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<th>THE ONLINE DISCOURSE OF ASEAN REGIONALISM: A USER AND CONTENT ANALYSIS OF INDONESIAN, ENGLISH AND JAPANESE TWEETS</th>
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SUMMARY

This thesis comprises eight chapters. Chapter 1 offers an introduction, background, and points to be carried out throughout the study. ASEAN declared a project with the objective of creating by 2015 an integrated community consisting of three pillars: the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) and the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC). Within its goals, it emphasizes both active engagements of the “people”—the general public, not just the elites—and strong collaboration with partner countries outside ASEAN.

Since its establishment in 1967, ASEAN was generally viewed as elite-dominated and therefore the rhetoric of engaging a wider population raised questions. This study suggests four research inquiries: first, how far has ASEAN integration shifted from an elite-centered project to a project owned by actors from all levels of society in the region?; second, to what extent are actors of ASEAN member states interested in the three aspects of integration (AEC, ASCC, and APSC)? third, in the context of wider regional integration, how do actors of ASEAN member states view Japan, China, and other partner countries, and which aspects of integration are these countries being associated with?; fourth, how is ASEAN as an entity viewed by the populations of its partner countries and which aspects of the integration project attract their interest? Perspectives from Indonesia, a prominent member of ASEAN, will be used as representation of ASEAN’s internal perspective on the above questions. This thesis uses Japan, a long-standing close partner of ASEAN, to answer the questions in regard to external perspective.

Chapter 2 introduces relevant previous research related to the ASEAN Community, its critics, its struggle for more public engagement and surveys on ASEAN awareness. Previous ASEAN studies have focused mostly on high-level diplomacy; however, the spread of democracy in Southeast Asia and the state-led rhetoric of “people-centered” integration increase the need for research that links state and the views of general population.
Surveys to gauge awareness of ASEAN integration project have been conducted and there are studies on civil society organizations’ potential contribution to the process as well. However, several years have passed since these studies were carried out. Following the view that regionalism is very dependent on its actors and is an economic and political artefact with meanings that change over time, there is a need to revisit the question. A brief history of Indonesia’s policy towards ASEAN makes clear the challenge faced in realizing more active public engagement. Theories of regionalism and studies of East Asian regionalism and the actors who define it will give context to help understand ASEAN’s perspective and Japan’s perspective on the region.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of social media research in relation to political activism. Studies on Twitter, particularly on its content characteristics and discussions on its role as an information sharing network; and on influential online opinion leaders will be introduced. Cases of social media research in some parts of Asia, i.e. Indonesia, Malaysia and Japan are presented, to give context on how social media users utilize the platform as a political medium. These studies analyze the connection between media and its society by focusing on the power relations between socio-political elements in society, questions of locality and/or nationality on Internet platforms, and question the changing role of Internet media in government and public relations.

The focus in the field of comparative regionalism has been more on formal regional organizations and institutions, and less on informal regionalism and the various ways in which state, market and civil society actors engage in regionalism and regionalization. Employing the concepts of social media and society relation, this study offers an investigation of informal channels of regionalist discourse by observing ASEAN related communication on social media. The latter part of the chapter presents hypotheses constructed against the background of the ASEAN integration project (from Chapter 2) and concepts of social media for political use (Chapter 3) to operationalize the research questions.

Chapter 4 explains the data and details of the methods used for the user and content analysis. Tweets containing the word “ASEAN” were collected as this study’s main data and clustered according to the languages used in the messages, i.e. Indonesian, English and Japanese. Tweets in each
language were then subjected to an influential user analysis and a content analysis. The influential user analysis categorizes users to answer the question of what kind of Twitter users are actively engaging in sharing information about ASEAN, e.g. individuals, community, intellectuals, government institutions, politician, media. Content analysis is conducted in two steps: first, categorization of tweet content that follows the three officially declared pillars of ASEAN Community integration (AEC, ASCC and APSC); second, analyses of which countries are mentioned in the tweets. Descriptive statistics including an overview and explanation of the peaks in ASEAN-related Twitter traffic can be found in the later part of this chapter.

Chapter 5 investigates influential users tweeting about ASEAN in Indonesian, English and Japanese. Calculating an influence score of followers, retweets and mentions, the chapter lists and categorizes influential users in the three languages. Analysis was conducted based on concepts from previous ASEAN and social media researches and on social-political contexts for each language. The investigation was carried out to identify influential users who are opinion leaders in ASEAN-related discourse with the potential to drive the agenda for conversation and influence their followers' perspectives and behavior on the matter. The findings show that various actors, not only government institutions, but also media, groups, and individuals, were participating in ASEAN online discourse in each of the languages. Communication about ASEAN in the three languages, however, shows considerable variation in the kinds of users playing influential roles. From the user composition of each language cluster, the study found an online community-based Indonesian cluster, an elite-dominated English cluster, and an individual opinion leaders-based Japanese cluster.

To confirm the findings of Chapter 5, Chapter 6 elaborates the content production process and communication strategies employed by some influential Indonesian users. The chapter is based on interviews conducted in December and January 2015. The large portion of influential individual and community accounts tweeting about ASEAN in Indonesian suggests that awareness of ASEAN has spread beyond the elite into a wider section of Indonesian society. This section however, raised a caution based on the findings from the interviews and further investigations of the @ASEANCom2015 and @GNFI accounts. Influential community users have
endeavored to reach a wider audience by e.g. selecting topics of wider interest, using Indonesian rather than English, positioning themselves as representative of the “people”, the fact remains, though, that these users have higher than average socio-economic backgrounds and their audiences are likely to have a similar demographic profile.

Chapter 7 investigates the content of ASEAN related tweets: it categorizes tweets according to the three aspects of ASEAN integration (economic, socio-cultural and political security), and according to the countries that are mentioned in the tweets. Results show that topics related to the economic aspect of the ASEAN Community integration (AEC) occupy most of the Twitter conversation compared to sociocultural and political-security aspects. Indonesia was the ASEAN member state that was mentioned most frequently by the users, followed by Malaysia and Myanmar who hosted the ASEAN Summits during the period of data collection. The non-ASEAN countries that were frequently mentioned were China, the U.S. and Japan.

In regard to country mention analysis, the idea of building a community of Southeast Asian nations cannot be separated from member states’ national agendas. The relations between actors from within and outside ASEAN are relevant factors for the success of the ASEAN integration project. This chapter sheds light on how the users see their own national position and their country’s foreign relations in the context of ASEAN regionalism. It provides evidence about how users are imaginatively bound by their geographical origins, i.e. nation and region, even on online platforms. It also shows that many users explicitly identify themselves as members of a specific country or region.

Despite tweeting and retweeting regarding their concerns in Indonesia’s ability to compete with other ASEAN member states, Indonesian users did not reject the notion that they are also members of a single ASEAN Community. The English tweets, written in ASEAN’s lingua franca, have a more neutral nuance on the issue of member states’ competition and more supportive tone on regional integration. Many users writing in Japanese communicated their strong comradeship with the ASEAN countries while excluding China and South Korea from their imagined region.

Chapter 8 offers conclusions. The chapter answers the research questions and discusses the limitations of the data and methods. This study
suggests that even on the potentially egalitarian platform of social media, the ASEAN integration project has not moved far from being an elite-focused project. Online discourse about ASEAN still largely focuses on the economic rather than the political-security and socio-cultural aspects of integration. The chapter ends with suggestions for future research.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY