



A Sense of Community in the ASEAN

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Contents

Introduction	2
Sense of Community and Communication for a Sustainable Community	3
Definition of Community	3
Communication for a Sustainable Community	4
Factors Predicting a Sense of Community	5
Sense of Community in ASEAN and Its Predictors	7
Perceived Sense of Community in the ASEAN	8
Factor Predicting Sense of Community in the ASEAN	8
Summary	10
Future Directions	12
Appendix 1: Survey from a Citizen of ASEAN's Member States	13
References	13

Abstract

The ASEAN Community was established in 2015 to achieve the three pillars of sustainable development: political security, economic, and sociocultural development. However, this is only the beginning of establishing a sense of community there. The question remains whether the ASEAN can reach its goals and whether the people will feel this sense of community. Understanding the factors that predict the development of a sense of community in the ASEAN can help answer this question. The survey results from 1200 citizens of the ASEAN member states provide insight for future regional communication campaigns, which may help to strengthen emotional connections, trust, and a sense of belonging to the ASEAN Community.

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Introduction

One Vision, One Identity, One Community

This motto was stated by the Chairman of the 11th ASEAN Summit on December 12, 2005. Ten years after this statement, the ASEAN Community was formally established on December 31, 2015 (The ASEAN Secretariat Community Relations Division 2017a). Member states include Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam (The ASEAN Secretariat Community Relations Division 2017b).

Following the community's motto, three blueprints reflecting the three pillars of development were issued: (1) the ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint 2025 (AEC); (2) the ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint 2025 (APSC); and (3) the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025 (ASCC) (Aekaputra 2011). By 2025, according to the ASEAN secretariat (2015), member states should be working together to achieve the vision of these three blueprints, including the following: (1) to strengthen an integrated economy, (2) to ensure peace and a strong shared sense of togetherness, and (3) to promote a sustainable community and a shared sense of ASEAN identity.

However, there is ample evidence that these visions have not yet been accomplished. Regarding the first pillar, the ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint 2025 (AEC), Rillo (2017) states that the ten member states have faced difficulties in achieving economic integration. The existing literature reveals that about half of the respondents in the extant studies engaged in small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Cambodia and about 20% of the respondents working in manufacturing in Indonesia appeared to lack awareness of the AEC (Thangavelu et al. 2017; Anas et al. 2017). The SMEs in Lao were not seen to be closely linked to regional economic integration (Kyophilavong et al. 2017), and most of the SMEs in the Philippines have not recognized the impact of the AEC on their business performance (Aldaba 2017). Additionally, the Gen Y Malaysian population reported a strong sense of economic nationalism and at the same time the possibility of disagreement with the idea of regional economic integration in the ASEAN (Benny 2016).

As for the second pillar, the ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint 2025 (APSC), some member states have not yet achieved its vision of peace and security. Thailand's southern insurgency has also contributed to a sense of insecurity and distrust between the leaders of Thailand and Malaysia (Zha 2016, 2017; na Thalang 2017). With the last pillars, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025 (ASCC), the issues of humanitarian crises that have systematically crushed the ethnic minority and religious identity of the Rohingya, for example,

have impeded the process of promoting ASEAN Community integration (Paik 2016).

As pointed out above, various problems still occur within this community. Therefore, the question remains whether the ASEAN Community can reach its visions and whether the people of the ten member states will feel this sense of community. To date, only one study has examined the sense of belonging to the ASEAN Community among its citizens, and it was discovered that about 75% of the respondents from the ten member states reported a moderate to strong sense of belonging to the ASEAN Community. Out of 2322 respondents, only 69 reported a very low sense of ASEAN citizenship and belonging (Intal and Ruddy 2017). However, no study has looked into the influence of communication factors on developing a sense of community in the ASEAN (Dawson 2006). Section “[Sense of Community and Communication for a Sustainable Community](#)” provides a comprehensive review of the literature and empirical research on the concepts and definitions of community across the disciplines of sociology, community psychology, and development communication. The roles of communication tools in community development are also discussed in this section. Section “[Factors Predicting a Sense of Community](#)” explores the factors that predict a sense of community in a general context. The crucial factors that can enhance a sense of community in the ASEAN are identified in Section “[Sense of Community in ASEAN and Its Predictors](#)”. Section “[Summary](#)” presents a concise summary of the key factors predicting a sense of community in the ASEAN. Finally, the future directions for member states in developing a sense of community in the ASEAN are proposed in Section “[Future Directions](#)”.

