

Communication Strategies to Amplify ASEAN Awareness and Foster an ASEAN Identity

ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Trend Report
No. 23 (2026)

ASCC Research & Development Platform on Media, Culture, and Arts



one vision
one identity
one community



ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Trend Report

ASCC Research and Development Platforms Programme

The ASEAN Secretariat
Jakarta

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Catalogue-in-Publication Data

ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Trend Report

Jakarta

ASEAN Secretariat

Classification Number

363.7

1. ASEAN - ASCC - Media, Culture, Arts

ISSN: 2986-4224

Vol. 23

ASEAN: A Community of Opportunities for All

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General information on ASEAN appears online at the ASEAN website www.asean.org.

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This trend report was made possible with the support of:
ASEAN-China Cooperation Fund

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Acknowledgements

The ASCC Research and Development Platforms Programme is the proactive response of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) to analyse, understand, and formulate strategic responses to multifaceted challenges in the region. ASCC's R&D Platforms focus on diverse sectors crucial to the socio-cultural fabric of the ASEAN Community, with the media, culture, and arts, as one such focus.

The ASCC R&D Platform on Media, Culture, and Arts aims to develop a robust body of research outputs and identify and develop a pool of experts more aware of the ASEAN context. Its primary objective is to incorporate external perspectives to foster an increased awareness of blind spots, identify gaps and trends, and facilitate policy and advocacy engagement on cross-sectoral issues. The ASCC R&D Platform on Media, Culture, and Art received support from the Government of People's Republic of China Through the ASEAN-China Cooperation Fund (ACCF).

This report, as part of the ASCC Research and Development (R&D) Platform on Media, Culture, and Arts, aims to provide a strategic space for dialogue on emerging and cross-cutting issues in ASEAN. In particular, it highlights key challenges and trends that are likely to shape the post-2025 landscape; these include, among others, digital transformation for media industry, preservation and promotion of cultural heritage, ASEAN Creative Economy, and ASEAN Identity.

This report was made possible by the technical expertise and knowledge shared by many individuals and organisations, whom we thank here:

- The Senior Officials Meeting on Culture and Arts (SOMCA), the Senior Officials' Meeting Responsible for Information and Media (SOMRI), and the Senior Officials Committee for the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (SOCA), for their guidance and insights;
- The ASEAN Secretariat, under the leadership of H.E. San Lwin, the Deputy Secretary-General of ASEAN for the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC); Dr. Puthsodary Tat, Head of the ASCC Monitoring Division; the ASCC Analysis Division comprising Dr. Erica Paula Sioson, Ms. Ratnawati Kusuma Jaya, Ms. Karina Oriza Herastuti; and the Culture and Information Division, in particular, Dr. Jonathan Tan, Ms. Mary Anne M. Luis, Dr. Noel Hidalgo Tan, Ms. Fiori Rizki Djuwita, Ms. Widya Librianti, and Ms. Armita Soetarto, for their feedback, support, and facilitation during the development of this publication;
- Former Deputy Secretary-General of ASEAN for the ASCC, H.E. Ekkhaphab Phanthavong for his direction during the implementation of the ASCC R&D Platforms Programme; Dr. Benjamin Loh, former Head of the ASCC Monitoring Division, for his strategic implementation guidance and oversight and Ms. Pricilia Putri Nirmala Sari, Ms. Rebekha Adriana, and Ms. Hizky Kezia Ambroise Sufa; former members of ASCC Analysis Division for their facilitation and support;
- Dr. Teh Lip Li and Ms. Amalia Hayati;
- Mr. Christian Razukas for copyediting.

We invite readers to engage with the findings and analysis presented in this publication. We believe this research offers valuable insights for business, educators, individuals, policymakers, and practitioners alike, as we collectively navigate media, culture, and arts in ASEAN.

Communication Strategies to Amplify ASEAN Awareness and Foster an ASEAN Identity

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ASCC Research and Development Platform on Media, Culture, and Arts

Dr. Teh Lip Li

Executive Summary

This report analyses the external communication strategies of ASEAN and ASEAN Member States (AMS) intended to amplify ASEAN awareness and foster a shared regional identity. It explores the following areas:

- How digital and social media platforms engage young people in AMS, and how emerging technologies create immersive ASEAN-related experiences.
- How ASEAN-related information has been incorporated into individual AMS national education curricula.
- How AMS have leveraged their unique cultural assets to promote their national and ASEAN regional identities.
- How bottom-up, youth-led projects can foster ASEAN awareness.

This report assesses current approaches and highlights best practices through case studies. It then makes recommendations for the future communications strategies of ASEAN and its members. The recommendations include developing more inclusive narratives, leveraging cross-sector collaborations, and implementing robust evaluation frameworks.

- ASEAN policymakers are encouraged to investigate ways to:
- balance national and regional identities in external messaging,
- address the linguistic diversity and cultural contexts of the member states,
- address uncomfortable truths and historical tensions that have hindered external communications, and
- introduce or improve monitoring and evaluation processes.

As ASEAN reaches its sixth decade, effective communication will be crucial for realising its vision of an integrated ASEAN Community with a strong regional identity.

Section 1: Introduction

1. ASEAN Awareness and Identity

ASEAN, established on August 8, 1967, was established to maintain regional stability and foster economic cooperation during the Cold War. Its role and ambitions have since evolved. ASEAN aspires to foster an ASEAN Community that engages in dialogue and cooperation on political-security, economic, and socio-cultural concerns. The idea of an ASEAN Community was devised to foster a shared ASEAN identity and awareness of ASEAN among the diverse populations.

ASEAN recognises the significance of promoting a regional identity to realise its vision of a people-oriented, people-centred community. However, the cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity of the member states has made this difficult to achieve. Studies consistently indicate a low level of ASEAN awareness among the general public, highlighting the need to improve communication strategies to bridge the gap between public perception and ASEAN's institutional progress.

Fostering ASEAN awareness and ASEAN identity are crucial to:

- enhance regional economic integration, intra-regional trade, and labour mobility;
- ensure that the region's collective voice in global affairs is heard;
- increase ASEAN's influence at international forums and negotiations;
- mitigate historical tensions to prevent future disputes between AMS;
- encourage cultural exchange and an appreciating the region's rich diversity; and
- engage younger generations, to ensure ASEAN's long-term relevance and sustainability.

2. Objective

This trend report assesses ASEAN and communication strategies undertaken by the AMS to amplify ASEAN awareness and foster a regional identity. The objectives of this report are to:

- analyse recent trends in ASEAN's communication approaches across various channels and platforms.
- assess existing strategies for reaching diverse target audiences.
- explore trends and technologies potentially shaping future communication strategies.
- identify challenges and limitations in current communications.
- highlight innovative practices and successful case studies.

The report provides recommendations for policymakers, communications professionals, and other stakeholders involved in ASEAN-related outreach.

3. Methodology

This report adopted qualitative research methods by combining policy and academic research. The research methods included document analyses, informal surveys from online forums, and case study analyses. The author examined ASEAN documents, policy papers, and communications materials to identify themes,

strategies, and narratives. The report incorporated academic and policy literature on ASEAN communications messaging and strategies, cultural exchange, identity-building initiatives, integration, and regional identity formation.

The author applied a multidisciplinary approach to examine the assumptions, influences, and underlying narratives in ASEAN's communication strategies. The approach combines several social science disciplines, including cultural heritage, gender and media studies, geography, international relations, political economy, and political science.

4. Scope and Limitations

This report focuses on ASEAN and AMS, privileging the interests of the ASEAN Secretariat and sectoral bodies under the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. It does not focus the communications strategies of stakeholders such as the media, the general public, civil society or the ASEAN Dialogue Partners who fund communications activities on ASEAN.

The report examined official communications, national initiatives, public diplomacy efforts, digital and social media strategies, cultural and educational exchange programs, and the role of civil society organisations from 2008 (post-ASEAN Charter) to 2023. It considered the complex task of promoting a collective ASEAN identity alongside national or other identities.

The report focuses on regional communication strategies pertaining to ASEAN issues, identity formation, and its impact although it touches on the broader context of ASEAN integration. The economic and political aspects of integration are discussed in relation to communications implications.

This approach has limitations, including a focus on English-language materials and a reliance on secondary academic research on the rapid evolution of the digital communications. The report did not use surveys, interviews, or apply statistical modelling due to time and budget constraints.

Section 2 discusses the current status of communications in ASEAN. Section 3 investigates the evolution of ASEAN communications, trends, and themes. Section 4 discusses challenges and risks faced by ASEAN in developing relevant communications strategies. Chapter 5 provides a conclusion and recommendations.

Section 2:

Status of ASEAN Communications Strategies

ASEAN and AMS employ diverse communication strategies to promote awareness and foster regional identity. Their strategies include developing cultural programs, digital initiatives, educational networks, institutional mechanisms, public diplomacy, and traditional media outreach. At the regional level, the ASEAN Secretariat's Community Relations Division plays a key role in disseminating information. National implementation is varied across individual AMS, with government ministries often spearheading ASEAN awareness campaigns.

1. Key Actors

ASEAN communications involve a complex network of stakeholders. The ASEAN Secretariat coordinates regional communication efforts and, together with relevant ASEAN organs, while the individual AMS coordinate the national policy-making activities. The national governments, typically represented by their foreign ministries, implement awareness programs at the national level. Civil society organisations, cultural institutions, educational institutions, media organisations, the private sector, and youth organisations, also contribute to shaping and implementing communication strategies.

2. Target Audience

ASEAN's communication strategies aim to reach diverse audiences in the region, including government officials and policymakers, media professionals, members of the professional and business community, educators and academics, civil society organisations, students, youth and the general public. Outside ASEAN, strategies target global policymakers, investors, members of the international community, and tourists. The diversity of these target audiences requires a diverse approach.

3. Core Communications Channels

ASEAN employs a range of communication channels, including the ASEAN social media accounts and website, communiqués, and summit declarations. Public diplomacy initiatives, such as the ASEAN Foundation programs and youth exchange schemes, have facilitated direct engagement. Cultural promotions have included events such as the ASEAN Cultural Year celebrations and arts projects, while education programs have incorporated ASEAN-related curricula and university studies. ASEAN has also collaborated with the media through the ASEAN News Network and other co-productions. ASEAN maintains an active presence on social media and has developed virtual exhibitions, while cultivating traditional media to reach older people and rural populations.

