook page. The rich content generated by Facebook users provided invaluable qualitative data for this research. User-generated materials such as videos, images, reactions, and text posts serve as robust qualitative data sources on Facebook.

For the objectives of this study, the focus was on specific categories of user-generated textual data, including texts written and published by Facebook users, responses to posts or other comments on the platform, indicators of user approval or emotional engagement with a post, and instances where users not only approve of a post but also demonstrate a deeper level of engagement by redistributing it to their network. These data were subsequently extracted and analyzed using NVIVO 12 Plus software and are presented in a descriptive narrative format.

Literature Review

Looking at the theoretical foundations for the concepts of regionalism and regional integration reveals that over the last five decades, academics of international relations have made significant attempts to explain the role and importance of regional integration in international politics (Khani, 2018). There are two approaches in the regionalism study, old and new regionalism; both are distinguished by reference to the wave or generation of emergence (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2007). The first wave is rooted in the experience of destroying interwar and World War II nationalism that emerged in Western Europe in the late 1940s and ended in the early 1970s. Early theories or approaches to regionalism, at that time, were always concerned with peace and tended to see the state as a problem rather than a solution. The most relevant theories are federalism, functionalism, and neo-functionalism (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2007). The second wave began to emerge in the mid-1980s in Western Europe with the White Paper and the Single European Act. In contrast to "old", the new regionalism considers new aspects, primarily those that emphasize globalization. Regionalism is closely related to globalization, although there are differences in the relationship between the two.

The different approaches to regionalism are similar when scientists have different views between “regionalism/regional cooperation” and “regionalization/regional integration” (Söderbaum, 2007). Regional cooperation refers to an open process in which individual countries (or perhaps other actors) within a particular geographic area act together for mutual benefit to accomplish common tasks in certain areas, regardless of conflicts of interest in other areas of activity. Meanwhile, regional integration refers to a more profound process in which previously autonomous units are merged into a single unit. Thus, regional integration refers more to the process of cooperation, integration, cohesion, and identity, which creates regional space for a specific or general affair.

In this article, the authors tend to use the perspective of regional integration to understand how ASEAN builds its regional cohesion and identity. As a process, regional integration can be shaped by actors from within the region and external forces. There are four stages in this regional integration process, consisting of regional formation (the creation of “soft/hard” boundaries), symbolic formation (names/other symbols), institutional formation (institutions that produce/reproduce other forms), and regional formation as part of a regional system and social awareness, namely a region with an “identity” (Paasi, 2011, 2017). Identity covers two elements: regional identity and regional identity or awareness of the people living in or outside the area (Paasi, 2011). These forms are produced and reproduced continuously by individual and institutional practices and economic, political, governmental, cultural/media, and educational discourses. Therefore, to understand regional production, reproduction, and de-institutionalization (i.e., merger or dissolution), one must look at how actors promote new regional identities to their societies and member states.

Furthermore, ASEAN, which is engaged in the ongoing endeavor of regional integration, necessitates the cultivation of a distinct regional identity. This is particularly pertinent as ASEAN interacts with its member countries, each of which is concurrently navigating its own nation-building process. The challenge for ASEAN lies in harmonizing the historical, cultural, ideological, political, and economic diversities across its member states. Its tact in this regard is manifested through the “Narrative of ASEAN Identity,” adopted at the 37th ASEAN Summit in 2020. According to this narrative, the ASEAN identity is anchored in two core values: constructed and inherited (<https://asean.org/narrative-asean-identity/>, 2020). ‘Constructed values’ refer to the collective virtues that emerge from a deliberate and conscious endeavor to engender loyalty and achieve communal objectives. In contrast, ‘inherited values’ stem from the cultural and societal norms passed down through

generations, culminating in the diverse yet interconnected communities of Southeast Asia.

ASEAN leaders have reached a consensus that the identity of ASEAN, as articulated in Article 2 of the ASEAN Charter, is founded on values including respect, peace and security, prosperity, non-interference, consultation/dialogue, adherence to international law and trade norms, democracy, freedom, human rights promotion and protection, unity in diversity, inclusivity, and ASEAN centrality in external relations—collectively termed as ‘the ASEAN Way.’ This term encapsulates cultural elements that share commonalities across member countries, thus distinguishing ASEAN from Western paradigms of multilateralism (Nguyen, 2018). ASEAN’s identity is further framed by the principles of hybridization and social complexity (Noor, 2015). Therefore, the regional identity of ASEAN is constructed through cultural acculturation that spans traditions, beliefs, religions, arts, food, sports, and languages, all while embracing and respecting such diversity (<https://asean.org/narrative-asean-identity/>, 2020).

Additionally, the formulation and dissemination of the ASEAN identity can be executed via multiple avenues, such as direct contact, education, art, mass media, and notably, social media. Social media has emerged as a potent tool for fostering discourse among its users and offers significant potential as an instrumental vehicle for crafting and propagating the ASEAN identity. It signifies a paradigm shift in the manner in which people discover, consume, and share information. It embodies a confluence of sociology and technology, transforming traditional one-to-many monologues into many-to-many dialogues and democratizing the flow of information by evolving users from mere content consumers to content creators (Burita, 2019).

As a form of technology-based mass media, social media wields significant influence over human life (Habermas, 2006). While platforms like Facebook, Skype, Twitter, and YouTube may be relatively recent entrants to the market, their impact is comparable to traditional gatherings that have the power to delineate racial, class, and ethnic lines (Shabir et al., 2017). Importantly, the potency of social media is rooted in information and communication technology, offering a digital space where people can engage in discussions on a myriad of topics—ranging from economic and social to political issues. Such platforms enable users to both perceive and catalyze social movements aimed at articulating their interests (Shirazi, 2013).

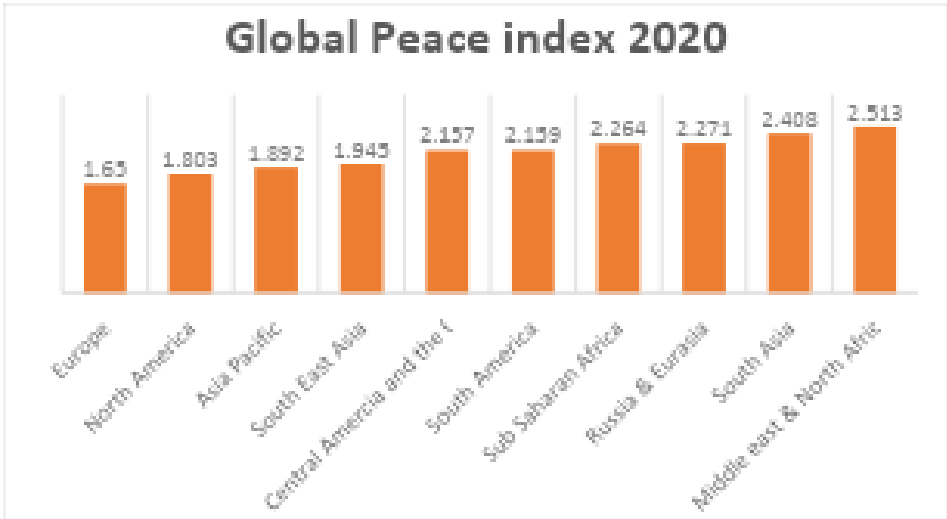
The discourse process on social media commences with communities framing their social realities. Subsequently, these framed realities are shared through the platforms, inviting further discussion and engagement. Responses from netizens can vary significantly, ranging from passive engagement—

such as merely reading or viewing a post—to active involvement, which may manifest as commenting with diverse viewpoints or showing agreement through comments, images, or actions like sharing the post. Ultimately, this discourse process leads to a collective understanding or agreement concerning the social reality under discussion (Shirazi, 2013). Within the context of this study, this process is examined in relation to ASEAN’s initiatives aimed at forging and ingraining a distinctive ASEAN identity among its populace, particularly focusing on how such discourse unfolds within the ASEAN community on Facebook.