Sense of Community and Communication for a Sustainable Community

Definition of Community

The definition of “community” is often ambiguous (Giddens and Sutton 2017). For several decades, sociologists, along with psychologists, have been working to construct a definition of “community” (Hutchison 2008). Attempts have been made to define “community” in the field of sociology. Hillery (1955), for example, examined 94 studies and found that the definition of community included three common elements: geographic area, social interaction, and common ties.

Community psychologists also have highlighted the importance of the sense of community (Hughey and Speer 2012; McMillan and Chavis 1986; Sarason 1976). Among the concepts discussed in this connection, the most prominent framework of the community is the idea of the “psychological sense of community” developed by McMillan and Chavis (Flaherty et al. 2014). The sense of community comprises four dimensions: (1) membership, (2) influence, (3) integration and fulfillment of needs, and (4) a shared emotional connection. The first dimension, *membership*, refers to a sense of belonging or personal relations, which has five elements: (1) boundaries,

(2) emotional safety, (3) a sense of belonging and identification, (4) personal investment, and (5) a common symbol system. The second dimension, *influence*, is the perception of individuals of their contribution to the community and a sense of cohesion with people in the community. The third dimension, *integration and fulfillment of needs*, refers to the perceived fulfillment of an individual's needs through the resources available in the community, such as membership status and the reputation of the community. The last dimension, *shared emotional connection*, is a bonding between people or a group with a shared emotional connection, history, place, time, experience, as well as spirituality (McMillan and Chavis 1986).

Communication for a Sustainable Community

The community concept can also be seen to have roots in the development of the communication approach. Servaes (2008) pointed out, for example, that communication for sustainable social change has become an influential paradigm, and from his standpoint, it is crucial to examine the “changes from bottom-up, from the self-development of the local community.” Servaes and Malikhao (2016) further proposed five levels of communication strategies for development and social change as listed below:

- (a) *Behavior change communication* (BCC): mainly interpersonal communication
- (b) *Mass communication* (MC): community media, mass media, online media, and ICT
- (c) *Advocacy communication* (AC): interpersonal and/or mass communication
- (d) *Participatory communication* (PC): interpersonal communication, community media, and social media
- (e) *Communication for structural and sustainable social change* (CSSC): interpersonal communication, participatory communication, mass communication, and ICT

In particular, Servaes and Malikhao (2014) have stated that CSSC should come to the forefront for the social and sustainable development of the ASEAN Community, and sustainable development should be accomplished via a combination of communication and other dimensions, including structural, organizational, cultural, demographic, sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and physical environmental factors. Furthermore, Servaes and his students (2016a) formulated sustainability indicators for evaluating the influence of communication on development projects. One of the indicators suggests investigating a variety of media, including face-to-face communication, print, radio, television, ICT, and mobile phone. Therefore, the next section will provide a review of the literature on the disadvantages and advantages of the media regarding community development and the role of each type.

The mass media, for example, have been criticized for being one-way communication oriented and for overestimating the importance of audience exposure to the mass media without considering the content or sources of messages (Melkote and

Steeves 2015). Similarly, one of the disadvantages of community media is that they are small-scale organizations which fail to reach a large audience (Carpentier et al. 2003).

In contrast, social media and face-to-face communication have several advantages when compared to mass media and community media. Social media have been seen to foster the relationships between citizens and government organizations (Criado et al. 2017) and to provide opportunities for civic engagement and building trust among citizens, which leads to high trust in an institution (Warren et al. 2014). Likewise, face-to-face communication that focuses on receiver-oriented and horizontal communication is crucial for building a sustainable community. According to the communication for social change paradigm, it is important to build communication networks for sharing knowledge and information among key stakeholders, including academic scholars, communication practitioners, field-specific professional, NGOs, and community members (Servaes and Lie 2015). During their interaction period within networks, mutual trust and honesty have increased, and this has triggered information flows and true participatory action, which eventually leads to the success of the community building effort (Servaes and Malikhao 2008). Thus, focusing on the local community's viewpoint and building trust among the people in the community through collaboration between local and international stakeholders are crucial for reaching community sustainability (Servaes 2016b).

Factors Predicting a Sense of Community

The first predictor begins with the perceived physical environment, and several studies have demonstrated an association between this and the perceived sense of community. For example, it has been suggested that perceived neighborhood safety is positively associated with a sense of belonging to the community (Gonyea et al. 2017), and a safe physical environment, pedestrian facilities, and recreation areas have been seen to promote a sense of community (French et al. 2014). In particular, the sense of belonging among the citizens of the ten ASEAN member states has been seen to be derived from the geographical setting (Intal and Ruddy 2017).

Apart from the physical environment factor, there is also a social interaction factor that plays an important role in the prediction of a sense of community. Jabareen and Zilberman (2017) developed a social interaction methodological framework that emphasized the physical environment, transportation, and social interaction as predicting factors in promoting a sense of community. Evidence from previous studies also supports this framework; that is, the availability of public spaces can promote face-to-face interaction among people in communities (van den Berg et al. 2014). Likewise, Wood et al. (2010) found that communities with pedestrian-friendly streets strengthened the social interaction among residents.

Reid (2015) also found that the perception of living in a safe physical environment with common facilities increased opportunities for social interaction and enhanced the sense of community among the residents of multi-owned properties in Australia. Likewise, Seo and Lee (2017) demonstrated that the Crime Prevention

Through Environment Design project in Korea, which renovated the pedestrian environment for safety and established crime protection devices, increased the residents' perceived quality of the environment by 13.7–18.5%. As a result, the residents have increased their participation in several types of social activities, including social gathering and joining a children's playground. Consequently, their perceived sense of community rose by 5.4–7.9%. Thus, a high-quality physical environment, or the perception of living in one, can be seen to promote a sense of community through the availability of opportunities for formal and informal interaction between the members in the community.

The role of social interaction itself is also important. Drawing on McMillan and Chavis's sense of community concept, Garrett et al. (2017) proposed co-constructing a sense of community model which highlights the importance of the relationship between participating in community activities and the sense of community. According to this model, community members develop their sense of community through their interaction during daily routines and social events. For young people, engaging in sports and recreational and religious activities strengthens a sense of community and identification with the community (Cicognani et al. 2008).

In communities where various social activities have been organized, community members have plenty of opportunities to spend time together. Consequently, they are able to develop social connectedness, neighborhood-based friendships, and social relationships with other people in the community (Lenzi et al. 2013). Along the same lines, the results of previous study have demonstrated that leisure activities, sports, and cultural activities have been seen to significantly predict the social connectedness of older people through social gatherings with family and friends from within and outside the neighborhood (Toepoel 2013).

A more specific social gathering has been discussed by Rosenthal et al. (2007), who stated that people that report spending time with others through religious activities have a higher level of perceived connectedness to the people in the city than those that have not participated in any activities because they know their source of emotional support. Similarly, Sohi et al. (2017) found that the more that people participate in ritual activities, the more likely they are to have a greater sense of community. Because the members of a ritual community have worshiped together, they are bonded together. Thus, their sense of membership and a shared emotional connection are developed.

Another factor that previous studies have highlighted as a possible determinant of the sense of community has to do with the information from different sources – there is evidence that community members develop their sense of community through the information gathered from the various sources of media in the community. For instance, a case study of the success a local initiative against the carbon dioxide capture and geological storage in a Canadian community demonstrated the importance of information sources in developing a sense of community. Boyd (2017) investigated this case and found that strong community attachment was one element of a sense of community that was derived from the communication networks in the community. Sharing cooperative connectedness, gathering information through online media and mass media, and disseminating the information via face-to-face

communication helped the community members succeed in their opposition to the carbon dioxide capture system in this Canadian community.

Information sources such as face-to-face communication, participatory communication, ICT, and mass communication have been viewed as crucial tools for sustainable social change (Servaes 2017). Out of these tools, online media, such as digital media and mobile phones, have become prominent forms of communication for social change projects (Servaes and Lie 2015). ICTs help people develop social contact with friends and family, enhance economic performance, and increase the sense of security and peace (Baqir et al. 2011). It was for this reason that Hoffman (2017) suggested distributing information concerning community activities across social media channels (e.g., Twitter and Facebook) in order to enhance the perception of the importance of community service activities and to strengthen the sense of connectedness with the community. Another tool that has been posited to serve community development is community media (Carpentier et al. 2003), which are accessible sources of information, education, and entertainment for the local community, according to Berrigan (1979).

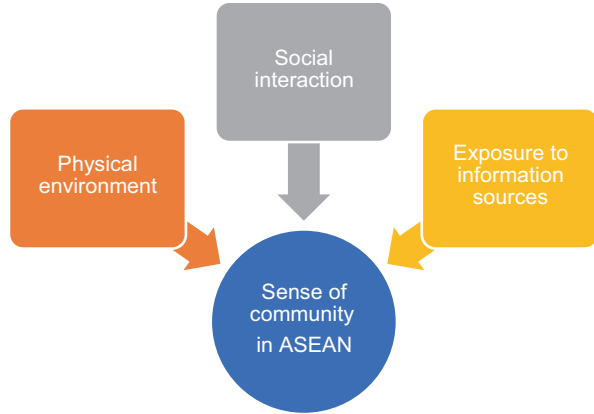
The role of information sources in community development is crucial in many ways, not only for sustainable social change but also for fostering a sense of community. Friends and radio were the desired sources of information that were able to establish a sense of community among Trinidadians and Jamaicans living in Washington, D.C. The more that information was gathered from friends at work, meetings, and with the telephone, the more were the immigrants likely to have a greater sense of community. Thus, exposure to online media, community media, mass media, and face-to-face communication are one of the factors that predict a sense of community (Regis 1988).

In order to understand the sense of community in the ASEAN, a prediction model is proposed. As shown in Fig. 1, the perceived sense of community among the citizens of the ASEAN Community may be a result of the perceived physical environment, social interaction, and exposure to information sources.

Sense of Community in ASEAN and Its Predictors

To explore the factors that predict a sense of community among the citizens of the member states (Fig. 1), a survey was conducted in six provinces across three geographical regions of Thailand: the northeast, north, and south. These settings are unique and located along three special border economic zones, including the Thailand-Laos border, the Thailand-Malaysia border, and the Thailand-Myanmar border. According to the Official Statistics Registration System of Department of Provincial Administration (2015), the total size of the populations in the 6 selected provinces was 5,358,866, comprising Chiang Rai (1,282,544), Tak (631,965), Nakhon Phanom (716,873), Nong Khai (520,363), Songkhla (1,417,440), and Narathiwat (789,681). A total of 1200 respondents residing in 6 selected provinces were recruited to fill out the survey, employing the quota sampling method with a proportional allocation of 400 samples for each region. Each of the predictors is

Fig. 1 Predictors of a sense of community in the ASEAN



explored. An exploration of perceived sense of community in the ASEAN and its predictors are demonstrated below.

Perceived Sense of Community in the ASEAN

The citizens of the member states have a strong sense of community in the ASEAN (Mean = 3.54). Further examining the sense of community dimensions, the highest average score went to “membership” with a mean score of 3.65. The membership questionnaire items that measured the feeling of who is a part of the ASEAN community and a recognition of the common symbol system received a higher mean score than all others. The lowest average score went to the integration and fulfillment of needs dimension with a mean score of 3.46. The lowest-scoring question item assessed whether the ASEAN community would succeed in fulfilling the needs of its citizens. (Appendix 1, Table 2).

Factor Predicting Sense of Community in the ASEAN

The perception of the citizens of the ASEAN member states toward border environmental features, such as cross-border connecting roads, public transportation, and commercial areas, was high, with a mean value of 3.54, 3.49, and 3.48, respectively (Fig. 2).

Regarding their social interaction with people that were residing in ASEAN member states, the citizens of the ASEAN Community were more likely to exchange greetings (e.g., “hello” and “smile”) than to engage in cross-border spiritual activities, have conversations, and get together with friends (Fig. 3). In addition, the citizens of the member states reported that their main sources of information about the ASEAN Community were online media such as websites, Google, Line, Facebook, and YouTube. The second most common information source for exposure

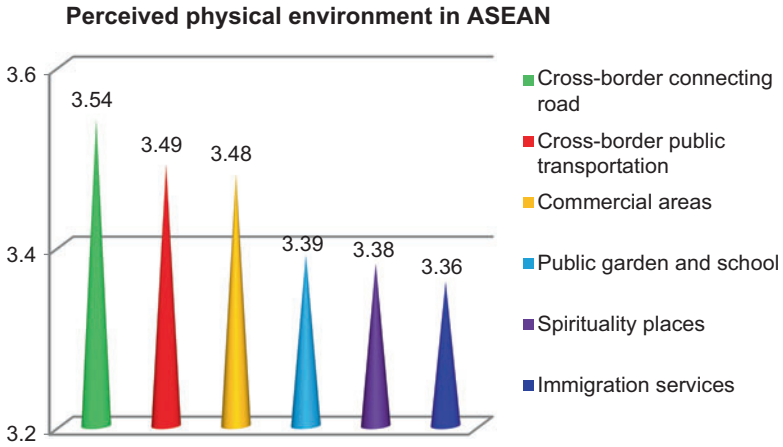


Fig. 2 Perceived physical environment in the ASEAN (Data were collected for this study. The respondents were asked to rate the items using a five-point Likert scale, measured on the basis of a 7-item questionnaire derived from Cerin et al. (2009))

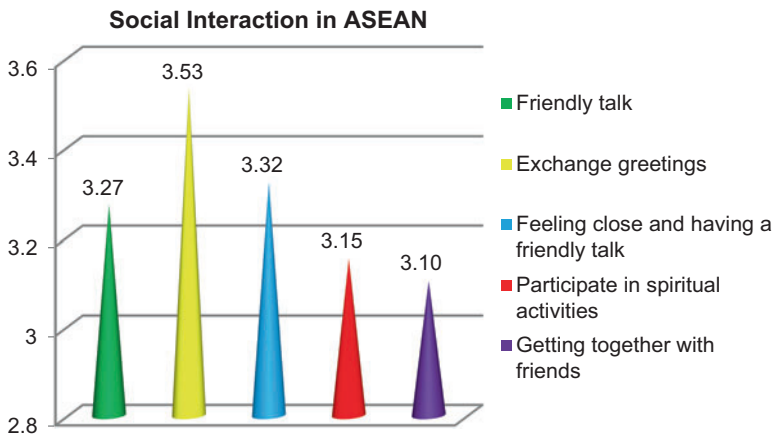


Fig. 3 The level of social interaction among the citizens of the ASEAN Community (Data were collected for this study. The respondents were asked to rate the items using a five-point Likert scale. The 5-item questionnaire on perceived social interaction was adapted from Mendes de Leon et al. (2009)).

was the mass media, followed by community media. The least-used information source was face-to-face communication, which scored on average 3.35 (Table 1).

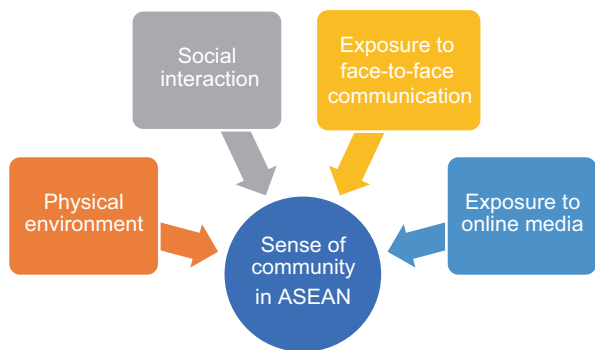
As shown in Fig. 4, the model for predicting a sense of community in the ASEAN was developed using the stepwise regression technique. The analysis showed that the combination of perceived physical environment, social interaction, exposure to face-to-face communication, and exposure to online media explained 58.7% of the perceived sense of community ($R^2 = .587$) (Appendix 1, Table 2). The standardized

Table 1 Exposure to information sources among the citizens of the ASEAN Community

Information sources	Mean
Online media (websites, Google, Line, Facebook, and YouTube)	3.81
Mass media (television, radio, newspapers, and magazines)	3.55
Community media (cable television, community radio, and local newspapers)	3.51
Face-to-face communication (family, teachers, government officers, and community leaders)	3.35

Source: Data were collected for this study. The respondents were asked to rate their level of exposure to information sources on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “highest level of exposure” to “lowest level of exposure”.

Fig. 4 Predictors of a sense of community in the ASEAN



coefficients for perceived physical environment ($\beta = .360$; $p < .001$), social interaction ($\beta = .309$; $p < .001$), exposure to face-to-face communication ($\beta = .171$; $p < .001$), and exposure to online media ($\beta = .136$; $p < .001$) were significant. This explained that these factors were variables that predicted the perceived sense of community in the ASEAN. The strongest predictive contribution was the perceived physical environment variable ($R^2 = .459$; $R = .678$); however, exposure to community media and mass media did not significantly predict the perceived sense of community.

Summary

This is just the early period of establishing the ASEAN Community. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the sense of what the ASEAN Community is and the social interaction and media exposure among the citizens of the community so that the ten member states can accomplish the three-pillar visions. This study provides an understanding of the sense of community in the ASEAN.

The perceived physical environment was the strongest predictor of the perceived sense of community in the ASEAN, accounting for 45.9%. The citizens of the ASEAN Community perceived that they could easily commute across the borders of the ASEAN member states using individual and public transportation for the

purposes of education, business, and ritual practices. Thus, living in a community with a “walkable” space, a recreation area, and high availability of public transportation engenders a real sense of community (Francis et al. 2012; Gonyea et al. 2017; Wood et al. 2010; French et al. 2014). The member states of the ASEAN Community are obviously situated in close proximity, and this leads to an increase in the sense of belonging (Intal and Ruddy 2017).

In particular, public spaces and facilities can promote social interaction among the people in communities (van den Berg et al. 2014). A sense of community is developed after engaging in social interaction and social activities in the community (Garrett et al. 2017; Cicognani et al. 2008). The more people engage in spiritual activities, the more likely they are to have a greater sense of community (Rosenthal et al. 2007; Sohi et al. 2017). The physical environment, together with the social interaction variables, explained 54.2% of the perceived sense of community: greater accessibility to transportation, infrastructure, and public facilities led to a higher level of engagement in social activities on the part of the ASEAN Community citizens. Social interaction such as friendly talk with people from member states, exchange greetings, and participating in spiritual practices can enhance their sense of community in the ASEAN.

Exposure to face-to-face communication and online media were also found to predict the sense of community in the ASEAN. As emphasized by Servaes and Malikhao (2014), the communication for sustainable social change (CSSC) should be central to the sustainability development initiatives of the ASEAN Community, and in particular, the current study demonstrated that face-to-face communication is one of the crucial information sources for strengthening a sense of belonging to this greater community. Moreover, Servaes and Lie (2015) have stated that communication networks including academic scholars, NGOs, and community members are drivers of social change: as information regarding community development is exchanged during social interactions, mutual trust is established, and, consequently, a community is developed sustainably (Servaes and Malikhao 2008; Servaes 2016b). Additionally, social media channels (e.g., Twitter and Facebook) and ICTs are crucial tools for fostering relationships between citizens and government agencies (Criado et al. 2017; Warren et al. 2014) and for strengthening a sense of connectedness with the community and developing a sense of security (Hoffman 2017; Baqir et al. 2011).

In spite of the fact that the citizens of the member states have a high level of exposure to mass media and community media, these factors failed to predict the perceived sense of community within the ASEAN. This may be explained by the weaknesses of these types of media: the mass media focus too heavily on one-way communication but ignore content (Melkote and Steeves 2015), and the community media have low capability to reach large audiences (Carpentier et al. 2003).

According to the idea of Servaes and Malikhao (2014), sustainable social change is not only the result of exposure to the media; it can also be achieved through the integration of communication factors and other factors such as the perceived physical environment. The model that is the most successful predictor of the perceived

sense of community must include the perceived physical environment and exposure to online and other media.

The citizens of the member states recognized the beginning of the establishment of the ASEAN Community through their exposure to face-to-face communication and online media. In dealing with community issues, the members of the community tended to obtain information from different sources. They then passed this information through face-to-face interaction, and this in turn created strong community attachment and a sense of community (Boyd 2017). Thus, the more frequently that the respondents were exposed to these information sources (e.g., face-to-face communication and online media), the more was information regarding the ASEAN Community distributed and the more this led to social interaction. Additionally, the respondents live close to other ASEAN member states along the borders, and this close proximity increases opportunities for social interaction and eventually develops a sense of belonging to the greater community.

Future Directions

The ten member states of the ASEAN Community have faced challenges in accomplishing the visions of the three pillars. It is important to gain insight into the key factors that can predict the ASEAN citizens' sense of community. As mentioned, the geographical proximity advantage was seen to be a major predictor of this sense of community; however, the communication aspects, such as the social interaction among the citizens of member states, along with exposure to online media and face-to-face communication, were also seen to be crucial keys in fostering a sense of community.

This study suggests future directions for exploration. Given the partial roles of exposure to online media and face-to-face communication, emphasis should be placed upon the use of online media (e.g., websites and Facebook Fan Pages) as a major tool for the promotion of the ASEAN Community's visions in fostering integration and trust among its citizens. Along with online media, the ten member states should convey information regarding these visions through government officers, community leaders, teachers, and local people because they are the most important sources of information in many border communities in the ASEAN Community. Although in this study exposure to the mass and community media was not seen to effectively predict the perceived sense of community, these cannot be dismissed as unimportant channels for the ASEAN Community Awareness Campaigns. As the final level of strategic communication for sustainable development is communication for sustainable social change (CSSC), this suggests incorporating interpersonal communication, participatory communication, mass communication, and ICT into development communication campaigns (Servaes and Malikhao 2014).

Appendix 1: Survey from a Citizen of ASEAN's Member States

Table 2 Mean for the perceived sense of community in the ASEAN

Perceived sense of community in the ASEAN	Mean
Membership	3.65
Influence	3.50
Integration and fulfillment of needs	3.46
A shared emotional connection	3.50
Total	3.54

Sources: Data were collected for this study. The respondents were asked to rate the items using a Likert scale. The questionnaire on the perceived sense of community was adopted from Chavis et al. (2008). Permission to use this questionnaire was obtained from Community Science.

Table 3 Model summary of linear stepwise regression analysis

	SOC	PE	SI	O	F	M	b	β	SR ² incremental
PE	0.678						0.347***	0.360	0.459
SI	0.674	0.683					0.270***	0.309	0.084
O	0.369	0.304	0.265				0.130***	0.171	0.027
F	0.493	0.383	0.487	0.247			0.082***	0.136	0.016
M	0.364	0.328	0.299	0.227	0.592		–	–	–
C	0.335	0.341	0.353	0.329	0.515	0.611	–	–	–
							Intercept		0.710***
Mean	3.541	3.446	3.278	3.811	3.354	3.512			
SD	0.669	0.694	0.766	1.106	0.878	0.846			
							R ²		0.587
							R ² _{adj}		0.585
							R		0.766***

SOC sense of community, PE physical environment, SI social interaction, E exposure to information sources, F face-to-face communication, O online media

*** $p < 0.00$

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