Section 3: Communications Trends

ASEAN's communication strategies reflect complex institutional structures, regional dynamics, and technological developments. This section investigates these strategies, highlighting their potential and limitations.

1. Evolution of ASEAN Communications

ASEAN's communications have evolved substantially in recent years, reflecting broad shifts in governance, changing regional dynamics, and technological advances. The shift to more inclusive communication approaches is notable. The partnerships with civil society organisations and the private sector reflect the limits of state-centric strategies and media digitalisation (Gerard, 2014). This evolution demonstrates the changing regional power dynamics and the increasing influence of non-state actors in shaping public discourse.

The growing involvement of ASEAN Dialogue Partners and international organisations in communications efforts as highlights the interaction of economic interests, geopolitical considerations, and cultural diplomacy. These partnerships have reflected the position of ASEAN in global economic and political networks and influenced how it has communicated its identity and objectives (Breslin & Higgott, 2000).

However, the rise of digital platforms, while enabling increased cross-border communications, exposes the digital divides in and between AMS. Technological advancements intersect with existing socio-economic inequalities, influencing access to and participation in regional discourses (Goh, 2020).

2. ASEAN Awareness

ASEAN's communication strategies reflect its role as a regional organization, shape narratives that reinforce political, economic, and cultural cohesion, and balance diverse national interests and historical legacies.

2.1 Security Narratives and Regional Cohesion

ASEAN's security-focused communication strategies reflect the organisation's historical role in maintaining regional stability. Historically, these narratives were intertwined with regional economic interests and power relations. This trend reflects the dominance of political and economic elites in shaping regional discourse (Jones, 2012). However, this emphasis on ASEAN's state-centric security frameworks may have marginalised human security concerns (Caballero-Anthony, 2005).

2.2 Cultural Heritage and Memory

The use of cultural narratives in ASEAN's communication strategies plays a significant role in fostering a shared regional identity. However, these narratives are often shaped by economic imperatives, particularly in the context of tourism promotion (Chua, 2015). ASEAN's communications strategies have also combined discussions on cultural preservation, economic development with the need to build the regional identity. The commodification of cultural heritage for economic gain raises questions about authenticity and the potential exploitation of local communities.

2.3 Environmental Narratives

Increasingly, ASEAN's communications strategies focus on environmental themes, reflecting the growing recognition of shared ecological challenges. These narratives have been shaped by competing economic interests, varying national levels of development, and global environmental discourses (Hirsch, 2020). However, the framing of environmental issues often emphasises technocratic solutions, potentially sidelining grassroots and indigenous perspectives. While ASEAN's approach is typical of state-led solutions, it often neglects complex local environmental knowledge and practices.

2.4 Economic Narratives

The prominence of economic integration in ASEAN's messaging reflects the organisation's approach to regionalism. However, these narratives reinforce existing power structures and exacerbated inequalities in the region (Dosch, 2017). Messaging focused on market integration and competitiveness can marginalise alternative economic models and social welfare concerns, illustrating the tension between economic growth and social equity in ASEAN's communication strategies (Nesadurai, 2018).

2.5 Gender Representation

ASEAN's approach to gender representation in communications reflects broader societal norms and regional power structures. Gender roles in AMS have been intertwined with economic systems, political structures, and cultural traditions (True et al., 2017). Limited representation of women in ASEAN's communications leadership has reinforced existing gender inequalities and hindered efforts supporting more inclusive economic and political participation (Sim, 2021).

2.6 Youth Engagement and Future-Oriented Narratives

ASEAN's focus on youth engagement through digital platforms reflects regional demographic trends and the growing importance of the digital economy. These strategies are shaped by economic imperatives, technological advancements, and changing social norms (Sinpeng & Tapsell, 2020). However, emphasising outreach to tech-savvy, globally connected young professionals via youth-focused narratives may inadvertently marginalise rural and economically disadvantaged youth, widening regional socio-economic disparities.

2.7 Technology and Innovation Narratives

ASEAN's promotion of technological progress and innovation in communication strategies has positioned the region as a rising technology hub. The global economic trends, regional development goals, and the interests of technology corporations shapes this narrative (Raska & Ang, 2019). However, emphasising smart or digital solutions can reinforce urban-rural divides and exacerbate existing socio-economic inequalities, demonstrating how advances in technology, economic development, and social inclusion could affect ASEAN's vision for the future.

3. ASEAN Identity

The Narrative of ASEAN Identity, adopted in 2020, has been central to ASEAN's vision of a people-oriented, people-centred community. However, the formation and promotion of ASEAN identity present unique challenges in a region characterised by immense cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity. Forming ASEAN identity is complex and dynamic, and shaped by the interaction of political, economic, and cultural forces, as detailed below.

3.1 Concepts and Contexts

The notion of ASEAN identity has evolved since the organisation's inception. Initially conceived as a diplomatic construct to promote regional stability, ASEAN now promotes a regional identity encompassing cultural,

economic, and social dimensions. This reflects the broader shifts in regional dynamics and global geopolitics.

While discussions on regional solidarity and shared values have been part of ASEAN's discourse since its inception, explicit use of 'ASEAN identity' became prominent in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In 2007, the ASEAN Charter formally articulated the term, marking a significant milestone in the organisation's approach to regional community-building (ASEAN, 2007). However, formalisation did not lead to implementation or realisation.

