

Fostering Youth-Led ASEAN Interest Group in South Korean Universities: Preliminary Studies of Two ASEAN Roundtables

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ABSTRACT

During the COVID-19 pandemics, most of the youth's extracurricular events and activities in South Korean universities had been halted. These included the student-led interest group that was purposed to promote better understanding and people-to-people connections from South Korea and other regions, including the Southeast Asia region and the ASEAN organization. This paper aims to provide initial insights into how these student-led ASEAN Interest Groups show their eagerness to survive the pandemic semesters and keep their existence as a common and sustainable space for youth in South Korean universities better to understand the Southeast Asia region and its people. As a preliminary case study, this research conducted mini field research observation on-site and virtually in two ASEAN roundtable groups in two South Korean universities for two months (mid-September 2021 to early November 2021). These activities include participating in both groups' regular meetings, monitoring social network service (SNS/social media) accounts, disseminating voluntary primary demographic and aspirations surveys for the groups' members, and in-depth interviews with the groups' in-office and former coordinators. The result from this mini-ethnographic study later deliberated into how these student-led ASEAN interest groups in South Korean universities can play a role in lime lighting a young, dynamic, and prospective region of Southeast Asia amongst young Koreans that still have a limited understanding of the Southeast Asia region and culture, that in the future can play in building a sustainable and future-oriented ASEAN-South Korea partnership.

Keywords: South Korea-ASEAN Relations, South Korea, Southeast Asia, ASEAN, Student Club

INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the student's extracurricular events and activities in South Korean universities have been halted, along with other universities around the globe. The student council, student club, art exhibition and concerts, sports competition, and even the freshmen orientation, yet graduation commencements were held virtually or did not commence at all. According to a survey by Chen et al. (2021), South Korean university students significantly reduced their activities during the pandemic, such as traveling, spending time with friends, eating out, and working part-time. Instead, they turned to food delivery services and online shopping for their

necessities. Despite these shifts, the survey highlighted the critical role of social support from peers, as spending time with friends was positively correlated with happiness during this stressful period.

These include the student-led area interest group that purposed to promote better understanding and people-to-people connection between South Korea and the intended region, including the Southeast Asia region with the ASEAN organization that level getting connected as shown by South Korea's New Southern Policy at that time. The New Southern Policy (NSP) is a foreign policy initiative launched in 2017 by President Moon Jae-in to strengthen ties between South Korea, Southeast Asia, and India. This initiative seeks to reduce South Korea's dependency on major powers, such as the United States, Japan, and China. The NSP reflects Seoul's strategic recognition of ASEAN and India as crucial yet underappreciated partners in its foreign policy. As a result, South Korea considers it imperative to deepen its engagement with ASEAN and India across various fronts (Choe, 2021).

However, according to the Survey on Mutual Perceptions of ASEAN and Korean Youths conducted by ASEAN Korea Centre in 2021 and 2022, the level of interest among Korean youth towards ASEAN was only 52.8%, which is relatively low compared to the interest of local ASEAN youth towards Korea at 90.4%. Additionally, Korean youth's favorability towards ASEAN only reached 41.6%. This disparity in interest is further highlighted by the predominantly negative keywords that Korean youth associate with Southeast Asia region and its people, such as "developing country," "underdeveloped country," "poor," "dirty," "cheap," "small," "dark-skinned," and "foreign worker." In contrast, ASEAN youth who are living locally and in Korea tend to use positive terms to describe Korea and its people, including "pretty," "diligent," "beautiful," "technology," "fast," and "development" (ASEAN-Korea Centre, 2022; ASEAN-Korea Centre, 2023).

This research aims to provide initial insights into how the student-led ASEAN Interest Groups in South Korean universities, namely the Seoul National University (SNU) GSIS ASEAN Roundtable and the Korea University (KU) GSIS Southeast Asia Society, can be a sustainable space for youth in South Korean universities to get a better understanding of Southeast Asia region and its people, in addition to more extensive annual activities as in ASEAN-Korea Youth Summit and other eventual events. This research particularly focuses on the approach taken by the selected student-led ASEAN interest groups to survive amidst the global pandemic. It highlights their strategy of adjustment and innovation to attract more students to participate in the groups despite the difficult situation.

Recent research examines youth dynamics in South Korea and Southeast Asia, highlighting various aspects of cultural exchange and global competence. Efforts to bridge the perception gap between ASEAN and Korean youth have been proposed, such as the SKYFITY initiative, which aims to foster mutual understanding through cultural and public diplomacy approaches (Aji & Anindhita, 2022). Studies have also assessed global competencies among ASEAN and Korean youth, revealing unique characteristics and the potential benefits of online international exchange programs such as the annual ASEAN-Korea Youth Summit (Kim et al., 2022). The influence of Korean popular culture,

or the "Korean Wave," has been also widely observed in Southeast Asian countries, demonstrating the complex outcomes of globalization beyond simple Americanization (Beloan, 2022; Glodev, et.al, 2023). These studies collectively emphasize the importance of youth engagement in fostering regional cooperation and cultural understanding.

These student-led ASEAN Interest Groups in South Korean universities were chosen based on the corresponding author's involvement and observation. The corresponding author was an active graduate student who participated directly in one of the ASEAN Roundtables during the observation; then, the author had direct access to the group's dynamics. For the other roundtable, the author finds the group's active presence in SNS engaging as a promotional medium for their internal activities, with Southeast Asia-related content as their primary focus.