Findings and Discussion

Over the past five decades, ASEAN has made significant strides in maintaining peace and stability, enhancing regional cooperation, establishing a common set of norms, and developing the regional economy. According to the 2020 Global Peace Index, Southeast Asia was ranked as the fourth-most peaceful region and categorized as having medium to moderate levels of peace (Global Peace Index 2020: Measuring Peace in a Complex World, 2020).

Graph 1: The Level of Peace Index in Southeast Asia 2020



Source: Processed from (Global Peace Index 2020: Measuring Peace In A Complex World, 2020)

In addition, the 2019 ASEAN Integration Report highlighted ASEAN as the fifth-largest global economic power with a GDP of USD 3 trillion. The report also indicated that the total trade volume within the ASEAN region reached USD 2.8 trillion in 2018, which was a 23.9% increase compared to 2015 figures (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2019).

Despite these economic accomplishments, it's imperative to note that such interactions tend to primarily benefit capital owners and the workforce while not sufficiently encouraging community-level ties. For example, economic activities have sometimes led to social conflicts and tensions between ASEAN nations, illustrated by issues such as the treatment of Indonesian foreign workers in Malaysia and Singapore. Likewise, political and security cooperation often gets complicated by national interests, evident in the South China Sea territorial disputes and Myanmar's political issues. These challenges highlight the importance for ASEAN to establish long-term solidarity and unity, not just among member states but also at the community level, through the creation of a shared identity (Nguyen, 2018).

To address the need for a cohesive regional identity, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) was founded based on the ASEAN Concorde II in 2003. The ASCC Plan of Action, adopted in 2012, aimed to instil a sense of collective identity among ASEAN member states. The objectives of this plan were multifaceted. They included mainstreaming the promotion of ASEAN awareness, regional identity, and values into national communication strategies, educational curricula, and interpersonal interactions. These interactions focus particularly on the realms of culture, arts, and sports, especially among the youth. The plan also aimed at preserving and promoting ASEAN's cultural heritage and living traditions. These traditions not only serve to deepen the understanding of the interrelationship between culture and development but also act as a source of inspiration for future initiatives. Further, the plan encouraged fostering dialogue among civilizations, cultures, and religions as a means to enhance mutual understanding,

Previously, heads of state and government from ASEAN nations committed to building a people-oriented, people-centered, and rules-based ASEAN community during the 25th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur in 2015. They resolved to foster a community in which all individuals and stakeholders can contribute to, and benefit from, an increasingly integrated and connected society. This would include enhanced collaboration across political-security, economic, and socio-cultural spheres to promote sustainable, equitable, and inclusive development (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2016).

According to the ASCC Blueprint 2025, which was also adopted at the 25th ASEAN Summit, the essence of community building lies in the

inclusion of all sectors and stakeholders within ASEAN. The Blueprint places an emphasis on elevating and sustaining awareness of the ASEAN community while deepening a sense of ASEAN identity. It calls for multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder engagements. This includes dialogues and partnerships with sub-regional organizations, academia, local governments at various levels, public-private partnerships, and community and tripartite engagement with the labor sector. It also involves interactions with social enterprises, government organizations, non-governmental organizations, and civil society organizations (GO-NGO/CSO). In addition, it highlights the role of corporate social responsibility (CSR), inter-faith, and inter-cultural dialogues in enhancing awareness and fostering caring societies within ASEAN (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2016).

Subsequently, during the 27th ASEAN Summit in Manila in 2017, ASEAN leaders assigned a more significant role to the ASEAN Ministers Responsible for Information (AMRI) to bolster ASEAN awareness. They tasked them with educating the public about the benefits and opportunities arising from ASEAN integration. The AMRI was also responsible for countering the dissemination of fake news within the region. Their efforts in utilizing information media to raise ASEAN awareness have been well-received across various information and media sectors in the ASEAN community. As a testament to this commitment, they adopted the ASEAN Strategic Plan for Information and Media 2016-2025. This strategic plan aims to advance cooperation in providing accessible information about ASEAN, promoting a sense of regional identity, leveraging the use of information and communication technology to reach broader audiences, and developing multimedia content that is relevant to ASEAN (ASEAN Ministers Responsible for Information, 2024).

The third strategy outlined in the ASEAN Strategic Plan for Information and Media 2016-2025, specifically the leveraging of information and communication technology to engage a broader audience, is particularly relevant for ASEAN in today's social media age. Social media platforms are known for initiating and organizing social activities and revolutions, thereby challenging or even toppling established regimes (Shirky, 2011). Additionally, social media has the potential to bolster civil society and the public sphere, leading to long-term transformative change.

The strength of social media resides in its democratization of information: it offers equal opportunities for all users to access, respond to, or become a source of information. This opens up avenues for discursive communication, where posted information elicits a range of responses from passive to active engagement. A passive response might entail merely reading

or viewing a post, while active engagement could involve commenting on the post, sharing different viewpoints, or endorsing it through comments, images, or shareable actions. Ultimately, this discourse process leads to a consensus about the social reality under discussion. The effectiveness of the message sender in propagating ideas through social media is primarily dictated by the manner in which the message is conveyed and the level of community involvement in the social discourse process (Shirky, 2011).

Furthermore, ASEAN has shown responsiveness in acknowledging the growing significance of new media in the region, making the role of social media crucial for nurturing the ASEAN community. According to the Digital 2017 report by We Are Social, the number of active social media users in Southeast Asia surged by 31% within a single year, amounting to an addition of 72 million new users in the 12 months following January 2016.

Table 1: ASEAN Digital Society

No	State	Population	Internet Users	Social Media Users	Mobile Connections	Mobile Social Media Users
1	Indonesia	262.0 million	132.7 million	106.0 million	374.4 million	92.0 million
2	Thailand	68.22 million	46.0 million	46.0 million	90.94 million	42.0 million
3	Malaysia	30.96 million	22.00 million	22.00 million	42.93 million	20.0 million
4	Singapore	5.74 million	4.71 million	4.40 million	8.44 million	4.00 million
5	Philippines	103.0 million	60.0 million	60.0 million	129.4 million	54.0 million
6	Vietnam	94.93 million	50.05 million	46.00 million	124.7 million	41.0 million
7	Brunei	0.431 million	0.37 million	0.37 million	0.515 million	0.33 million
8	Cambodia	15.95 million	7.16 million	4.90 million	27.60 million	4.40 million
9	Myanmar	54.60 million	14.00 million	14.00 million	50.56 million	13.0 million
10	Laos	6.98 million	1.80 million	1.80 million	5.95 million	1.50 million
Total		642.76 million	338.79 million	305.47 million	855.44 million	272.23 million

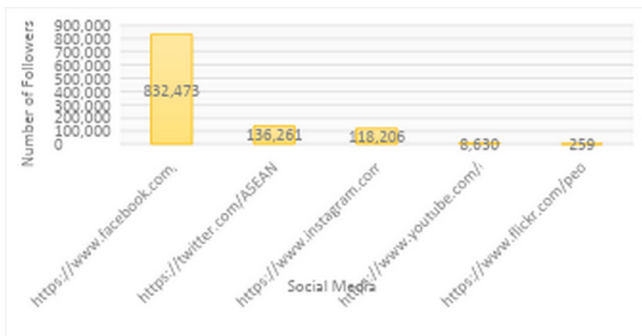
Source: <https://aseanup.com/southeast-asia-digital-social-mobile/>, 2017.

In response to the burgeoning role of social media, the ASEAN Secretariat has been assigned the task of developing comprehensive strategies and programs to enhance ASEAN's visibility online. The organization has increased its activity on major social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter to amplify public awareness across the region. Official accounts for ASEAN on these platforms were launched in the 2010s. Between 2012 and 2013, the ASEAN Secretariat collaborated with MC Digital Services, a digital consultancy firm, to address its lack of international visibility and engagement on social media platforms.

Several initiatives were undertaken in this collaboration. First, a strategic framework was developed to foster citizen engagement with ASEAN's activities while effectively promoting the organization as a body committed to regional development. Second, comprehensive revisions were made to ASEAN's style guide, including its existing logo, offering a unified framework for message colors and language styles. Third, a detailed strategic document was prepared that set out editorial activities and guidelines for ASEAN. This resulted in a threefold increase in media engagement concerning ASEAN-related news and press releases, as well as a rapid growth in the number of followers on both Facebook and Twitter. Fourth, extensive training was provided to Secretariat staff, incorporating insights from key stakeholders and social media experts, to equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills for effective social media engagement. (Source:MC Digital's Campaign on ASEAN Social Media Strategy).

In addition to this, ASEAN has expanded its presence to almost all popular social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, and Instagram. Among these, Facebook enjoys the most extensive following, followed by Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Flickr, as indicated in the graph below.

Graph 2: Followers of Social Media in ASEAN 2017



Source: <https://aseanup.com/southeast-asia-digital-social-mobile/>, 2017

The large following of the official ASEAN Facebook account, www.facebook.com/aseansecretariat, is reflective of the substantial number of Facebook users in the ASEAN region. In 2017, Facebook users in this area totalled 305.47 million, a figure that escalated to 430.35 million by 2019 (Source: Southeast Asia Digital, Social, Mobile Report, 2019). The substantial base of followers and Facebook users within ASEAN underscores the pivotal role of social media in shaping and disseminating a collective ASEAN identity.

ASEAN utilizes its official Facebook fan page, www.facebook.com/aseansecretariat, to promote a variety of its agendas and initiatives to the online community. The content posted on this Facebook account largely mirrors the posts found on ASEAN's official website, www.asean.org, thereby making the Facebook page a comprehensive source for official institutional information regarding ASEAN. As of May 2021, the page boasted 831,885 followers and received 815,312 likes (ASEAN Secretariat Facebook Page, 2021), with a daily fan addition rate of 404.83 individuals (Socialbakers Analytics, 2021).

However, the relatively limited growth in the number of fans and followers indicates that the ASEAN Facebook page is not fully capturing the interest of internet users within the ASEAN region. An analysis conducted using Likealyzer in 2018 yielded the following results:

Table 2: Analysis results of the ASEAN Facebook fan page

Aspect	Score	Description
Frontpage	100%	Give visitors a great first impression
About	79%	Do a good job of providing visitors with context and information
Activity	57%	Post per day: 2.5, with 76% photos, 18% notes, 5 % videos
Response	0%	The responsiveness of this page is not good at all. • No users can post, while Facebook is a remarkable channel for fans to interact with their favorite brands. Allowing users to post to a page is the first step in increasing engagement.
Engagement	N/A	• Cannot score engagement based on public profiles • 18,417 people talking about this (PTAT), measuring how many people have interacted with a page or its content, in any way, over the last seven days • 646,262 total page likes • The engagement rate of 3% was calculated by dividing the page's PTAT by the total number of likes.

Source: <https://likealyzer.com/>, 2018

The results of the analysis indicate that in 2018, the ASEAN account had a low daily posting activity of 2.5, earning a score of 57%. Additionally, the account showed a lack of responsiveness to its fan base, as evidenced by a 0% score on the responsiveness indicator, revealing the nature of ASEAN’s communication with visitors. Fan engagement, measured in terms of shares, likes, and comments, was also minimal, at only 3%. A subsequent analysis conducted in 2021 using Socialbakers revealed only marginal improvements. Daily posting activity on the ASEAN Facebook page decreased to 1.63 posts per day, with content primarily comprising 87.76% photos and 12.24% videos. Meanwhile, user involvement showed significant activity, as detailed in Table 3 below:

Table 3: Most Engaging Post Type per Post Type

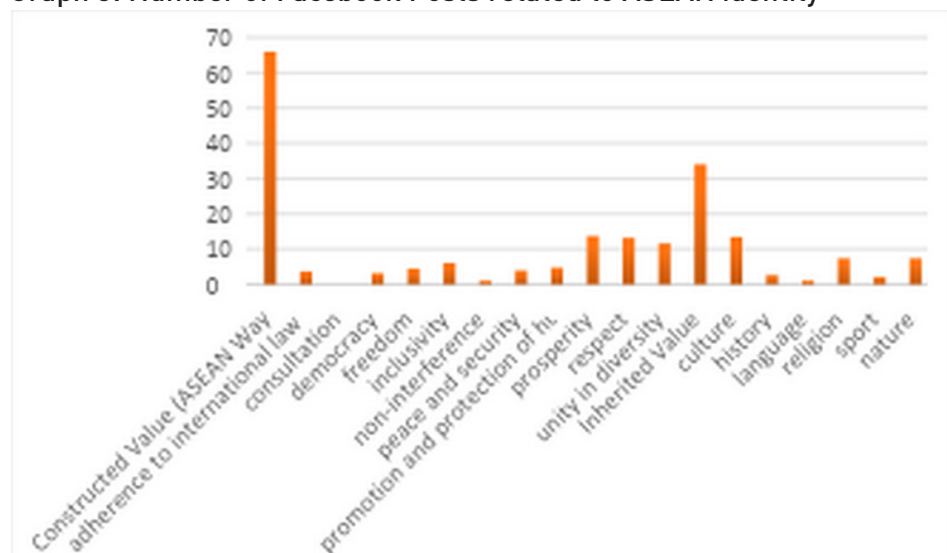
Type	Distribution	Reaction	Comment	Share
Photo	86.37%	28,082	45,820	5,642
		35.30%	57.60%	7.09%
Video	13.63%	1,148	430	174
		65.53%	24.54%	9.93%
Total		29,230	46,250	5,816
Average engagement per day: 2,709.87				

Source: Processed from <https://suite.socialbakers.com/>, 2021

Although user activity on ASEAN’s Facebook page increased from February to May 2021, the majority of this interaction centered on concerns about the coup in Myanmar.

On a different note, ASEAN has effectively leveraged Facebook for identity construction. A content analysis conducted using NVIVO 12 Plus revealed that 66% of posts related to ASEAN identity were categorized under constructed values, while 34% fell under inherited values. Posts associated with constructed values predominantly featured themes such as prosperity, accounting for 14%, mutual respect at 13%, and unity and diversity at 12%. In contrast, posts dealing with inherited values largely focused on culture, constituting 13%, and both religion and natural beauty, each making up 7% of the content.

Graph 3: Number of Facebook Posts related to ASEAN identity



Source : Data analysis utilizing NVIVO 12 Plus

In this context, welfare serves as a crucial tool for ASEAN to foster a sense of community or “we-ness” among its members. Through the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) initiative, the organization has made significant strides in deepening economic cooperation with the aim of enhancing the well-being of its citizens. As outlined in the AEC Blueprint 2025, ASEAN aspires to create an economic region that is highly integrated and cohesive, competitive, innovative, and dynamic. The plan also emphasizes the importance of enhanced connectivity and sectoral cooperation while aiming to build communities that are resilient, inclusive, and people-oriented, as well as integrated into the global economy (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2015).

However, while ASEAN has achieved notable success in economic cooperation—rising to become the world’s fifth-largest economic power with an average GDP of USD 3 million—it still faces challenges in the equitable distribution of welfare among its member countries. This disparity is evident in the Legatum Prosperity Index™ 2020, which evaluates the welfare of a country based on nine specific indicators.

Table 4: Welfare Index of ASEAN Countries

Ranking	State	Score
1	Singapore	79.51
2	Malaysia	67.49
3	Indonesia	61.1
4	Thailand	60.41
5	Vietnam	58.28
6	Philippines	56.9
7	Laos	49.92
8	Cambodia	48.55
9	Myanmar	46.78

Note: Brunei Darussalam was not found in the Legatum Prosperity Index™ 2020.

