

## FROM FANDOM CONFLICT TO “SEABLINGS”: THE CONSTRUCTION OF A DIGITAL SOUTHEAST ASIAN IDENTITY IN RESPONSE TO TRANSNATIONAL RACISM

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### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes how SEAbings was constructed as a Southeast Asian digital identity through social media interactions in response to transnational racist discourse. The phenomenon emerged from an online dispute following DAY6’s concert in Kuala Lumpur on 31 January 2026, which later developed into a wider digital controversy involving racialized insults against Southeast Asian fans and communities. Drawing on constructivist International Relations, this article conceptualizes identity as a social construction formed through shared meanings, interaction, and representation. This study uses a qualitative descriptive design based on literature review and document analysis. The data consist of academic literature, online news reports, social media monitoring reports, and publicly available digital traces documenting the SEAbings controversy. The analysis is guided by four indicators: *boundary-making*, *shared symbols*, *affective solidarity*, and *narrative reversal*. The findings show that SEAbings emerged when Southeast Asian users collectively drew symbolic boundaries between “us” and “them,” circulated hashtags, memes, and regional expressions as shared symbols, transformed anger and humor into affective solidarity, and transformed negative narratives about Southeast Asia into expressions of regional pride. The article argues that SEAbings represents a citizen-led and situational form of Southeast Asian digital identity. It contributes to International Relations by showing that regional identity is not produced only through states, diplomacy, or formal institutions, but can also emerge from everyday digital practices, symbolic struggles, and affective interactions among ordinary social media users.

Keywords: SEAbings; digital identity; Southeast Asia; constructivism; digital regionalism.

### 1. Introduction

The expansion of digital communication has reshaped global politics by increasing the visibility and agency of non-state actors. Citizens, activists, civil society groups, and transnational communities are no longer merely recipients of information; they can now shape public opinion, build

networks, express political support, and produce political meanings across borders through the internet and social media.

This transformation is particularly visible in Southeast Asia, a region marked by high levels of internet and social media adoption. Reports published by *We Are Social*, *Meltwater*, and *DataReportal* show

that by late 2025, most people in several Southeast Asian countries were already connected to the internet and social media. Indonesia had 230 million internet users and 180 million social media user identities, equivalent to 62.9% of its total population; the Philippines had 95.8 million social media user identities, or 81.9% of its population; Thailand had 56.6 million, or 79.1%; and Vietnam had 79.0 million, or 77.6% (Kemp, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d). These figures indicate that Southeast Asia provides a fertile digital environment for cross-border interaction, where regional issues, cultural disputes, and collective responses can circulate rapidly across national boundaries.

In this context, social media is no longer simply a tool for communication and entertainment. It has become a social arena where citizens, activists, and civil society communities share information, shape opinions, produce discourse, and build solidarity across national borders. In International Relations, this development expands the capacity of non-state actors to build transnational networks, generate political meaning, and mobilize support within a relatively short period of time (Castells, 2007; Cheng et al., 2023; Hall et al., 2020; Hussain & Howard, 2013).

This sense of digital closeness later crystallized in the term “SEAbplings”, derived from the phrase *Southeast Asian siblings*. The term captures a symbolic sense of siblinghood among Southeast Asian social media users who see themselves as sharing similar experiences, positions, and emotional responses in cross-border digital conversations.

The SEAbplings phenomenon emerged from a social media dispute following DAY6’s concert in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on 31 January 2026. The dispute began with allegations that several South Korean fans had violated concert rules by using professional cameras, but it quickly turned into a cross-border online controversy after comments appeared that

insulted Southeast Asian fans and communities. What began as a debate over concert etiquette soon exposed broader stereotypes, cultural insults, and forms of digital racism directed at Southeast Asians on social media (Salim, 2026; *The Straits Times*, 2026).

As the conversation escalated, comments about skin color, physical appearance, economic status, and Southeast Asian cultures prompted responses from users across the region. These responses were not confined to direct criticism. They also appeared through humor, memes, local scripts, and cultural symbols that turned online interaction into a form of collective pushback. SEAbplings therefore developed beyond a hashtag or online label. It became a symbolic space where anger over discrimination, regional solidarity, and pride in Southeast Asian identity were expressed together.

The case illustrates how an online dispute can quickly acquire regional meaning. Although the controversy began with allegations that several fans had violated concert rules, it soon became a larger conversation about how Southeast Asians are viewed, stereotyped, and positioned by outsiders. In this sense, the case moved beyond the immediate issue of concert etiquette and became a debate over dignity, representation, and Southeast Asia’s symbolic place in relation to others (*The Korea Times*, 2026a, 2026b; *The Straits Times*, 2026). By adopting the term “SEAbplings”, social media users drew a symbolic boundary between “us”, as fellow Southeast Asians, and “them”, as outsiders perceived to have engaged in racist behavior.

SEAbplings, however, should not be treated as a single-layered phenomenon. It intersects with the global circulation of K-pop, the socio-cultural relationship between South Korea and Southeast Asia, and the persistence of racism in digital spaces. This article does not attempt to

address all of these dimensions, nor does it seek to determine which side was right or wrong in the controversy. Its focus is more specific: to examine how digital solidarity among Southeast Asian social media users was transformed into a form of regional digital identity known as SEAbings. The digital conflict is therefore treated not as the main object of analysis, but as the context through which this identity became visible and meaningful.

Theoretically, this article draws on constructivist International Relations, which understands identity as socially produced through shared meanings and repeated interaction. This perspective allows SEAbings to be read not as a pre-existing regional identity, but as a digitally mediated form of Southeast Asian belonging produced through collective responses to transnational racism (Acharya, 2017; Hopf, 1998; Wendt, 1992, 1999).