Therefore, this paper investigates how and why student-led ASEAN interest groups are sustained in two South Korean universities observed. What are the main interests and aspirations of the members of both groups? How well and exposed the group members to ASEAN and Southeast Asia? What are the most significant needs and supports demanded from both groups to foster and attract more members? Finally, how might ASEAN and South Korean stakeholders support these student group activities?

METHOD

As a preliminary case study, this research employed a mini-ethnographic approach, combining field observation, surveys, and in-depth interviews to explore how student-led ASEAN interest groups in South Korean universities contribute to ASEAN-Korea awareness. Data collection was conducted over two months (mid-September 2021 to early November 2021), involving both on-site and virtual observations. The study focused on two student organizations: SNU GSIS ASEAN Roundtable and GSIS Southeast Asia Society, as they remained active during the COVID-19 pandemic through online activities, ensuring continuous engagement despite mobility restrictions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly transformed ethnographic research methods, necessitating a shift towards digital approaches. Researchers have adapted by employing online platforms and digital tools for data collection, including virtual ethnography, netnography, and online interviews (Fatanti et al., 2022). This transition has presented both challenges and opportunities, particularly in establishing trust and connections with participants in virtual spaces (Gera & Hasdell, 2021). The pandemic has altered the relationship between space and visibility in fieldwork, impacting researchers' situated perspectives and access to participants (Weiner Davis & Obertino-Norwood, 2024). Despite these changes, qualitative research using digital platforms can still adhere to conventional principles while adapting to new circumstances (Fatanti et al., 2022). The evolving nature of ethnographic methods in a globalized and post-pandemic society has led to the emergence of virtual-collaborative fieldwork approaches (Kumoro, 2022), highlighting the need for researchers to navigate ethical considerations and methodological innovations in this new landscape.

The primary data sources included: (1) participation in the groups' regular meetings, (2) monitoring of their social networking service (SNS) accounts, (3) voluntary demographic

and aspirations surveys, and (4) in-depth interviews with current and former group coordinators.

Respondent Criteria and Sampling

A total of 13 out of 28 registered members voluntarily participated in the survey. The respondents were graduate students from Seoul National University GSIS and Korea University GSIS, regardless of nationality or semester, provided they were members of the respective groups and willing to complete the survey. Their prior engagement with ASEAN-Korea relations was unknown beforehand, which was specifically addressed through survey questions.

While the sample size is relatively small compared to the total member population, the survey findings serve as an illustrative representation rather than a statistically generalizable result. To enhance credibility, the survey results were triangulated with qualitative data from in-depth interviews with the groups' coordinators.

Data Processing and Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using manual thematic analysis, aimed at identifying trends in the respondents' demographic background, knowledge, and aspirations regarding ASEAN and Southeast Asia. Responses were categorized under key themes, including:

- Awareness Level – general recognition and knowledge of ASEAN
- Familiarity Level – depth of understanding about ASEAN and Southeast Asian countries
- Sources of References – primary sources of information about ASEAN
- Country of Origin – nationality of respondents and its influence on ASEAN interest
- Contents of Group Discussions – key themes discussed within the groups
- Interest and Aspirations – respondents' motivations for engaging in ASEAN-related topics
- Enrollment in Southeast Asia-Related Courses – formal academic engagement with ASEAN studies

To ensure data validity, findings from the survey were cross-verified through interviews with both groups' coordinators. These interviews provided further insights into the groups' objectives, activities, and their perceived role in enhancing ASEAN awareness among young Koreans.

The results of this study contribute to understanding how student-led ASEAN interest groups function as platforms for fostering knowledge and engagement with ASEAN in South Korea. The findings highlight the potential of such organizations in promoting ASEAN-Korea relations through youth-driven initiatives, despite limitations in sample size and generalizability. Future research with larger samples and extended methodologies (e.g., longitudinal studies, mixed-method approaches) could further validate these preliminary insights.

RESULTS

Groups' Survivability During the Pandemic

Both groups are eager to survive after being halted in pandemic semesters to different

extents. The SNU GSIS ASEAN Roundtable was stopped for three semesters, and the KU GSIS Southeast Asia Society was paused for one semester. From the interview with the in-office coordinators of each group until the mid-fall Semester of 2021 (late October), the SNU GSIS ASEAN Roundtable had 13 (thirteen) registered members, and the KU GSIS Southeast Asia Society had 15 (fifteen) registered members.

These registered numbers already included the coordinator and the committee, and the average number of attendees for the regular meeting is around five to eight members in both groups. This number is indeed far below the pre-pandemic membership and attendance numbers. In the SNU GSIS ASEAN Roundtable, the average attendance before the pandemic was 15–20 students based on the internal documentation; the same figures are also similarly illustrated in the uploaded activities in the KU GSIS Southeast Asia Society's SNS account.

The registered members have different basic knowledge about ASEAN and Southeast Asia regions. From basic survey sample answers (see Figure 1), three survey participants (23,1 percent) said they are very familiar with Southeast Asia regions, six participants (46,2 percent) are familiar, one participant (7,7 cent) is neutral, and three participants (23,1 percent) are relatively unknown about the region, but none of the samples stated they are very unknown about Southeast Asia.