ASEAN identity remains a contested and fluid concept, shaped by competing visions of regionalism and national interests (Acharya, 2018). Further, attempts to create regional coherence have often overlooked complex intra-ASEAN border and maritime concerns. There is often a disconnect between official narratives and the lived experiences of people, as identity formation has been largely an elite-driven process reinforcing existing social hierarchies.

ASEAN's conceptualisation of ASEAN identity has been deeply intertwined with economic integration, particularly the ASEAN Economic Community (Narine, 2016). However, framing ASEAN identity in economic terms raises questions about inclusivity and its relevance to diverse populations: Identity construction often privileges certain cultural forms while marginalising others, particularly minority groups.

Although ASEAN's institutional practices have shaped a regional identity (Acharya, 2014), this sectoral cooperation also shapes this identity (Nesadurai, 2018). However, a more honest engagement with regional history is needed, as identity building has often glossed over historical conflicts and power imbalances (Acharya, 2014).

Ultimately, promotion of an ASEAN identity involves power dynamics and ideological factors that may legitimise particular political and economic arrangements while marginalising alternative visions of regional community (Jones, 2016). Developing a shared regional identity in such a diverse region can be challenging.

3. 2 Politics of Identity Formation

Formation of an ASEAN identity is inherently political, involving negotiations between national interests and regional aspirations. This has been shaped by historical legacies, contemporary power dynamics, and competing visions of Southeast Asia's future.

The inclusion of newer AMS, particularly the CLMV countries (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Viet Nam), substantially impacted the politics of ASEAN identity formation. These countries have different historical experiences, political systems, and levels of economic development, complicating efforts to forge a cohesive regional identity. The political situation in Myanmar, for instance, highlights the challenges of reconciling ASEAN's non-interference principle with the promotion of shared values and norms (Dosch, 2017).

The consensus-based decision-making model of ASEAN, often criticised as inefficient, has played a crucial role in shaping its collective identity. The approach, rooted in traditional Southeast Asian diplomacy, emphasises harmony and face-saving. However, it also tends to produce lowest-common-denominator outcomes that lack meaningful, substantive discussions that are necessary to build the regional identity (Acharya, 2014).

Further, internal political dynamics also affected ASEAN identity formation. Democratisation, as seen in Indonesia and Malaysia, leads to more open discussions about ASEAN and regional identity. Conversely, authoritarian tendencies in other AMS pose challenges to the promotion of shared values and norms (Chong, 2019).

Finally, the role of elites in shaping ASEAN identity is key. ASEAN identity formation often reflects the interests and worldviews of political and economic elites, potentially alienating broader populations. This top-down

approach to identity construction raises questions about authenticity and popular resonance (Gerard, 2014).

3.3 Balancing Nationhood and Regional Identity

ASEAN faces a substantial challenge in balancing a regional identity with national and local identities. This requires negotiations between competing loyalties, historical narratives, and contemporary political imperatives.

AMS have approached this issue in varying ways. Singapore, for instance, has promoted ASEAN awareness through its education system and public diplomacy efforts. The country approaches the development of regional identity as complementary to its national interests. In contrast, countries like Indonesia and Viet Nam have emphasised their national identities, viewing ASEAN through the lens of national strategic interests (Emmers, 2018).

Education systems play a crucial role in this process. The incorporation of ASEAN studies into national curricula is uneven across the region. While some AMS promote ASEAN awareness in schools, others have been more hesitant, reflecting concerns about diluting national narratives. This variation has contributed to disparities in ASEAN awareness and identification across the region (Koh, 2017).

Further, the rise of nationalist movements and policies in AMS also challenge regional identity building. The promotion of certain ethnic identities or independent foreign policies in AMS can compromise regional identity-building or ASEAN centrality (Heydarian, 2017).

Economic disparities in and between AMS further complicate the balance between national and regional identities. The benefits of ASEAN economic integration have not been evenly distributed, potentially reinforcing national loyalties among populations who have felt left behind (Jones, 2016).

3.4 Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power

ASEAN's use of cultural diplomacy and soft power in promoting a regional identity reflects a complex interaction of cultural, economic, and political factors. Cultural diplomacy has the opportunity to foster a shared identity while reinforcing existing power structures and cultural hegemonies.

The ASEAN City of Culture program, launched in 2008, exemplifies the organisation's efforts to promote cultural exchange and regional awareness. The initiative selected cities to showcase their cultural heritage and creativity, aiming to foster ASEAN identity through cultural appreciation. However, the program's impact on broader populations remains limited, often reaching primarily urban, educated elites (ASEAN, 2019).

The arts, literature, and sports have become important vehicles for promoting ASEAN identity. Regional literary festivals, art exhibitions, and sporting events like the Southeast Asian Games have provided platforms for cultural exchange and the cultivation of regional consciousness. These initiatives, however, create tensions between celebrating diversity and forging commonality (Liow & Emmers, 2018).

ASEAN is increasingly leveraging on its cultural diversity as a form of soft power in international relations. ASEAN has presented itself as a model of unity in diversity, using this narrative to enhance its global standing and influence. However, this framing sometimes overlooks internal tensions and regional power imbalances (Acharya, 2018).

The commodification of culture for tourism and economic gain can raise questions about authenticity and the potential exploitation of local communities. While cultural tourism can promote regional awareness and economic development, it risks reducing complex cultural identities to marketable stereotypes (Winter, 2015).

3.5 Regional vs. Global Positioning

ASEAN's efforts to construct a regional identity have been inevitably shaped by global dynamics. The organisation must balance its aspirations for regional cohesion against effective global engagement.

ASEAN's relations with major powers, particularly China and the US, influence the construction of its identity. The organisation's emphasis on ASEAN centrality in regional affairs may be seen as an attempt to assert a distinct identity in the face of great power competition. However, the strategic orientations of individual AMS to these powers complicate the presentation of a unified regional front (Tan, 2017).

ASEAN's participation in wider regional forums, such as the East Asia Summit and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), present opportunities to project a collective identity beyond Southeast Asia. The platforms allow ASEAN to position itself as a key player in broader Asian regionalism. However, the platforms also expose the limits of ASEAN cohesion when confronted by diverse interests and external pressures (Stubbs, 2019).

Global challenges such as climate change and the pandemic increasingly shape ASEAN's regional and global positioning, highlighting the interconnectedness of AMS and their need for collective action—all of which could potentially strengthen regional identification. However, the challenges also expose the gaps in ASEAN's capacity to coordinate responses, and opposes its image of regional unity (Nesadurai, 2018).

Further, the digital revolution and the rise of social media adds new dimensions when ASEAN projects its identity. These technologies offer new channels for promoting ASEAN awareness and fostering regional connections. However, they also present obstacles in terms of information control and the potential for digital divides to reinforce existing inequalities (Goh, 2020).

The formation and promotion of an ASEAN identity is complex and must balance national and regional imperatives, diverse cultural landscapes, and shifting global dynamics. ASEAN's understanding these complexities is crucial when developing effective communication strategies that foster a sense of shared regional identity and respect the region's diversity.

Section 4: Challenges and Risks

This section examines the challenges associated with devising communications strategies that promote ASEAN awareness and develop ASEAN identity.

1. Challenges

1.1 Accessibility and Relevance

Many of ASEAN's official communication channels privilege a top-down approach and prioritise official narratives over interactive engagement, potentially limiting their effectiveness in fostering ASEAN identity at the grassroots (Chong, 2020). ASEAN must consider how to transform communications platforms from tools for information dissemination to spaces for dialogue and community building.

ASEAN communication strategies are generally perceived as elitist. The diplomatic language used in summit declarations and communiqués is often perceived as inaccessible to the general public, reinforcing perceptions of ASEAN as an elite-driven project (Jones, 2016). Similarly, public diplomacy initiatives and educational programs often struggle to reach people other than urban, educated elites, raising questions about their inclusivity and broad impact (Gerard, 2014).

Further, inconsistent implementation of ASEAN-related curricula in AMS leads to a variable understanding of ASEAN among the region's youth (Koh, 2017). This highlights a need for coordinated efforts to ensure a comprehensive and consistent approach to ASEAN education. More innovative and participatory approaches can engage AMS citizens beyond traditional state-centric narratives.

1.2 Media and Communication Challenges

Press freedom, regulation, and technological infrastructure vary widely across AMS, making it challenging for ASEAN to develop cohesive regional communication strategies. Local power structures shape media production and consumption across the region, while state control over media varies widely. This context influences how ASEAN-related content is produced, disseminated, and received (George, 2012). ASEAN's communication strategies need to adapt accordingly.

Further, the rapid growth of digital media and social platforms offer the potential to engage more directly with citizens. At the same time, it can fragment audiences, potentially amplifying misinformation and nationalist sentiments that contradict ASEAN's regional narratives (Sinpeng & Tapsell, 2020).

1.3 Language and Communication

While English is the official language of ASEAN, proficiency levels vary widely across the region. The immense linguistic heterogeneity impacts the reach and effectiveness of ASEAN's messaging (Kirkpatrick, 2018).

Language is not a neutral medium but reflects local power relations and cultural meanings (Fairclough, 2013). The choice of language for ASEAN's communications, whether English, official languages, or local dialects,

affect inclusivity and the construction of regional identity. The predominance of English in ASEAN's official communications, while practical, can reinforce existing linguistic hierarchies, socio-economic disparities, and potentially alienate segments of the population less proficient in the language. On the other hand, using multiple languages, while more inclusive, may dilute messaging's consistency and coherence.

1.4 Digital Diplomacy and Social Media Strategies

Digital diplomacy and social media offer new opportunities for ASEAN engagement, alongside challenges related to equality, regional identity, and representation. A critical approach is required to ensure that digital diplomacy and social media serve ASEAN's diverse populations and contribute to regional integration.

ASEAN has increasingly used platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter), to disseminate information. While these platforms use algorithm-driven content discovery to break down echo chambers, they do not ensure data privacy and enable external influence on regional narratives.

New content types such as social audio, auto-generated content, user-generated content, and short videos have further reshaped digital media. These formats offer opportunities for diverse voices but risk oversimplifying complex regional issues. User-generated content in particular challenges ASEAN's narrative control, democratising discourse while potentially increasing the risk of misinformation.

Further, the concept of social business is becoming increasingly relevant to ASEAN's digital strategy, with the potential to create meaningful engagement through social impact and community building. Similarly, micro-influencers could be powerful allies in promoting ASEAN awareness. However, ASEAN should consider these collaborations carefully to consider how they may affect existing power structures and whether they represent ASEAN's diverse populations.

Finally, branded content strategies, may be potentially effective. However, ASEAN's use of branded content could be interpreted as 'selling' a particular vision of regional identity, potentially glossing over real tensions and differences across the region.

1.5 Digital Platforms and Identity Construction

Digital platforms offer new opportunities for ASEAN to engage with citizens and grassroots to build the regional identity, but also create the potential for misinformation and challenge ASEAN's ability to control its messaging.

ASEAN's digital communication strategies must balance top-down messaging and bottom-up participation. For example, while official ASEAN social media accounts can disseminate curated narratives of regional identity, user-generated content can simultaneously present alternative or conflicting views. This underscores the need for a more inclusive and dialogue-driven approach in constructing the regional identity.

Further, the digital divide in and between AMS means that social media engagement may disproportionately reflect urban, educated, and affluent populations, or reinforce existing inequalities. Regional disparities in internet access and digital literacy may lead to certain voices being overrepresented in digital spaces, and potentially skew the narrative of ASEAN identity.

Finally, social media algorithms challenge the promotion of regional over national identities, raising questions about the appropriate role for private corporations in shaping public diplomacy and regional identity discourse. ASEAN's digital communication strategies must address this potential distortion. ASEAN will need to collaborate with technology companies to develop ways to promote regional content.

1.6 Historical Conflicts

Historical grievances and ongoing disagreements between AMS present a significant hurdle in the development of ASEAN's communication strategies. ASEAN's emphasis on consensus and non-interference could lead to a sanitised portrayal of regional relations that fails to resonate with populations aware of these tensions (Ba, 2017) and undermines the authenticity and effectiveness of ASEAN's messaging. Further, regional approaches have been deeply rooted in national contexts, such as those pertaining to gender inequalities, human rights (Lim, 2018), and gender representation. With varying perspectives across the AMS, it is difficult for ASEAN to adopt a unified approach.

1.7 Civil Society Engagement and Inclusivity

The role of civil society organisations in building ASEAN identity has grown in recent years, albeit in superficial and controlled ways. Their engagement has been limited by deeply embedded socio-economic and political disparities that shape who can participate in regional discourse, reflecting the nature of regional power dynamics and structural inequalities (Gerard, 2014).

ASEAN's approach to civil society engagement often favours state sponsored non-governmental organisations over grassroots organisations. This trend potentially reinforces existing power structures. With such selective engagement, ASEAN risks creating a facade of inclusivity as it marginalises critical voices and alternative perspectives on regional identity.

Further, the underrepresentation of indigenous communities, religious minorities, and other marginalised groups in official ASEAN narratives reflects a broader pattern of exclusion and discrimination in AMS that limits diverse voices in ASEAN's identity discourse and perpetuates historical injustices and power imbalances.

Gender representation in ASEAN communications remains a critical issue, with women often underrepresented in decision-making roles despite ASEAN's commitments to gender equality (True et al., 2017). This imbalance affects how ASEAN constructs and communicates its regional identity, potentially reinforce patriarchal norms in regional communications.

Addressing these obstacles necessitates a rethinking of relationships in ASEAN. It requires discussions on national sovereignty and developing regional policies that reduce existing inequalities. It requires creating dialogues that go beyond controlled consultations to embrace potentially disruptive but transformative conversations about regional identity and belonging.

1.8 Assessment and Evaluation

Evidence-based assessments of regional studies assessing the impact of ASEAN's communication strategies on public awareness and identity formation are limited (Thompson & Thianthai, 2008). Insufficient evaluation mechanisms reflect a larger challenge for ASEAN, since its regional initiatives often lack systematic monitoring and assessment protocols (Jones, 2016).

This further hinders improvement of current strategies and perpetuates a disconnect between ASEAN's institutional progress and public perception. Without reliable data on communications effectiveness, ASEAN risks continuing ineffective practices or overlooking emerging opportunities in the media landscape.

Moreover, poor assessment frameworks could reinforce existing power imbalances by encouraging communication strategies that primarily resonate with already engaged audiences while failing to reach marginalised groups. It is important to develop better assessment frameworks to develop effective, inclusive, and responsive communication strategies that can adapt to the diverse needs and perspectives across ASEAN.

2. Risks

Changes in communications methods pose several risks for ASEAN and AMS in amplifying ASEAN awareness and foster regional identity.

First, while widespread ASEAN messaging may increase stakeholder awareness and promote identity-building, communications will become more decentralised as diverse voices emerge. ASEAN may struggle to maintain a cohesive narrative about the organisation, potentially leading to conflicting messages about its role and importance (Jones, 2016). This may undermine efforts to build a regional identity. External funding of ASEAN messaging activities complicates this issue.

Second, AMS must consider how to support their national identities to maintain domestic support for regional initiatives while fostering a sense of ASEAN identity (Acharya, 2018). Overemphasising ASEAN or national identities could lead to resistance or disengagement from citizens who feel their alternative identities are being marginalised.