This discussion leads to the following research question: *How was SEAbings constructed as a Southeast Asian digital identity through social media interactions in response to transnational racist discourse?*

The article argues that SEAbings represents a bottom-up construction of Southeast Asian digital identity. It emerged as users responded to experiences of transnational racism by drawing symbolic boundaries, circulating shared symbols, building affective solidarity, and turning narratives of inferiority into expressions of regional pride. To operationalize this argument, the article focuses on four analytical indicators: *boundary-making*, *shared symbols*, *affective solidarity*, and *narrative reversal*. These indicators are examined through secondary materials that record and reproduce the digital traces of the SEAbings controversy, including hashtags, memes, post narratives, quote tweets, replies, and screenshots circulated in online news coverage and social media

monitoring reports between 31 January and 17 February 2026.

This study aims to examine how SEAbings was constructed as a Southeast Asian digital identity through documented social media interactions. More specifically, it analyses how digital insults produced symbolic boundaries, how hashtags and memes operated as shared symbols, how emotions generated affective solidarity, and how derogatory narratives were reworked into expressions of regional pride.

The article contributes to International Relations by extending the way regionalism is understood. Regionalism is often associated with state diplomacy, official declarations, and regional institutions. Yet the SEAbings case suggests that a sense of region can also be produced through the everyday digital practices of citizens. Social media users did not merely react to an online controversy; they collectively imagined Southeast Asia as a meaningful community through which shared dignity, grievance, and pride could be expressed. SEAbings therefore deserves to be treated as a relevant phenomenon for International Relations because it shows that regional identity can emerge from below, through conflict, representation struggles, and symbolic exchanges in digital spaces. Southeast Asia, in this sense, is not only a geographical or institutional category, but also a symbolic community continually shaped through the social interactions of its people.

## 2. Literature Review & Conceptual Framework

This section reviews literature on digital activism, transnational solidarity, constructivist approaches to regional identity, imagined communities, representation, and digital racism. These bodies of literature are used to situate SEAbings as a bottom-up process of Southeast Asian digital identity formation

in response to transnational racist discourse.

Studies on digital activism show that social media has reshaped how solidarity is built across borders. Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) concept of connective action explains how digital mobilization can emerge through personalized communication and peer-to-peer circulation rather than centralized organization. Castells (2007) similarly views digital communication as a space of power and counter-power, while recent studies highlight how platform affordances, public engagement, and networked communication expand the role of non-state actors in transnational advocacy (Cheng et al., 2023; Hall et al., 2020). In this sense, cross-border solidarity does not depend solely on formal institutions or established transnational organizations. It can also emerge organically through hashtags, memes, reposts, comments, and other forms of platform-mediated amplification that connect users from different countries within a shared digital conversation.

Existing studies on Asian digital activism and K-pop fandom provide useful points of comparison. Research on the Milk Tea Alliance shows how digital platforms can sustain cross-border solidarity around pro-democracy struggles in Southeast Asia (Prayoga et al., 2025; Putra, 2024). Studies on K-pop fandom similarly demonstrate that fan communities may move beyond cultural consumption and become involved in social participation, resistance, and identity negotiation (Andini & Akhni, 2021; Nadhifah et al., 2026). SEAbings differs from these cases because its solidarity did not emerge primarily from an explicit pro-democracy agenda or fandom activism, but from a shared response to racialized insults directed at Southeast Asia as a region.

A recent study by Widuri et al. (2026) examines the SEAbings-KNetz conflict

through the concept of regional digital citizenship, emphasizing how conflict-based digital interaction produces regional belonging through identity superiority activation, boundary building, cross-border network alignment, and emotional reinforcement. This article builds on that discussion but takes a different analytical route. Rather than treating SEAbings primarily as an expression of regional digital citizenship, this article situates the phenomenon within constructivist International Relations and reads it as a process of Southeast Asian regional identity construction in response to transnational racism. Its analytical focus therefore falls on boundary-making, shared symbols, affective solidarity, and narrative reversal as mechanisms through which ordinary digital users participate in producing Southeast Asia as a meaningful regional community.

To make sense of this identity-making process, this article draws on constructivist approaches in International Relations as its theoretical foundation. From a constructivist perspective, identities and interests are not fixed or naturally given; they are produced through social interaction. Wendt (1992, 1999) argues that social structures in international relations are sustained by shared ideas, intersubjective meanings, and repeated practices among actors. Hopf (1998) similarly shows that identity matters because it shapes how actors understand themselves, how they define others, and how they make sense of their social world. Applied to this study, SEAbings can be understood as a digital identity that crystallized through repeated interactions among Southeast Asian netizens in response to insults made by some K-netz. Its emergence cannot be explained by geographical proximity alone. Rather, SEAbings took shape as social media users began to articulate a shared sense of "us" in distinction from "them."



Acharya's work on Southeast Asian regionalism is particularly useful because it treats regional identity not as a pre-existing fact, but as a social and political construction (Acharya, 2017). Southeast Asia becomes meaningful as a region through repeated interactions among governments, societies, institutions, and everyday social practices that allow the region to be imagined as a community. SEAbings points to a different pathway of region-making. In this case, a sense of Southeast Asian belonging was not articulated through ASEAN's formal institutions or state-led diplomacy, but through the communicative practices of digital citizens. When users from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, and other Southeast Asian countries invoked the term SEAbings, they were not merely naming a group. They were symbolically producing Southeast Asia as a shared community.

Anderson's notion of imagined communities further helps explain why SEAbings solidarity could form among people who had never met one another. A community, for Anderson (2006), is imagined because its members are able to feel a sense of belonging with others whom they will never encounter directly. In the SEAbings case, this symbolic connection was built through shared digital experiences: feeling collectively insulted, responding through humor, circulating memes, using the same hashtags, and expressing pride in Southeast Asia. Hall's work on representation adds another important layer to this argument. Identity, for Hall (1990, 1997), is not stable or self-evident; it is produced through representation, difference, and struggles over meaning. SEAbings therefore should not be understood as a fixed regional identity that already existed before the conflict. It was produced through the ways Southeast Asian users represented themselves, marked their difference from K-netz, and turned a moment of digital

hostility into a language of regional solidarity.

The literature on digital racism is crucial for situating SEAbings within the conditions that made its emergence possible. Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas (2021) argue that racism on social media should not be understood simply as a collection of individual insults. It is also shaped by user practices, platform logics, and the governance of digital spaces. Ekman (2024) makes a similar point by calling for a relational reading of digital racism, one that examines how networked affect, nationalism, masculinity, and conspiracy thinking intersect in the circulation of racialized content online. This article uses the term transnational racism to capture cross-border discourses that rank people and regions through markers such as skin color, bodies, culture, geography, economic position, and imagined standards of progress. In this sense, the hostility surrounding SEAbings was not only directed at particular individuals. It also cast Southeast Asia itself as a lesser "other" within a wider hierarchy of culture, region, and development.

Research on #StopAsianHate provides a useful comparison because it shows how experiences of racism can become a trigger for digital activism. Xie et al. (2023) show that #StopAsianHate narratives were built through personal reflection, public education, the recognition of racial violence, and calls for collective action. Shahin and Hou (2025) further demonstrate that anti-racist hashtag activism can gain force through celebrities, fandoms, and the repeated circulation of messages, although digital spaces also remain vulnerable to provocation and hijacking. These findings are useful for reading SEAbings because anti-racist solidarity is not produced only through rational argument. It is also driven by shared affective experience. Anger, offense, humor, pride, and the desire to

defend fellow Southeast Asians became the social energy that moved users into digital participation.

Studies on racism and online hate in South Korea provide additional context for understanding how racialized expressions can circulate in digital spaces. Lee et al. (2024) show that racial discourse and discrimination in South Korea are shaped by broader hierarchies of ethnicity, race, and migration, while Koo et al. (2024) demonstrate how online communities can facilitate the circulation of hateful expressions across social categories. These studies are not used to generalize South Korean society as a whole, but to situate the SEAbings controversy within a wider digital environment in which stereotypes and racial insults can travel rapidly across platforms.

Taken together, these bodies of literature allow this article to read SEAbings not merely as a moment of digital solidarity, but as a process of identity formation. Constructivism explains how identities are produced through social interaction. The idea of imagined communities helps explain how users who do not know one another can still come to feel part of the same collective. The theory of representation makes it possible to examine how the meaning of Southeast Asia is contested, while the concept of affective publics explains how emotion accelerates the spread of solidarity in digital spaces.

Based on the literature reviewed above, this article treats SEAbings as a bottom-up construction of Southeast Asian digital identity. Digital identity is understood here as a collective sense of “who we are” that is formed, performed, and recognized through repeated online interactions, shared symbols, and circulating narratives (boyd, 2008; Castells, 2007; Hall, 1997). The term SEAbings itself brings together “SEA” and “siblings,” capturing a sense of kinship among Southeast Asian netizens. It

becomes meaningful when an insult directed at one Southeast Asian country, community, or cultural marker is interpreted as an affront to the region more broadly. SEAbings, in this sense, refers not simply to a group of social media users, but to an imagined digital community through which Southeast Asians come to recognize shared proximity, shared injury, shared humor, and shared regional pride.

This article analyzes that identity-making process through four indicators. The first is boundary-making, which refers to the symbolic construction of “us” as fellow Southeast Asians and “them” as outsiders perceived to have looked down on the region. This indicator draws on the broader understanding of symbolic boundaries as social distinctions through which groups classify people, practices, and forms of belonging (Hopf, 1998; Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Wendt, 1992, 1999). The second is shared symbols, which include hashtags, memes, family metaphors, local languages, regional scripts, and cultural icons that operate as markers of collective belonging. This indicator builds on the idea that communities are sustained through shared meanings, representational codes, and symbolic forms of identification (Anderson, 2006; Hall, 1997).

The third indicator is affective solidarity, or the emotional bond produced through anger, pride, humor, satire, empathy, and cross-border identification. This indicator draws on the concept of affective publics, which explains how networked storytelling and emotion can connect publics around shared issues (Papacharissi, 2015). The fourth is narrative reversal, which refers to the reworking of derogatory stereotypes into sources of collective pride. Through this process, objects of ridicule such as rice fields, skin color, local languages, or agrarian culture are reclaimed as signs of regional dignity rather than inferiority, echoing the broader politics of

representation and reappropriation through which stigmatizing labels and meanings can be contested, reclaimed, and re-signified (Galinsky et al., 2013; Hall, 1997). Together, these four indicators translate the article's conceptual framework into an analytical tool for examining how SEAbings was constructed through differentiation, symbolism, emotion, and narrative re-signification.

Existing studies have shown how digital platforms sustain pro-democracy solidarity, anti-racist hashtag activism, socially engaged fandom practices, and conflict-based forms of regional digital citizenship. Recent work on the SEAbings-KNetz conflict has also demonstrated that digital conflict can generate regional belonging through boundary building, cross-border network alignment, and emotional reinforcement. However, the constructivist International Relations dimension of SEAbings remains less developed. In particular, existing discussion has not sufficiently examined how SEAbings operates as a bottom-up process of Southeast Asian regional identity construction through symbolic differentiation, shared representational practices, affective solidarity, and the reversal of degrading narratives. This article addresses that analytical gap by reading SEAbings not merely as fandom conflict, anti-racist reaction, or regional digital citizenship, but as a moment of digital region-making in which ordinary users produced Southeast Asia as a meaningful community from below. In doing so, the article extends Acharya's (2017) insight on regional identity by showing that a sense of region is not made only through states, diplomacy, or formal regional institutions. It can also be produced spontaneously by digital citizens who turn shared offense into a language of regional belonging.

## **2. Research Method**

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design that combines a literature-based approach with document analysis. This design is appropriate because the study seeks to interpret the meanings, contexts, and representations through which SEAbings was constructed as a digital identity (Aspers & Corte, 2019). The literature-based approach is used to organize and synthesize academic debates on constructivism, regional identity, digital activism, and digital racism, while document analysis is used to examine publicly available materials that record the SEAbings controversy. As Snyder (2019) explains, a literature review can function as a research method when it is used to organize, evaluate, and synthesize existing knowledge in order to develop a new understanding of a particular phenomenon. Document analysis is also suitable because documents can serve as important sources for understanding social phenomena, particularly when they contain narratives, representations, and communicative traces relevant to the research question (Bowen, 2009).

The data used in this study consist of two categories. The first includes academic sources on constructivism in International Relations, regional identity, digital activism, transnational solidarity, and digital racism. The second consists of non-academic secondary sources, including online news reports, social media monitoring reports, and publicly available digital documentation that records the chronology, screenshots, hashtags, memes, and narratives surrounding the SEAbings-K-netz conflict. This study does not conduct direct observation of specific social media accounts; instead, it treats these documented digital traces as a secondary digital archive through which patterns of representation, symbolism, emotion, and narrative can be interpreted.

These sources are used to trace how the term SEAbings emerged, how Southeast Asian netizens' responses were reported, and how hashtags, memes, local languages, and narratives of regional pride became part of a broader process of digital identity formation. This choice is methodologically relevant because SEAbings unfolded rapidly, moved across platforms, and left much of its conversational trace in online news coverage, social media monitoring reports, and publicly circulated screenshots.

Data were collected through purposive searches of literature and documents. Sources were selected based on their relevance to the chronology of the SEAbings controversy, their documentation of netizen responses such as hashtags, memes, scripts, screenshots, and post narratives, their connection to digital identity formation, transnational racism, or cross-border solidarity, and their public accessibility.

Temporally, the empirical material focuses on the period from late January to February 2026, beginning with the DAY6 concert incident in Kuala Lumpur on 31 January 2026 and continuing into the period when SEAbings conversations became more widely documented in social media monitoring reports and online news coverage. This time frame is used to keep the analysis focused on the early formation and circulation of SEAbings as a digital identity.

The collected materials were read interpretively through constructivist International Relations and the concept of digital identity. The analysis was guided by the four indicators developed in the previous section: boundary-making, shared symbols, affective solidarity, and narrative reversal. Through these indicators, the study examines how symbolic boundaries between "us" and "them" were drawn; how hashtags and memes operated as shared symbols; how emotions such as anger and pride generated solidarity; and

how insults directed at Southeast Asia were reworked into narratives of regional pride.

This study does not aim to quantify the scale of netizen support, generalize its findings to all Southeast Asian societies, or provide a comprehensive mapping of every social media conversation related to SEAbings. Its purpose is more specific: to interpret documented patterns of representation, symbolism, emotion, and narrative as part of the construction of SEAbings as a Southeast Asian digital identity.

### 3. Results and Discussion

This section discusses how a digital conflict that began within a fan community developed into a wider process of Southeast Asian digital identity construction. The discussion first maps the chronology and scale of SEAbings-related conversations, then analyzes the phenomenon through four indicators: *boundary-making*, *shared symbols*, *affective solidarity*, and *narrative reversal*. These indicators show how SEAbings moved from an immediate response to digital racism into a bottom-up marker of regional identity.

#### 3.1. From Fandom Conflict to SEAbings

The emergence of SEAbings can be traced to DAY6's concert in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on 31 January 2026. The dispute began when several South Korean fans were reported to have used professional cameras inside the concert venue, despite the organizer's prohibition on such equipment. Videos and screenshots of the incident circulated on X and drew criticism from Malaysian concertgoers and other Southeast Asian social media users. What initially appeared to be a dispute over concert etiquette soon became a cross-border digital controversy after some South Korean online users, often referred to as K-netz, responded with demeaning

comments toward Southeast Asian fans. Some comments told Southeast Asian fans to mind their own business or to support artists from their own countries. From this point, the issue shifted from a violation of concert rules to a wider controversy over cultural insult and stereotypes directed at Southeast Asia (Salim, 2026; *The Straits Times*, 2026).

**Figure 1. Screenshot from X documenting a reaction by a K-netz account on X**



**Source: Social Media X**

The controversy escalated further when racialized comments began to target skin color, physical appearance, economic position, and the identity of Southeast Asian communities. The music video of No Na, an Indonesian group under 88rising, also became a target of ridicule because it used rice fields as part of its visual setting. Southeast Asian users did not accept this agrarian imagery as a sign of backwardness or economic inferiority. Instead, many reinterpreted the rice-field landscape as a source of cultural pride and regional dignity (Buana, 2026a; *Detikcom*, 2025; Salim, 2026).

**Figure 2. Screenshot from X showing an Indonesian music group being targeted by racist remarks**



**Source: Social Media X**

The conflict also moved beyond X and spread across TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and online news platforms. Between 1 and 18 February 2026, the SEAbings versus K-netz conversation generated 18,933 mentions and more than 222 million interactions. These figures suggest that the issue had become a cross-platform and cross-border digital conflict rather than a limited exchange among fans (Fahmi, 2026; Salim, 2026).

As the conversation expanded, SEAbings emerged as a marker of Southeast Asian digital solidarity. Users from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, and other Southeast Asian countries began to build shared narratives that rejected the stereotypes and discriminatory comments associated with some K-netz (Beltran, 2026; Fahmi, 2026; *The Straits Times*, 2026). This solidarity was expressed not only through direct criticism, but also through humor, memes, and regional scripts. Indonesian users, for example, drew on Javanese, Batak, Javanese script, and Thai script in their responses to racist remarks. These

practices turned local languages and scripts into digital symbols that brought anger, humor, and regional pride into a shared symbolic space (Buana, 2026b; Fahmi, 2026).

Social media monitoring data further show that SEAbings had moved beyond a fandom conversation into a broader conflict over regional representation. Binokular's Socindex-based analysis recorded more than 34,200 participating accounts, 56,929 conversations, and 10.8 million engagements between 11 and 17 February 2026. Engagement peaked on 12 February 2026, reaching around 2.8 million engagements in a single day. The bot-score assessment also suggested that the conversation was largely organic. At the level of mass media, the issue produced 362 news items, with dominant terms such as "racism", "war", and "conflict" appearing in the coverage (*Binokular Media Utama*, 2026).

as a collective response to discourse that demeaned Southeast Asia.

These engagement figures are not treated here as quantitative proof that Southeast Asian societies as a whole accepted SEAbings as an identity. Rather, they are used to show that SEAbings circulated widely enough for regional symbols, emotions, and narratives to be recognized and reproduced by users across national contexts.

Conceptually, these responses show that SEAbings developed not simply as a fandom conversation, but as a process of digital identity formation. The experience of being insulted, the practice of responding through memes, the use of local languages and scripts, and the repetition of regional symbols encouraged Southeast Asian users to imagine themselves as part of a regional community marked by dignity, proximity, and shared cultural memory.

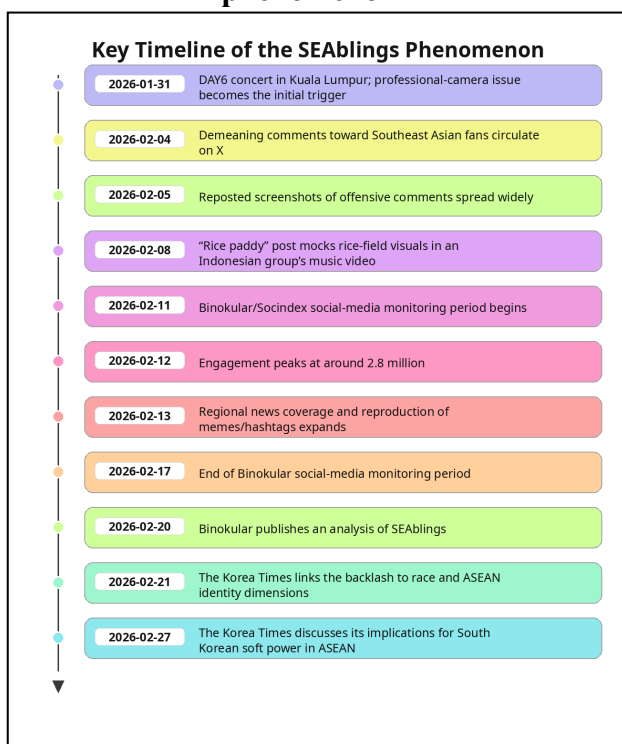
**Table 1. Summary of SEAbings conversation indicators**

| Indicator               | Value                | Period              |
|-------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Accounts involved       | >34,200 accounts     | 11-17 February 2026 |
| Number of conversations | 56,929               | 11-17 February 2026 |
| Total engagement        | 10.8 million         | 11-17 February 2026 |
| Daily engagement peak   | 2.8 million          | 12 February 2026    |
| Conversation pattern    | Tended to be organic | 11-17 February 2026 |
| Mass-media news items   | 362 news items       | 11-17 February 2026 |

**Source: Binokular Media Utama (2026), based on Socindex and Newstensity**

Table 1 points to two important dimensions of the SEAbings conversation. First, the number of accounts, conversations, and engagements indicates broad digital participation across national boundaries. Second, the dominance of terms such as "racism", "war", and "conflict" in media coverage shows that the issue was understood as a struggle over regional dignity and meaning, not merely as a dispute among fans. The data therefore support the reading of SEAbings

**Figure 3. Key timeline of the SEAbings phenomenon**



**Source: created by the authors (2026)**

The timeline in Figure 3 helps clarify the periodization of the SEAbings phenomenon. The sequence shows a gradual shift from the concert incident to the circulation of racist comments, the emergence of cross-border responses, the production of memes and local-language replies, and the eventual movement of the issue into online news coverage. SEAbings therefore did not appear suddenly. It was formed through an accumulation of repeated digital responses that reinforced one another. In the context of networked publics, social media provides a space in which users, platforms, and communicative practices can generate new forms of collectivity (boyd, 2008). Through the circulation of affect, especially anger, shared injury, humor, and pride, SEAbings became a recognizable marker of regional solidarity among Southeast Asian digital publics (Papacharissi, 2015).

The movement from fandom conflict to SEAbings shows how a dispute rooted in popular culture can become an arena for Southeast Asian digital identity formation. At this stage, Southeast Asia was no longer invoked only as a geographical space or as an ASEAN-centered institutional category. It was produced as a symbolic community through the digital practices of ordinary users. SEAbings names this process: a form of digital solidarity born from the experience of being demeaned and then reworked into pride, closeness, and a symbolic defense of regional dignity.

Once the fandom conflict had become a question of regional representation, the construction of SEAbings can be read through four main indicators: *boundary-making*, *shared symbols*, *affective solidarity*, and *narrative reversal*. These indicators explain how Southeast Asian users' solidarity moved from spontaneous response toward a more recognizable form of digital identity construction.

### **3.2. Boundary-Making: Constructing Southeast Asian "Us" and K-netz "Them"**

The first indicator is *boundary-making*, understood here as the symbolic construction of "us" and "them". In the SEAbings case, this boundary emerged when Southeast Asian users began to see themselves as a group collectively demeaned by racist comments from some K-netz. The boundary was not produced through official declarations or regional institutions. It emerged through everyday language, hashtags, memes, and solidarity narratives circulating in digital spaces.

In constructivist terms, identity is closely tied to differentiation. Hopf (1998) argues that identity helps actors understand who they are and how they are positioned in relation to others. SEAbings illustrates this process in a digital setting. Before the controversy, users from Indonesia,



Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, and other Southeast Asian countries could interact as K-pop fans, national publics, or ordinary internet users. Once racist comments began to circulate, their position changed. They increasingly imagined themselves as part of “Southeast Asia”, a regional collective being treated as inferior by outsiders.

The term SEAbings itself made this boundary visible. It worked inclusively inward and defensively outward. Inwardly, it invited users from different Southeast Asian countries to recognize one another as regional siblings. Outwardly, it distinguished them from those K-netz perceived to have demeaned the region. SEAbings therefore operated as a collective identity marker. Users who adopted the label signaled that an insult directed at one part of Southeast Asia could be interpreted as an insult to the region more broadly.

**Figure 4. A meme representing the symbolic boundary between Southeast Asian countries and external actors.**



**Source: Public social media post circulated during the SEAbings controversy (2026)**

Figure 4 illustrates the inward and outward dimensions of regional boundary-making. In the upper panel, Southeast Asian countries are represented as separate actors engaged in their own everyday interactions. In the lower panel, however, the involvement of an external actor transforms these separate national positions into a more unified regional formation. The meme therefore constructs a symbolic distinction between those located within the regional community and those positioned outside it. From a constructivist perspective, the boundary between “us” and “them” is not derived automatically from geography. It is produced through representations that encourage users to understand nationally distinct communities as members of the same regional collective.

This boundary-making also appeared in the way racist comments were interpreted as attacks on the region rather than as isolated insults against particular individuals. Mockery of skin color, facial features, economic position, or agrarian landscapes was understood as part of a hierarchical representation that positioned Southeast Asia as inferior. In this context, digital racism did not operate only through direct hate speech. It also worked through representation, humor, content circulation, and the normalization of social hierarchies on social media platforms (Ekman, 2024; Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021).

At the same time, the “us” and “them” boundary in SEAbings must be read discursively rather than literally. Not all Southeast Asians responded in the same way, and not all South Korean users were involved in racist comments. Some secondary sources also recorded South Korean creators apologizing for the racist remarks (Salim, 2026). This article therefore does not generalize South Korean society. Its focus is the symbolic construction that emerged within the digital conflict: some K-netz were perceived as the party demeaning



Southeast Asia, and Southeast Asian users responded by building solidarity through the SEAbings label.

Thus, boundary-making became the first foundation of SEAbings as a digital identity. A sense of “us” emerged when Southeast Asian users encountered narratives that positioned the region as inferior. From constructivist perspective, identity is formed through social relations and exchanges of meaning. This case shows that such relations can unfold in digital spaces through comments, memes, hashtags, and cross-border responses.

### 3.3. *Shared Symbols: Hashtags, Memes, and Regional Symbols*

The second indicator is *shared symbols*. Collective identity requires symbols that can be recognized, used, and circulated together. In the SEAbings case, these symbols appeared through hashtags, memes, regional scripts, cultural references, and visual markers associated with Southeast Asia. They transformed scattered reactions into a more recognizable collective expression.

The hashtag #SEAbings became the most important symbol in this process. It gave a name to an emerging form of regional solidarity. By combining “SEA”, or Southeast Asia, with “siblings”, the term created a metaphor of regional kinship in digital space (Beltran, 2026; Salim, 2026). Through the same hashtag, users from different countries could enter a shared conversation without belonging to the same organization. The hashtag made solidarity searchable, followable, and reproducible.

### Figure 5. The circulation of “Southeast Asia” and “SEAbings” as trending topics on X in Indonesia

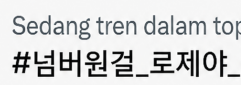
Sedang tren dalam topik Indonesia

**Knetz**



Sedang tren dalam topik Indonesia

**Malay**



Sedang tren dalam topik Indonesia

**Asia Tenggara**



**Source: Screenshot from X (2026)**

Figure 5 shows that “SEAbings” circulated alongside broader references to Southeast Asia within the digital conversation. Its appearance as a trending topic made the label visible and reproducible, allowing users to recognize SEAbings as a shared marker of regional identification. From a constructivist perspective, the term did not merely describe an already existing community. Its circulation contributed to producing a common language through which Southeast Asian users could imagine themselves as part of the same digital collective.

This function is consistent with Bennett and Segerberg’s (2012) concept of connective action. In digital action, participation does not always depend on formal organizations, a single leader, or a rigid mobilization structure. It can emerge through personalized messages, content circulation, and connectivity among users. SEAbings followed this pattern. No single leader directed Southeast Asian responses.

Solidarity grew through the circulation of content: users quoted posts, created memes, added comments, used hashtags, and reproduced counter-narratives.

Memes were also central to the construction of shared symbols. The SEAbings-K-netz controversy became one of the major “meme wars” among Southeast Asian netizens (Fahmi, 2026). Memes functioned as compact, affective, and highly shareable media. They could carry criticism, humor, pride, and satire in a single visual form. In the SEAbings case, memes helped mark regional togetherness. When users from different countries drew on similar forms of humor, they produced a shared symbolic language.

Anderson’s (2006) concept of imagined communities helps explain why such symbols mattered. A community can be imagined as a collective even when its members never meet one another directly. In SEAbings, this imagined community was produced through the circulation of symbols. Users who had never met could still feel that they belonged to the same group because they used the same hashtag, laughed at the same memes, and responded to the same insults. Digital platforms accelerated the formation of this imagined community and made it more visible.

**Figure 6. A meme representing Southeast Asian national communities as a shared regional collective**



**Source: Publicly circulated SEAbings meme (2026)**

Figure 6 illustrates how national identities were incorporated into a wider Southeast Asian collective. The flags of Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam remained visible, but they were positioned together in relation to a common external actor. The meme therefore did not erase national differences. Instead, it symbolically aligned separate national communities within a shared regional position. In constructivist terms, this visual arrangement contributed to producing Southeast Asia as a meaningful collective through differentiation and shared representation.

Shared symbols therefore connected emotion to identity. Anger toward racism provided the initial trigger, but shared symbols gave that anger direction and recognizability. Hashtags named the collective, memes gave it form, and regional symbols gave users a sense of belonging. Through these symbols, SEAbings developed from separate reactions into a Southeast Asian digital identity.

### **3.4. *Affective Solidarity: Anger, Humor, and a Shared Sense of Injury***

The third indicator is *affective solidarity*. SEAbings solidarity was generated through emotions that circulated across digital spaces. Anger, offense, humor, satire, pride, and a shared sense of injury became the affective energy that moved users into participation. Affect was therefore not incidental to SEAbings. It was one of the main forces that held the digital collective together.

Racist comments acted as the immediate trigger for anger. When insults targeted physical features, skin color, economic status, and Southeast Asian cultures, users from different countries responded with similar feelings of offense and humiliation. These emotions strengthened the formation of “us”. Users

who had not previously been connected through a political organization could recognize one another through a shared experience of being demeaned as Southeast Asians.

Papacharissi (2015) describes this kind of digital public as an affective public: a public formed through expressions of feeling that move across networked spaces. Such publics do not necessarily have formal organizations, detailed political programs, or visible leadership. They emerge through the circulation of emotion, stories, and symbols. SEAbings fits this framework because its solidarity was built through a combination of anger, humor, and pride circulating through hashtags, memes, and comments.

The affective texture of SEAbings was not limited to anger. Social media monitoring also indicated the presence of joy, anticipation, and anger in the conversation. Users were angered by racist posts, yet many were also entertained by the creativity of memes and collective Southeast Asian responses (Fahmi, 2026). This finding matters because it shows that affect in SEAbings was layered. Digital solidarity was animated by the pain of insult and by the pleasure of seeing the region respond collectively.

Humor played an especially important role. Many Southeast Asian responses used memes, satire, and mockery (Fahmi, 2026; Salim, 2026). Humor prevented the response to racism from remaining only a direct expression of anger. It turned the conflict into a creative space. Through humor, users could ridicule stereotypes, reduce the emotional burden of the controversy, and broaden participation. Users who did not want to engage in serious debate could still participate through memes or playful comments.

A shared sense of injury also mattered. In the documented responses, Southeast Asian users did not defend only one country. They defended the region. Although Malaysia was the initial site of

the controversy, responses came from Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, and other Southeast Asian countries. When No Na's music video was mocked for showing rice fields, the response did not remain a defense of Indonesia alone. The insult was read as part of a wider stereotype about Southeast Asia. This pattern reveals a form of regional solidarity based on shared symbolic experience.

**Figure 7. A meme portraying an external challenge to one Southeast Asian country as a shared regional concern**



**Source: Public social media post circulated during the SEAbings controversy (2026)**

Figure 7 visualizes the idea that an external challenge directed at one Southeast Asian country may be interpreted as a concern shared by the wider region. The upper panel represents ordinary disagreements among individual Southeast Asian countries, while the lower panel portrays them as moving together when an external actor confronts one of their members. The meme therefore expresses more than strategic cooperation. Through humor, it constructs an affective expectation of mutual defense and regional

loyalty. In constructivist terms, the image helps produce a shared understanding that the experiences of one national community are connected to those of other communities within the region.

This representational pattern was also visible in the SEAbings controversy. Although the initial dispute emerged in Malaysia, insults directed at Malaysian, Indonesian, and other Southeast Asian communities were increasingly interpreted as part of a common regional injury.

Affective solidarity, however, also has risks. Digital conflict can escalate into harassment or new cycles of insult when it becomes uncontrolled (Fahmi, 2026). This point is important because SEAbings should not be romanticized. Digital solidarity can function as resistance to racism, but it can also intensify polarization and reproduce hostile exchanges. SEAbings is therefore productive and ambivalent at the same time: it shows the capacity of digital citizens to build solidarity, while also revealing the risks of affect-driven conflict in online spaces.

Affect was the main material from which SEAbings identity was built. Without anger toward racist comments, SEAbings might not have emerged as a collective response. Without humor and memes, that response might not have circulated widely. Without pride and a shared sense of injury, SEAbings might have remained a temporary hashtag with little regional meaning. Affect made this digital identity alive, mobile, and recognizable across national boundaries.

### **3.5. Narrative Reversal: Turning Insults into Regional Pride**

The fourth indicator is *narrative reversal*, or the process through which narratives of inferiority are reworked into narratives of pride. In the SEAbings case, this reversal appeared when objects used to demean Southeast Asia were turned into markers of

regional dignity. Rice fields, darker skin, agrarian culture, and regional identity were initially mobilized as signs of inferiority. Southeast Asian users responded by reclaiming them as sources of pride.

The No Na case is a good example. The music video of the Indonesian group under 88rising was mocked because it used rice fields as part of its setting (Buana, 2026a; Salim, 2026). Within the logic of the mocking comments, rice fields were treated as signs of backwardness, poverty, or inferior production value. Southeast Asian users reversed this meaning. They did not accept the rice field as a symbol of lack. They read it instead as part of the region's cultural landscape, food systems, natural beauty, and agrarian identity.

Hall's (1997) work on representation helps clarify this process. Representation is never neutral. Meaning is produced, contested, and struggled over. When a symbol is used to demean a group, the group being demeaned can produce counter-meanings. In the SEAbings case, the rice field became a site of representational struggle. For those who mocked it, the rice field signified inferiority. For Southeast Asian users, it signified proximity to nature, food sovereignty, local culture, and visual beauty. This struggle over meaning shows that SEAbings identity was produced through the contestation of representation.

Narrative reversal also took place at the level of the body and skin color. Racist comments mocking Southeast Asian facial features and darker skin operated through particular racial hierarchies (Salim, 2026). SEAbings responses rejected those hierarchies by insisting that Southeast Asian physical features should not be placed beneath external standards of beauty, modernity, or cultural value. Here, narrative reversal functioned as a refusal of the evaluative framework that made such insults possible in the first place.

This reversal explains why SEAbings did not remain merely defensive. At first,

Southeast Asian responses appeared as a defense against insult. Over time, the response became a celebration of regional identity. Users did not only say that Southeast Asia was not inferior. They also affirmed that the region had cultures, landscapes, languages, humor, and creativity worth celebrating. The movement from defense to celebration is important because it shows that SEAbings generated positive meanings about the region.

From a constructivist perspective, narrative reversal is part of identity production. Identity is formed through meanings that are continually negotiated. SEAbings shows that the meaning of Southeast Asia is not determined solely by external representations. Southeast Asian users participated in shaping how the region could be understood. They rejected inferiorizing representations and replaced them with narratives of pride. This process made SEAbings more than a hashtag of resistance. It became a symbolic space in which Southeast Asia was reimagined by its own digital citizens.

This reversal nevertheless has limits. Not every narrative reversal produces stable social change. Some responses may last only as long as the digital conflict remains visible. Some memes may disappear once public attention shifts elsewhere. For this reason, SEAbings should not be described as an established regional movement. It is better understood as an intense, affective, and potentially recurring moment of digital identity construction. Its analytical value lies in showing how Southeast Asian digital identity can be produced from below.

### **3.6. SEAbings as a Citizen-Led Digital Southeast Asian Identity**

Taken together, the four indicators show that SEAbings can be understood as a citizen-led digital Southeast Asian identity: a regional digital identity produced by

ordinary users through everyday communicative practices on social media. This identity did not originate from the state or from formal regional institutions. It was built through symbolic boundaries, shared symbols, affective solidarity, and narrative reversal. The process shows that contemporary regionalism can emerge outside the formal channels of diplomacy.

In International Relations, regions are often approached through institutions, interstate cooperation, and regional architectures. Southeast Asia is frequently discussed through ASEAN, non-intervention, economic cooperation, and diplomacy among states. SEAbings introduces another perspective. A region can also be produced in the everyday digital life of citizens. When users called themselves SEAbings, they imagined Southeast Asia as a community that could feel close, injured, humorous, angry, and proud together.

Constructivism helps explain this process. Wendt (1992, 1999) emphasizes that identities and interests are formed through interaction. Acharya (2017) shows that Southeast Asian identity has always been the product of social and political construction. SEAbings extends this insight into digital space. Regional identity is not formed only through elite interaction, diplomacy, or institutions. It can also emerge through the interactions of social media users, memes, hashtags, and comments that circulate across borders.

The phenomenon also shows that non-state actors in International Relations do not always appear as formal organizations. SEAbings points to a more fluid form of collective agency. Southeast Asian users did not have official membership, organizational structure, or a clear policy agenda. Even so, they were able to produce a visible regional discourse in digital public conversation.

In this respect, SEAbings differs from the Milk Tea Alliance. The Milk Tea Alliance has often been studied as a form



of cross-border pro-democracy solidarity confronting authoritarianism and state repression (Putra, 2024; Prayoga et al., 2025). SEAbings emerged from a different context. It began in popular culture and a digital conflict around K-pop, then developed into a response to transnational racism. This difference matters because it shows that regional digital solidarity does not always originate from formal political agendas. It can also emerge from conflicts over representation, symbolic insult, and shared affective experience.

One of SEAbings' main strengths lies in its ability to connect local, national, and regional identities. Users did not abandon their national identities. Indonesian users, for example, still brought Indonesian language, local symbols, and pride in *No Na* into the conversation. Malaysian, Filipino, Thai, Vietnamese, and other Southeast Asian users also brought their own contexts. These expressions then met under one symbolic umbrella: SEAbings. Southeast Asian digital identity therefore did not erase local and national identities. It took shape through the convergence of local, national, and regional expressions in digital space.

Overall, SEAbings demonstrates that Southeast Asian digital identity can be produced rapidly, affectively, and participatorily through social media. This identity is fluid and situational: it can intensify when an emotional trigger appears and weaken when public attention moves elsewhere. Its temporary quality does not make it analytically insignificant. Moments such as SEAbings reveal that Southeast Asian digital citizens can imagine themselves as a regional community when confronted with shared insult. SEAbings therefore offers an example of how regional identity can be produced from below through everyday digital communication.

#### 4. Conclusion

SEAbings illustrates how a regional digital identity can emerge organically from online interaction rather than from formal political projects. Triggered by racist comments circulating across social media, what initially appeared to be a conflict within the K-pop fandom sphere gradually evolved into a broader struggle over the meaning and image of Southeast Asia in digital spaces. In the process, Southeast Asian users collectively negotiated who belonged within the imagined regional community and who stood outside it.

Several dynamics were central to this process. Racist stereotypes and degrading comments encouraged the formation of symbolic boundaries between Southeast Asian users and those perceived as looking down on the region. At the same time, hashtags, memes, local expressions, regional scripts, and cultural references became tools through which a shared sense of belonging was communicated and reinforced online. Emotional expressions also played an important role. Anger, humor, satire, and collective pride helped transform scattered reactions into a wider feeling of solidarity that crossed national borders. Perhaps most significantly, insults directed at Southeast Asian culture, language, appearance, and everyday life were reappropriated and turned into affirmations of regional pride.

These findings contribute to debates on regional identity in International Relations by highlighting that regions are not shaped exclusively through state-led initiatives, institutional frameworks, or diplomatic narratives. Regional consciousness can also be produced through everyday digital practices carried out by ordinary users. The SEAbings phenomenon demonstrates that online conflict may function as a catalyst for collective identity formation, particularly when shared experiences of racism encourage the circulation of common symbols, emotions, and

counter-narratives. Southeast Asian social media users, therefore, should not be viewed merely as passive audiences reacting to online events, but as active participants in constructing regional meaning in the digital era.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. The analysis is based primarily on secondary materials, including online news coverage, social media monitoring reports, and publicly accessible digital archives. As a result, the article does not attempt to generalize the perspectives of all Southeast Asian societies or fully capture the complexity of SEAbings-related interactions across platforms. Future studies could strengthen

this discussion by incorporating primary social media data, interviewing users directly involved in the exchanges, or comparing SEAbings with similar forms of digital regional solidarity in other contexts.

In conclusion, the SEAbings phenomenon demonstrates that Southeast Asia can also be understood as a symbolic community shaped through shared digital interactions and collective experiences. What initially emerged from online conflict and hostility gradually evolved into a form of digital solidarity, revealing how Southeast Asian users themselves actively construct, negotiate, and reinforce a shared sense of regional identity.



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