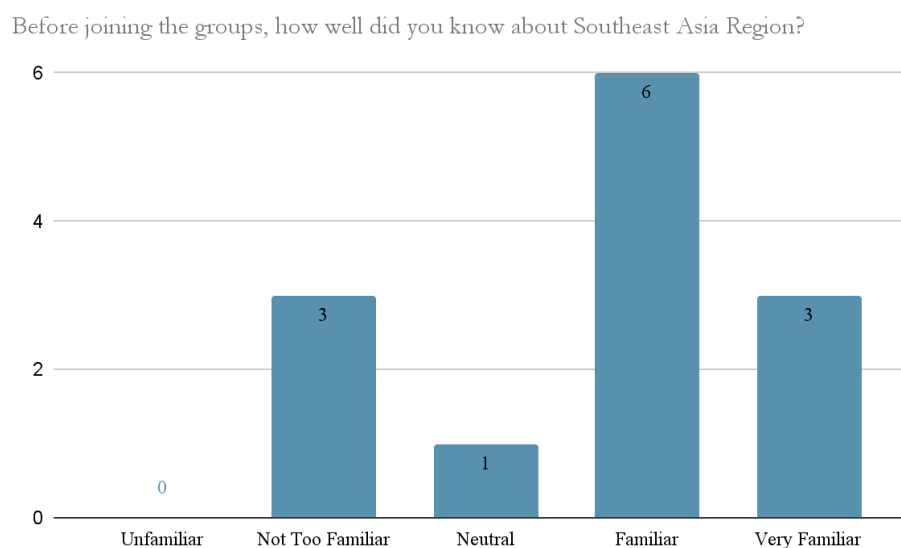


Figure 1. Groups' Member Awareness with Southeast Asia Region
(Source: Survey, 2021)

Regarding what fields the registered members are pretty familiar with in the Southeast Asia region (see Figure 2.), three-quarters of the survey participants are pretty familiar with Southeast Asia society and culture (ten participants, 76,9 percent). More than half of the participants were also quite familiar with the regional organizations in Southeast Asia, including ASEAN (eight participants, 61,5 percent). Furthermore, six survey participants (46,2 percent) are quite familiar with Southeast Asia's politics and government, and the region's trade, business, and economy are quite familiar to five survey participants (38,5 percent). However, only one survey participant (7,7 percent) was quite familiar with Southeast Asian human rights issues.

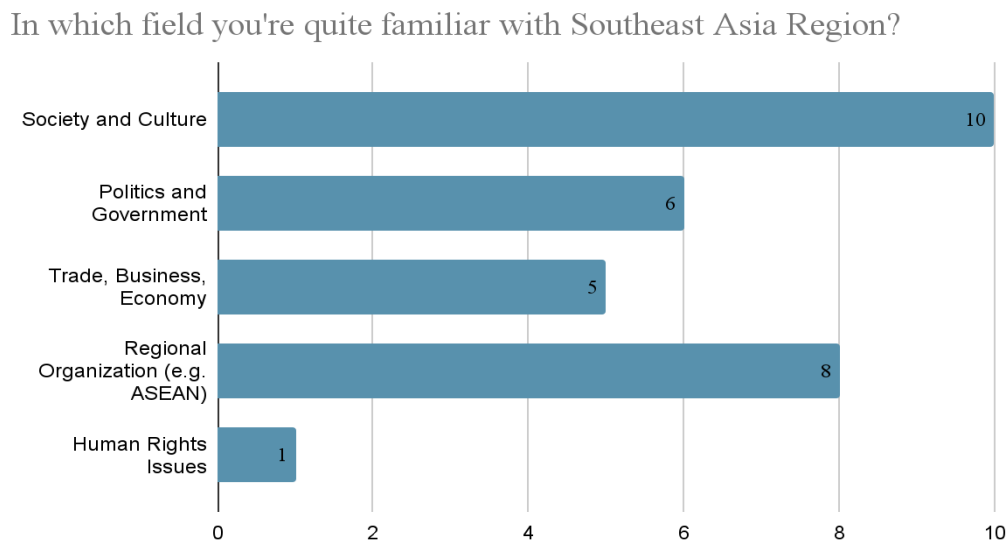


Figure 2. Groups' Member Familiarity in Southeast Asia Region based on Fields
(Source: Survey, 2021)

Most of the survey participants gained information about Southeast Asia regions from documentary and news publications (nine participants, 69,2 percent), social media (eight participants, 61,5 percent), and textbooks or academic journals (seven participants, 53,8 percent). Other sources are movies, TV serials, and music (six participants, 46,2 percent). The same percentage also noted that survey participants also get insights about Southeast Asia from their Southeast Asian friends and acquaintances. More minor sources for survey participants include Southeast Asia countries' embassies/representatives, Southeast Asia-related organizations, and personal experiences traveling to Southeast Asia (see Figure 3).