Third, more open communication platforms can lead to increased public discussion of sensitive regional issues, potentially straining inter-AMS relations (Chong, 2019). Topics such as territorial disputes, human rights concerns, or economic inequalities within ASEAN could become more prominent in public discourse, and provide challenge to the organisation's principle of non-interference and consensus-based decision-making.

Fourth, increasing reliance on digital communication strategies exposes governments to cybersecurity risks and requires programs to combat online disinformation (Goh, 2020). The spread of false or misleading information about ASEAN through social media and other digital channels could undermine public trust and hinder efforts to build regional awareness and identity.

Fifth, ensuring that communication strategies are inclusive and representative of ASEAN's diverse populations is a challenge. A failure to adequately represent and engage all segments of society, including ethnic minorities, women, and marginalised communities, could result in an ASEAN identity that is irrelevant to large portions of the population.

Sixth, involvement of ASEAN Dialogue Partners international organisations, and other external actors in ASEAN awareness initiatives challenges the notion of ASEAN Centrality. These actors naturally prioritise their own agendas first. AMS must carefully manage partnerships to ensure that ASEAN shapes its own regional narratives and identity (Tan, 2017). This will be difficult, since external sources provide substantial funding and resources to ASEAN stakeholders.

Seventh, ASEAN must carefully navigate political ideas when constructing its identity. ASEAN must define a regional identity that acknowledges the diverse political landscape across the region, including varying degrees of democratic freedom, human security concerns. It should also address competing regional frameworks, and the influence of external powers, particularly China and the US.

Eighth, significant economic disparities in and between the member states may hinder efforts to create a sense of shared regional identity. While digital platforms offer new opportunities for promoting ASEAN awareness, ensuring digital literacy, access, it will need to address the challenge of online disinformation (Sinpeng & Tapsell, 2020).

Finally, ASEAN's communications strategies can create a disconnect between the regional identity promoted by ASEAN and the lived experiences of the citizens. Communication strategies that focus too heavily on aspirational messages without addressing the challenges defined by ASEAN's peoples may fail to find resonance, leading to scepticism or apathy toward ASEAN (Nesadurai, 2018).

Section 5:

Recommendations and Case Studies

ASEAN policymakers can consider developing strategies that favour interactivity. They may deploy a bottom-up approach that resonates with the lived experiences of the citizens, and organically fosters a sense of regional belonging. This will help ensure that ASEAN's communications strategies are more effective and inclusive, and grounded in the diversity and dynamism of the region.

1. Inclusive and Participatory Approaches

ASEAN and the AMS have been transitioning their communications strategies from state-centric models to adopting more collaborative and diverse approaches. While these approaches have been effective, they must now address additional factors, such as digital transformation, inclusivity, and maintaining ASEAN centrality (Tan, 2017). They have increasingly adopted multi-stakeholder approaches involving collaboration with civil society organizations, the media, and private sector entities to create dynamic ASEAN narratives (Nesadurai, 2018).

One example is the ASEAN Youth Forum (AYF), established in 2009. AYF is a platform for young people in ASEAN to discuss regional issues and contribute to policy making. The forum has amplified youth voices and perspectives on social, cultural, and political issues, and its recommendations have been presented at ASEAN Summits, demonstrating the value of a more inclusive approach to regional dialogue.

When developing inclusive communication mechanisms, ASEAN must engage a wide range of stakeholders, including alternative voices and those from marginalised communities. ASEAN will also need to invest in multilingual communication strategies that respect the region's linguistic diversity. ASEAN should consider developing communication initiatives that openly address historical and contemporary conflicts in the region to promote dialogue and understanding. However, in order to develop cohesive approaches they must strengthen regional coordination while respecting national contexts.

Beyond ASEAN, the EU's Citizens' Dialogues offer a model for inclusive communication. During these public debates, citizens engage directly with European Commissioners and relevant decision makers to express their views on EU policies. The initiative increases transparency and citizen participation in EU affairs, and fosters a more inclusive approach to European governance.

2. Balancing Unity and Diversity in Messaging

Amitav Acharya's (2014) concept of multiplex regionalism and their interpretations offer a framework for understanding how ASEAN may navigate multiple, overlapping identities and interests. Promoting ASEAN identity must be understood within the context of power dynamics and competing national interests (Narine, 2016).

The ASEAN Cultural Year offers an excellent example of how ASEAN can balance unity and diversity in its external messaging. Celebrated annually in rotating host country, the ASEAN Cultural Year showcases the unique cultural heritage of individual AMS while emphasising shared regional values. For instance, the 2019 iteration in Thailand featured film festivals, culinary exhibitions, and performing arts showcases to highlight both national distinctiveness and regional commonalities.

India's 'Unity in Diversity' campaign offers another example of messaging that engages multiple audiences. The long-standing effort of the Indian government promotes national cohesion alongside cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity. The campaign uses various media channels, educational programs, and cultural events to reinforce the idea of a unified Indian identity that encompasses multiple sub-identities. The approach fosters a sense of national unity in one of the world's most diverse countries.

ASEAN policymakers can consider how to foster inclusive regional narratives that acknowledge diversity and shared values. They may develop external communications products that frame their individual national interests within ASEAN's goals, to demonstrate how ASEAN cooperation benefits individual AMS and the region's collective progress. They should also conduct quantitative and qualitative impact assessments regularly to ensure that their messages are effective.