Source: Processed from <https://www.prosperity.com/rankings?pinned=&filter=>, 2021.

Issues related to welfare have also been highlighted in the Economic Freedom Index published by the Heritage Foundation in 2021. The index revealed a significant disparity among ASEAN countries concerning economic freedom. Economic freedom, defined as the fundamental right of every individual to control their own labor and property, serves as a crucial metric for assessing welfare. In a society that values economic freedom, individuals have the autonomy to work, produce, consume, and invest as they see fit. Such a society also ensures that the government allows for the free movement of labor, capital, and goods, and refrains from imposing coercive measures or restrictions on freedoms beyond what is necessary to protect and maintain freedom itself. This level of economic freedom, in turn, fosters greater prosperity (Heritage Foundation, 2021).

Table 5: Welfare Index of ASEAN Countries

Ranking	State	Score	Category
1	Singapore	89.7	Free
2	Malaysia	74.4	Mostly Free
3	Thailand	69.7	Moderately Free
4	Indonesia	66.9	Moderately Free
5	Brunei Darussalam	66.6	Moderately Free
6	Philippines	64.1	Moderately Free
7	Vietnam	61.7	Moderately Free

Ranking	State	Score	Category
8	Cambodia	57.3	Mostly unfree
9	Myanmar	55.2	Mostly unfree
10	Laos	53.9	Mostly unfree

Source: Processed from <https://www.heritage.org/index/ranking>, 2021.

Economically, the disparity among ASEAN countries is evident in the GDP per capita of each member state. Singapore boasts the highest GDP per capita, followed by Brunei Darussalam, which has approximately half of Singapore's GDP per capita. This disparity becomes glaringly apparent when comparing Singapore with CVLM (Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar) countries, which have a GDP per capita of just USD 2,075.3. This gap has been highlighted by Gugler and Vanoli in 2017, who argue that the differences in GDP among ASEAN members primarily stem from productivity asymmetry and variations in labor employment (Gugler & Vanoli, 2017). Consequently, as stated by the Asian Development Bank, "narrowing the development gap within and across ASEAN economies is an essential step toward deepening economic integration" (ADB, 2014 apud Gugler and Vanoli, 2017).

Table 6: GDP of ASEAN Countries

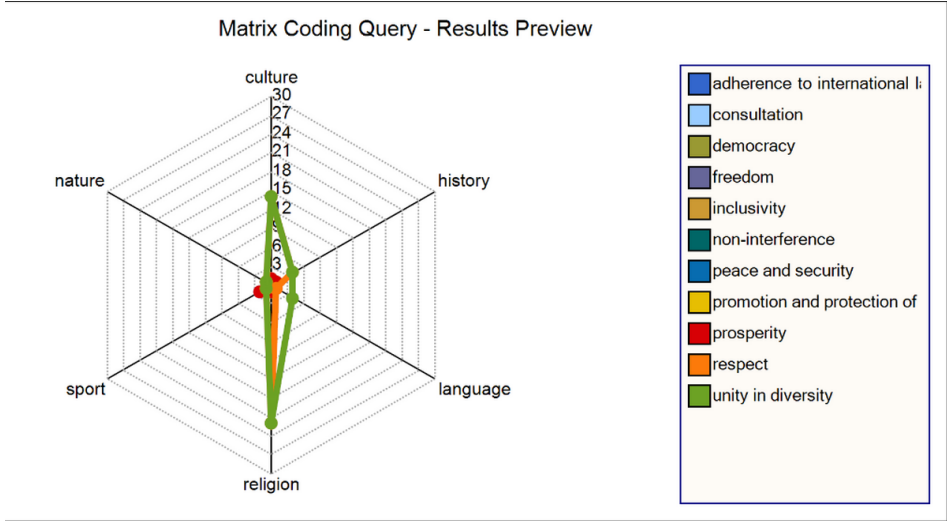
Country Name	GDP per capita (USD)
Singapore	65,233.3
Brunei Darussalam	31,086.8
Malaysia	11,414.2
Thailand	7,806.7
Indonesia	4,135.6
Philippines	3,485.1
Vietnam	2,715.3
Laos PDR	2,534.9
Cambodia	1,643.1
Myanmar	1,407.8

Source: Processed from World Bank, 2021

ASEAN's strategy of promoting "unity in diversity" serves as a cornerstone for regional identity formation. This phrase encapsulates the recognition of the ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity among its member countries. According to a detailed NVIVO 12 Plus analysis (Graph 4), the

concept of “unity in diversity” correlates strongly with key inherited values such as respect, culture, religion, history, language, sport, and natural landscapes.

Graph 4: The Relationship Between Unity in Diversity with Inherited Values



Source: Data analysis utilizing NVIVO 12 Plus

ASEAN has strategically adopted this “unity in diversity” ethos to circumvent potential conflicts arising from nation-building initiatives within its member states (Jönsson, 2010). This approach acts as a mediator between the twin processes of national and regional identity formation, particularly crucial when both are evolving in parallel.

The ASEAN identity is disseminated through strategic communication, predominantly via its official Facebook page. An NVIVO 12 Plus analysis reveals the words “community,” “development,” “stability,” and “prosperity” as frequent vocabulary choices. The prominence of the term “community” underscores ASEAN’s commitment to fostering a sense of collective identity built upon cultural diversity.

objective was to explore the role of social media, specifically Facebook, in the identity formation of the ASEAN community. The study integrated insights from prior research, notably the work of Al-Dheleai and Tasir (2017) and employed the lens of “unity in diversity” as a theoretical framework. Utilizing NVIVO 12 Plus for data analysis provided quantifiable metrics to assess ASEAN’s social media strategies and their efficacy. These findings reveal that while ASEAN has been effective in propagating its core values and messages, there is a significant disconnect in its outreach to its online community, calling for an immediate reassessment of its social media strategies.

The study’s results have substantial implications. They suggest that despite ASEAN being one of the largest internet-using communities in the world, its efforts in identity formation through social media platforms have room for significant improvement. These findings are not merely academic but have practical applications, signalling an urgency for ASEAN to reconsider its online communication tactics.

Looking forward, future research can extend the scope of this study in several ways. This could include investigating the causes of low social media engagement among the ASEAN populace, despite high internet usage rates. Subsequent studies could also explore the roles of other social media platforms in shaping regional identity and might utilize machine learning techniques for more nuanced user engagement and sentiment analysis.

In summary, this research underscores the complexities of identity formation in the digital age, particularly for a region as diverse as ASEAN. The study reveals both missed opportunities and significant challenges, highlighting the need for a more nuanced and effective approach to online community engagement for ASEAN. This final consideration aims to encapsulate the core arguments, implications, and potential future directions, in line with the reviewer’s suggestions.

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ABSTRACT

The ASEAN community is deeply invested in cultivating a regional identity as part of its commitment to people-centered regionalism. Despite the importance of this endeavor, there remains a significant gap in the public's awareness of what constitutes an 'ASEAN identity,' even among influential elites and member states with a long-standing relationship with the organization. Leveraging the influence of ASEAN as a norm-setting entity, this study aims to explore the organization's strategies for shaping a collective identity via its Facebook presence. Utilizing a qualitative research design supported by NVIVO 12 Plus for data analysis, this paper argues that social media platforms like Facebook, known for their interactive, participatory, and democratic features, offer ASEAN a valuable channel for fostering a shared understanding of its identity. Our findings indicate that ASEAN prioritizes the creation of shared values over the exploration of the diverse cultural heritage of its member nations. Moreover, the organization emphasizes the importance of prosperity, mutual respect, and 'unity in diversity' as key tenets of its collective identity.

KEYWORDS

ASEAN. Regionalism. Facebook. Identity. People-centered.

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