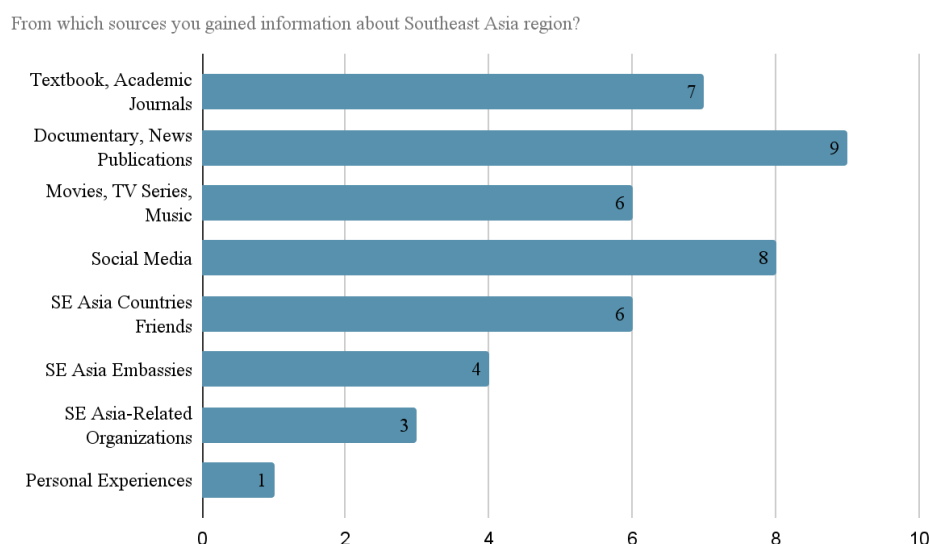


Figure 3. Sources for Group Members on Acknowledging Southeast Asia Region
(Source: Survey, 2021)

The Member's Demography

Both of the ASEAN Roundtables are established in the Graduate School of International Studies (GSIS) at the respected universities and comprise many international students. In the SNU GSIS, of 300 enrolled students, 40 percent are international students and represent 50 countries from the Americas, the Asia-Pacific, Europe, and Africa (SNU GSIS, 2021b). Meanwhile, in KU GSIS, roughly half of the student body is Korean. Half are from other countries, including China, the U.S., Germany, Uzbekistan, Japan, Palestine, Ecuador, Rwanda, Finland, Bolivia, Ghana, Indonesia, Canada, and Thailand, to name only a few (KU GSIS, 2020).

This colorful origin of the student body is also reflected in the demography of student-led ASEAN interest groups in both universities (see Figure 4). From the survey participants' demography, the Southeast Asian countries' origins dominated the population by seven participants (47 percent). This is followed by participants from Asia-Oceania countries (except South Korea and Southeast Asian countries) by three participants (33 percent). The Korean students comprise 13 percent of the survey's participants by two participants. Finally, the number of participants from European countries stands at seven percent, with only one survey participant from the blue continent.

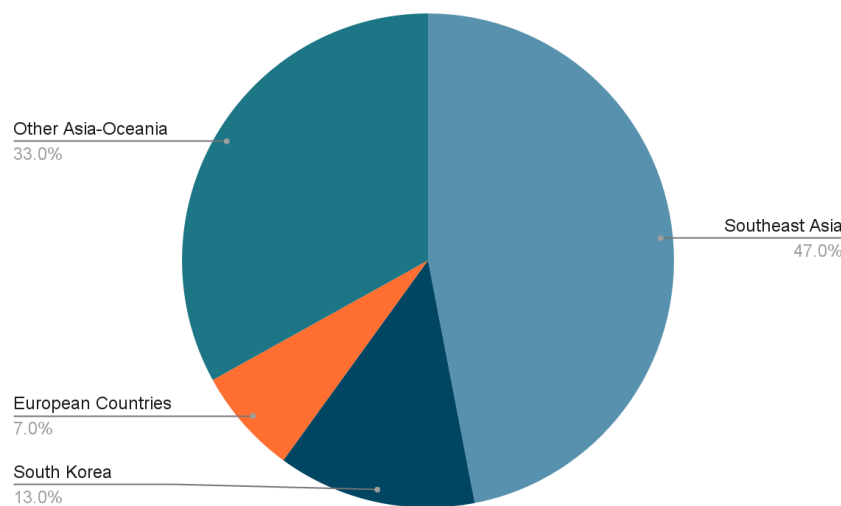


Figure 4. Group Member's Samples Demography based on Country of Origin
(Source: Survey, 2021)

Since the number of survey participants is not nearly half the registered member population, this demography is confirmed by the group's coordinators. In the SNU GSIS ASEAN Roundtable, most members are graduate students from Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Singapore (Interview with SNU GSIS ASEAN Roundtable Coordinator, October 22, 2021). In the KU GSIS Southeast Asia Society, the majority also non-Korean and mainly from Europe and the United States (which is not illustrated from the participant's demographic result), and not many participants from Southeast Asia except one member from Indonesia (Interview with KU GSIS Southeast Asia Society, October 28, 2021).

DISCUSSION

Student-Led ASEAN Interest Group in South Korean Universities: An Introduction

In this section, the author will introduce the SNU GSIS ASEAN Roundtable and the KU GSIS Southeast Asia Society. The group's origin, vision, main activities, and adaptation during the pandemic from the Spring Semester of 2020 to the Fall Semester of 2021 are included.

SNU GSIS ASEAN Roundtable

As cited from their internal documents entitled “ASEAN Roundtable: An Introduction,” this student-led ASEAN interest group, namely the SNU GSIS ASEAN Roundtable, was founded in the Spring Semester of 2018 under the banner of “SNU GSIS ASEAN Roundtable” commemorating the establishment of the ASEAN Culture House in 2017 and celebrating the 50th anniversary of ASEAN, the SNU GSIS ASEAN Roundtable was envisioned to be the best practice of people-to-people connectivity between ASEAN and Korea.

During its inaugural year, the activities include student presentations and an institutional visit to ASEAN-related stakeholders. The themes of the student presentation include the trade relations between ASEAN and ECOWAS member states, a comparative analysis between ASEAN and Mercosur labor mobility policy, and other ASEAN-related topics. During these terms, the members of the groups also visited the ASEAN-Korea Centre, Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat, Royal Thai Embassy, and Vietnam Embassy (SNU GSIS, 2019).

However, during the pandemic, the roundtable was halted and was inactive for three semesters from the Spring Semester of 2020 to the Spring Semester of 2021. Nevertheless, several Southeast Asian students later in the Fall Semester of 2021 tried to revive the ASEAN Roundtable with the help and advice from the seniors from the pre-pandemic semester. This roundtable revival was conducted virtually with more light contents, including an introduction to Southeast Asian languages, weekly news updates on Southeast Asia regions, and archiving Southeast Asia pop culture artifacts as in music, movies, and literature as deliberated by the later roundtable coordinator (Interview with SNU GSIS ASEAN Roundtable Coordinator, October 22, 2021).

KU GSIS Southeast Asia Society

As can be traced from their SNS account on Instagram (@seas_kugsis), the Korea University Graduate School of International Studies Southeast Asia Society was initiated in the Spring Semester of 2019 under the banner of “KU GSIS East Asia Society” or “KU GSIS EAS” (KU GSIS Southeast Asia Society [@seas_kugsis], 2019b). However, the name was officially changed to “KU GSIS Southeast Society” in the Fall Semester of 2021 after prolonging the former name for five semesters. This is also remembering that Southeast Asia issues have been one of the main focuses for the main sponsor of the KU GSIS Graduate Program of Area Studies or GPAS, as stated by the later roundtable coordinator (Interview with KU GSIS Southeast Asia Society, October 28, 2021).

The KU GSIS Southeast Society, in nature, is a weekly student-led discussion about Southeast Asia as deliberated in their “Fall Semester 2020 Orientation” presentation

documents. This weekly discussion is the room for debate and exchange of knowledge and ideas about Southeast Asian aspects, including politics, culture, and arts. The latest Fall Semester 2021 activities also include student-led presentations-discussions and documentary viewing on Southeast Asia's food culture. Nevertheless, before the pandemic, outing activities were also being held, such as the Night Palace Tour in Gyeongbokgung (KU GSIS Southeast Asia Society [@seas_kugsis], 2019a).

During the pandemic, society only halted for one semester of the Fall Semester of 2020 before recommencing again in the short Winter Semester of 2020-2021 and moving to virtual meetings started in the Spring Semester of 2021. In addition, the society is also more engaged in the SNS account as it regularly uploads weekly news updates, popular facts, and quizzes about Southeast Asia and publishes the documentation of the commenced regular meeting. Thus, the society finally gradually returned to the offline meetings that started in the Fall Semester 2021.

Southeast Asia-Related Contents in Group Activities

The Southeast Asia-related issues discussed in both groups also varied as observed during the Fall Semester 2021 term (see Table 1). The contents discussed in the SNU GSIS ASEAN Roundtable were observed by monitoring the members' bi-monthly updates on Southeast Asia issues in the observation period (mid-September to early November). COVID-19 situation updates in Southeast Asia countries have become the most discussed issues in the SNU GSIS ASEAN Roundtable; this includes case fluctuations, quarantines measure, vaccination progress, and post-pandemic plans as in overseas travel arrangements. Other than the pandemic, updates on individual Southeast Asian countries were well discussed, with the political turmoil in Myanmar becoming the most attention. The updates on the ASEAN Summit in 2021, chaired by Brunei Darussalam, were well covered in the roundtable, with the angle also related to Myanmar's presence and absences at the summit. The geopolitics of ASEAN and its partners also attract the members, including ASEAN communication with the US (on COVID-19 cooperation), Australia (AUKUS issue), and China (regarding South China Sea dynamics).

On the other hand, current affairs updates on individual countries in Southeast Asia are becoming the most attractive issues in KU GSIS Southeast Asia Society, which can be traced from their content and publication on their Instagram SNS account (@seas_kugsis). The update on Myanmar became the most discussed, followed by ASEAN relations with external factors with the European Union (EU) counterpart on this behalf. Other topics included environment, education, culinary, and Hallyu effects in Southeast Asia. An interesting part of the KU GSIS Southeast Asia Society activities is that in addition to having an internal weekly meeting, the society also uploaded several infographics and content about Southeast Asia to their SNS account so that the general public can also gain insight into Southeast Asia.

Table 1. Southeast Asia-Related Contents Discussed in Groups

Roundtable A		Roundtable B	
Topics	Frequency	Topics	Frequency
COVID-19 Situations in Southeast Asia Countries (Cases, Quarantines, Vaccination, Post-Pandemic Plan)	6	Update on Southeast Asia Individual Countries (Myanmar, Singapore, Cambodia)	4
Update on Southeast Asia Individual Countries (Myanmar, Malaysia, The Philippines))	4	ASEAN External Relations (EU)	2
ASEAN Summit Related Events	4	Various Topics in Southeast Asia (Environment, Education, Gastronomy)	3
ASEAN External Relations (US, Australia, China)	3	ASEAN Geopolitics (AUKUS)	1
Various Topics in Southeast Asia (Environment, Education, Arts)	3	ASEAN and Hallyu	1

(Source: Author's Observation, 2021)

The contents discussed in the groups mentioned above align with the survey result of the member's main interest in joining the groups (See Figure 5). Almost every survey participant (twelve participants, 92,3 percent) stated they were interested in Southeast Asia's society and culture. Other interests that also attract the participants are politics and government in Southeast Asia and regional organizations in the area (e.g., ASEAN), which is acclaimed by ten participants (76,9 percent). On the other hand, trade, business, and economy in Southeast Asia attracted seven participants (53,8%), and only one participant stated to have an interest in international relations in Southeast Asia regions (7,7%) despite the fact that this content is quietly discussed in both groups (see ASEAN External Relations and ASEAN Geopolitics, Table 1).

What are the main interests for you in joining the student-led Southeast Asian focus interest group?
(more than one is eligible)

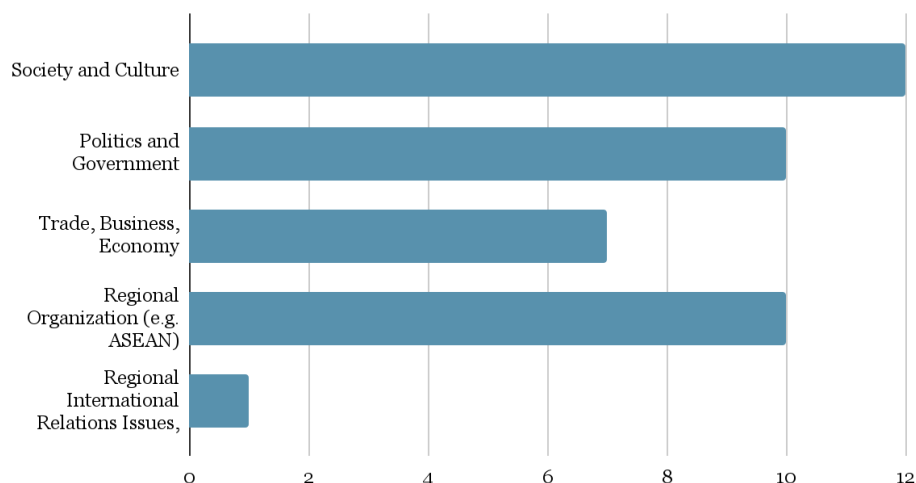


Figure 5. Main Interest of the Participant in Joining Student-Led ASEAN Interest Group
(Source: Survey, 2021)

Potentials and Challenges of Fostering Student-Led ASEAN Interest Group in South Korean Universities

After deliberating the current situation of both groups, the author will try to provide insights into how the student-led ASEAN interest group in South Korean universities can be a common and sustainable space for youth in South Korean universities to understand Southeast Asia region and its people better. The analysis will use a classical SWOT (strength-weaknesses-opportunity-threat) analysis by Fred David. Strengths and weaknesses will be analyzed from internal factors within the organization, including but not limited to human resources, physical resources, financial activities and processes, and past experiences. Opportunities and threats will be analyzed by external factors from the community or societal forces, including future trends in the organization's field, funding sources, demographics, and physical environments (David, 1993). Despite several limitations of SWOT analysis, this preliminary observation will still use SWOT analysis since the purpose of this study is to reflect the organization's current position or situation.

Strength in The Groups' Organizing Committees and Currently Registered Members

As mentioned in the previous section, most registered members were quite familiar with the Southeast Asia region even before joining the group. In the SNU GSIS ASEAN Roundtable, the members also come from the Southeast Asia regions, and all of the organizers also come from Southeast Asian origin, which might provide resources of information and perspectives from Southeast Asians. In KU GSIS Southeast Asia Society, despite the members from Southeast Asia regions being only minor, the members from other origins also show motivation to prepare and do the discussion materials and presentation. These well-rounded committees and well-knowledgeable students about Southeast Asia can be perceived as modalities to make the group sustain during the organizational hardships; as can be seen, both of the groups can survive and revive again (in the case of SNU GSS ASEAN Roundtable) during the pandemic semesters, and not vanished at all.

The survey's result also supports the fact that many registered members who joined the survey took Southeast Asia-related courses during their graduate studies. Around six participants took at least one of the Southeast Asia-related courses, and three took more than two (See Figure 6). In SNU GSIS, these courses include Political Economy of Southeast Asia, International Relations of Southeast Asia, and Korea-Southeast Asia Relations (SNU GSIS, 2021a). In KU GSIS, these courses include ASEAN and Southeast Asia, International Relations of Southeast Asia, Politics of Southeast Asia, and Study of Connectivity Between Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia (Korea University, 2021).

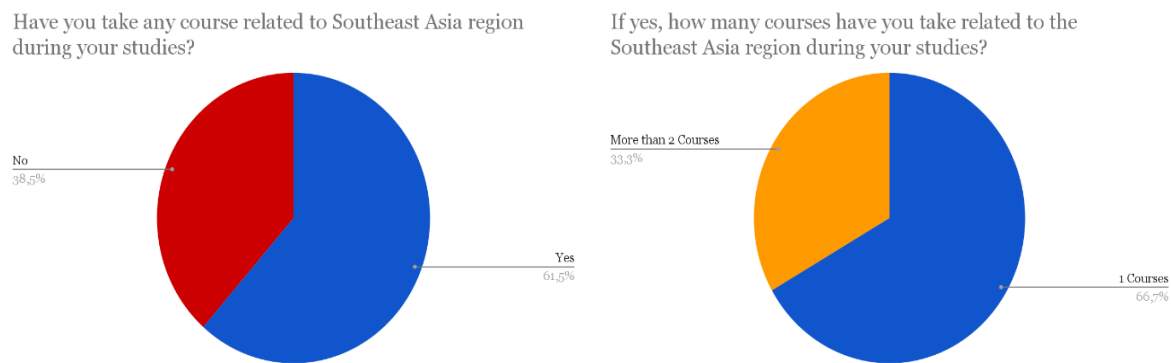


Figure 6. Group Members' Enrollment in Southeast Asia-Related Courses
(Source: Survey, 2021)

The members of ASEAN-Korea student groups exhibit distinct interests that align with cultural exchange, academic enrichment, and career development. For ASEAN students, participation in these groups serves as a means of fostering a sense of community while enhancing professional networks in South Korea. Korean students, on the other hand, often engage in these groups due to academic curiosity or opportunities for career advancement related to Southeast Asia. The disparity in participation levels may stem from differing long-term goals; ASEAN students have direct cultural and professional incentives, while Korean students may perceive engagement with ASEAN as secondary to their career prospects.

The underlying reasons for these interests can be traced to the socio-economic and educational backgrounds of participants. ASEAN students studying in Korea often rely on these groups to navigate cultural and academic challenges, while Korean students may view ASEAN as an emerging but not yet dominant area of international engagement. Additionally, the still emerging economic interdependence between ASEAN and South Korea in non-business sectors may contribute to lower enthusiasm among Korean students.

The study suggests that exposure to ASEAN-related topics through these student groups enhances knowledge and interest in Southeast Asia among Korean students. However, the extent to which this exposure leads to deeper engagement remains unclear. While some Korean students develop professional or academic pursuits related to ASEAN, a significant portion disengages after graduation, indicating that exposure alone may not be sufficient to foster long-term commitment.

A key factor influencing this is the representation of ASEAN within South Korean media and educational curricula. Despite ASEAN being South Korea's second-largest trade partner, its presence in mainstream discourse is relatively low compared to other regions such as the United States or China. To enhance engagement, structured academic programs and public diplomacy efforts must reinforce ASEAN's relevance beyond economic partnerships.

Weakness on Demography: Less Korean Student Participation

Since this research is purposed to show insight into how the student-led ASEAN interest group in South Korean universities can be a common and sustainable space for youth in

South Korean universities better to understand the Southeast Asia region and its people, this notion should face rock-bottom. Only a few Korean students are participating in both groups. In SNU GSIS ASEAN Roundtable, only two Korean students are participating in the groups in the Fall Semester 2021 so far, as SNU GSIS ASEAN Roundtable Coordinator observed:

“And from what I know, some of them (Korean students who are participating) are people who were born and raised in Southeast Asia; that's why they have this kind of interest in Southeast Asia. But so far, I don't think we have people who like, for example, Korean, that they have the kind of genuine interest in Southeast Asia that they have never experienced before.” (Interview with SNU GSIS ASEAN Roundtable Coordinator, October 22, 2021)

Actually, this situation is not uncommon in the SNU GSIS ASEAN Roundtable. In its inauguration year, the Korean students were also not the dominant presence in the roundtable. The SNU GSIS ASEAN Roundtable's coordinator at that time expressed this situation:

“This is just to be honest because they don't see intrinsic values in ASEAN. Because there are more opportunities in China, Japan, the US and EU, and even Africa. Interesting. ... I don't have any idea what's wrong with us (ASEAN). ...This is how I feel, you know, what's wrong? I think it's not just ourselves, but what we can do to attract them?” (Interview with Former SNU GSIS ASEAN Roundtable Former Coordinator, October 19, 2021)

In KU GSIS Southeast Asia Society, this situation also happens, and even since the meetings turned back to offline meetings, there are no Korean students at all in the society, as KU GSIS Southeast Asia Society coordinator mentioned:

“Now we're having more meetings offline. So fewer people are coming, but previously, it's online. Yeah, and online, more people are coming. It depends. It's their thing some people, especially Korean people, prefer online. So last semester, we tended to come up this semester since it's offline, then it's more foreigners, and we don't really have Korean.” (Interview with KU GSIS Southeast Asia Society, October 28, 2021)

One of the most significant challenges in this student-led ASEAN interest group is the relatively low participation of Korean students in ASEAN-related study groups. Possible reasons include Korean youth sentiments toward ASEAN, as while ASEAN is recognized as a key economic partner, its cultural and political significance is often overshadowed by more dominant international relations concerns such as U.S.-China dynamics. Limited media representation of ASEAN in Korea also results in a lower perceived importance of ASEAN studies. Additionally, institutional barriers, such as the lack of structured incentives and career pathways linked to ASEAN expertise, limiting Korean students' motivation to engage with these groups.

Opportunities and Threats on Institutional Supports

The pandemic brought survival situations to both groups, but both groups could still attract participants and keep the activities afloat. On the revival of the SNU GSIS ASEAN Roundtable in Fall Semester 2021, the groups still decided to run independently first while doing the run-check on participants' numbers and finding suitable activities after three semester hiatus (Interview with SNU GSIS ASEAN Roundtable Coordinator, October 22, 2021). However, before the pandemic, the roundtable had a lot of support from SNU GSIS,

ASEAN Korea Center, and other sponsors. These supports include meeting venue, institutional support (recognition, support logo, status), speakers, and research materials in the regular meetings (Interview with SNU GSIS ASEAN Roundtable Former Coordinator, October 19, 2021).

In the KU GSIS Southeast Asia Society, the institutional support was fully supported by the KU GSIS Graduate Program of Area Studies (GPAS), as mentioned on the institution's website. There is a support fund of generous amounts for the regular meetings, workshops, seminars, etc., per year for a voluntarily organized research society by students majoring in area studies of Southeast Asia, formerly named EAS: East Asia Society (KU GSIS, 2021). This fund is used for take-out meals for the discussion attendees and also as an incentive for the students who prepare and conduct the discussion presentation (Interview with KU GSIS Southeast Asia Society, October 28, 2021).

This institutional support and funding is crucial based on the interviews with the current committees. Since the groups are conducted independently and voluntarily, any kind of institutional support and administration really matters to keep the groups' activities running afloat and attract more participants, as seen from the aspirations word clouds in Figure 7.

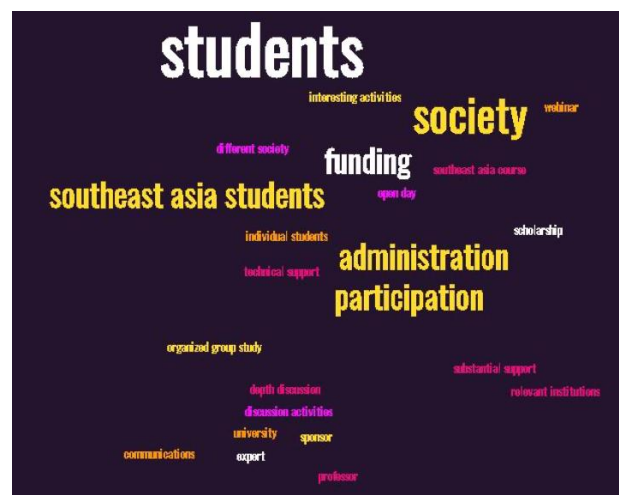


Figure 7. Members' Aspirations for Fostering the Group Activities
(Source: Survey, 2021)

To strengthen these student groups, various stakeholders—including the ASEAN-Korea Centre, South Korean universities, and ASEAN embassies—must implement targeted support mechanisms. The ASEAN-Korea Centre could facilitate funding, mentorship programs, and internship opportunities that bridge student group activities with professional career paths. Korean universities can enhance their commitment to ASEAN-related education by incorporating ASEAN studies into curricula, offering scholarships for ASEAN research, and hosting cultural immersion programs. ASEAN governments and embassies could also play a role by strengthening student networks, supporting ASEAN-Korean student collaborations, and providing language-learning incentives to sustain long-term engagement.

Each of the study's findings has broader implications for policy and educational frameworks. The high participation of ASEAN students highlights the necessity of

fostering support networks for international students in South Korea. The lack of long-term engagement among Korean students suggests the need for institutional strategies that extend ASEAN studies beyond extracurricular activities. Furthermore, the role of public diplomacy and media representation in shaping interest in ASEAN is critical, emphasizing the importance of integrating ASEAN discourse into mainstream education and public awareness campaign.

To enhance Korean student engagement with ASEAN-related study groups, a multi-faceted approach is required. Integrating ASEAN studies into university programs through dedicated degree programs and research grants could improve awareness. Enhancing media outreach by collaborating with Korean media to increase coverage of ASEAN-related issues would raise ASEAN's visibility. Strengthening public diplomacy initiatives, such as student exchanges, scholarships, and joint ASEAN-Korea research projects, could foster deeper engagement. Building career pathways by expanding ASEAN-Korea job opportunities would incentivize sustained interest beyond academia. By addressing these structural challenges, ASEAN-Korean student groups can become more sustainable and impactful, fostering long-term people-to-people connections and institutional collaborations.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to provide initial insights into how student-led ASEAN interest groups in South Korean universities are running even amid the pandemic. Through groups' survivability and adaptability, both SNU GSIS ASEAN Roundtable and KU Roundtable show that these groups can be a sustainable space for youth in South Korean universities, especially at the graduate level, to be more exposed to the Southeast Asia region. The current group members have an initial knowledge of Southeast Asia and enrolled in Southeast Asia-related courses. However, there is a situation where few Korean students are participating in both groups. This can be an interesting future inquiry into how Korean students in South Korean Universities' Graduate Schools perceived Southeast Asia as a region of prospects for their future. However, the presence of these student-led ASEAN interest groups can be an alternative sustainable space for ASEAN-related stakeholders in South Korea to be fostered and later provide more place for South Korean youth to have information about Southeast Asia.

The study suggests that exposure to ASEAN-related topics through these student groups enhances knowledge and interest in Southeast Asia among Korean students. However, the extent to which this exposure leads to deeper engagement remains unclear. While some Korean students develop professional or academic pursuits related to ASEAN, a significant portion disengages after graduation, indicating that exposure alone may not be sufficient to foster long-term commitment. A key factor influencing this is the representation of ASEAN within South Korean media and educational curricula. Despite ASEAN being South Korea's second-largest trade partner, its presence in mainstream discourse is relatively low compared to other regions such as the United States or China. To enhance engagement, structured academic programs and public diplomacy efforts must reinforce ASEAN's relevance beyond economic partnerships.

The results of this study contribute to understanding how student-led ASEAN interest groups function as platforms for fostering knowledge and engagement with ASEAN in South Korea. The findings highlight the potential of such organizations in promoting ASEAN-Korea relations through youth-driven initiatives, despite limitations in sample size and generalizability. Future research with larger samples and extended methodologies (e.g., longitudinal studies, mixed-method approaches) could further validate these preliminary insights.

STATEMENTS OF COMPETING INTEREST

The author(s) herewith declare that this article is free from any conflict of interest regarding the data collection, analysis, editorial process, and publication process in general.

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