3. Leveraging Digital Innovation Responsibly

ASEAN must consider digital transformation and inclusivity when devising messages about ASEAN's centrality and identity, including considering policies to enhance digital literacy and ensure equitable access to digital communication platforms.

Further, ASEAN should work to bridge the digital divide in and between the member states. Digital literacy programs should be encouraged to ensure equitable access to platforms across the region. Guidelines should be developed for the responsible use of social media and other digital platforms to promote ASEAN awareness. They could encourage the development of interactive and engaging content creation on ASEAN for wider audiences.

For example, the 2018 ASEAN Smart Cities Network (ASCN) leverages digital innovation to address common urban challenges while promoting regional cooperation. This platform aims to synergise smart city development efforts across ASEAN, using digital technology to improve urban life while promoting sustainable development. The ASCN facilitates cooperation by sharing best practices, catalysing projects, and securing funding and support from ASEAN's external partners (Raska & Ang, 2019).

Estonia's e-Governance initiative provides another example on how ASEAN may use digital innovation to enhance governance and promote its international image. Estonia digitised 99% of its public services, making government operations more efficient and transparent. Additionally, the nation's e-Residency program allows non-Estonians, such as digital nomads, to access government services.

4. Enhancing Media Literacy and Critical Thinking

When accepting the support and contributions from external partners shaping their communications strategies, ASEAN should consider how ASEAN plays a central role in these narratives. They should openly address historical and contemporary conflicts, to foster dialogue rather than avoid contentious issues.

ASEAN should consider how it may develop or expand educational programs that promote critical engagement with media and heritage. Incorporating media literacy and critical thinking skills in ASEAN-focused curricula can help create a more informed and discerning citizenry. Encouraging open dialogue and debate on ASEAN issues through media can foster a more vibrant regional discourse. Supporting independent journalism and fact-checking initiatives across the region can contribute to a more robust and credible information ecosystem.

For example, in Singapore, the National Library Board's S.U.R.E. (Source, Understand, Research, Evaluate) campaign has an ASEAN initiative that promotes information literacy and critical thinking. S.U.R.E. provides resources and conducts workshops to help citizens discern credible information sources in the digital age. This program helps to combat misinformation while fostering a more discerning public.

Beyond ASEAN, Finland provides an example of how media literacy may be integrated into the national school curriculum. Students learn to critically evaluate information from an early age, making the population more resilient to misinformation. The approach has made Finland one of the most resistant countries to fake news in Europe.

As regional and global contexts evolve, ASEAN must adapt its communication strategies to amplify ASEAN awareness and foster a shared regional identity. This requires flexible, inclusive, and transparent approaches that can adapt to changing contexts while upholding ASEAN's principles and values.

ASEAN must focus on fostering inclusive and participatory approaches, balancing unity and diversity in external messaging, leveraging digital innovation responsibly, and enhancing media literacy and critical thinking. It can learn from successful case studies from and beyond the region. More effective, inclusive, and ethically sound strategies can contribute to the development of a shared regional identity that respects the diversity across the member states. Policymakers should strive to develop a compelling vision of regional cooperation that resonates with the diverse experiences and aspirations of the people.

Section 6: Conclusion

National communications, play an important role in promoting ASEAN awareness and identity. While this approach leverages existing national infrastructure and tailored messaging, it also presents challenges for the development of a cohesive regional identity. In order to enhance the effectiveness of ASEAN's communication strategies and foster ASEAN identity and community, it will be important to strengthen regional coordination while respecting national contexts.

ASEAN's communication strategies to amplify ASEAN awareness and ASEAN identity must consider complex political, cultural, and economic factors. Scholarship from the disciplines of international relations, critical media studies, and critical heritage studies can help the ASEAN policymakers to assess the potential and the limitations of these efforts.

The communication strategies must balance messaging on regional cohesion and national sovereignty, by emphasising shared heritage, acknowledging diversity. They should leverage on new technologies, and ensure inclusive participation. The tensions inherent in these efforts reflect the broader challenges of ASEAN regionalism.

Moreover, construction of an ASEAN identity through communication strategies is not a neutral process. It reflects power dynamics, ideological underpinnings, and selective narratives. Policymakers must remember that communications strategies can both challenge as well as reinforce existing hierarchies and exclusions in the region.

As the organisation continues to evolve, ASEAN's communication strategies will play a crucial role in shaping perceptions of ASEAN identity across the region and on the global stage. The effectiveness of these strategies will depend on ASEAN's ability to address complex realities, engage diverse populations, and create meaningful connections across national boundaries.

Brand recognition and improved policy coordination should not be the sole measures of ASEAN identity building. Rather, success should be measured by how well ASEAN fosters a genuine sense of regional community and shared destiny among the peoples of AMS. ASEAN will need to adopt sophisticated, far-reaching, approaches that are inclusive, reflective and responsive to diverse regional voices and experiences.

By adopting a more pluralistic, inclusive, and critically engaged approach to regional identity building, ASEAN can foster a more robust and meaningful shared identity. However, geopolitical dynamics, national interests, and power contestations will inform these efforts. When implementing these recommendations, ASEAN should engage in critical reflection and adapt periodically to evolving regional realities.

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