

Understanding AEC Stakeholder Perceptions: A Mixed-Methods Approach Integrating Thematic Analysis and Computational Text Analytics

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51584/IJRIAS.2026.11060282>

Received: 05 July 2026; Accepted: 10 July 2026; Published: 18 July 2026

ABSTRACT

This study examines stakeholder perceptions of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) among youth and young adult respondents (aged 15–24) across ASEAN member states and regional partners, using a mixed-methods approach that integrates qualitative thematic analysis with computational text analytics, drawing on 480 open-ended survey responses, thematic analysis identified six themes: Economic Growth and Trade, Regional Integration and Connectivity, Business Development and Market Opportunities, Stakeholder Benefits and Quality of Life, Cooperation and ASEAN Solidarity, and Limited Awareness and Visibility Gap. Chi-square tests revealed statistically significant associations between theme distribution and both country of origin ($\chi^2 = 119.80$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.223$) and stakeholder group ($\chi^2 = 44.17$, $p = 0.046$, Cramer's $V = 0.136$). Sentiment analysis indicated a predominantly positive overall tone (49.8% positive), with T6 responses registering entirely neutral sentiment. Word frequency analysis identified distinctive vocabulary profiles for each theme. The findings, which reflect the perspectives of a predominantly Filipino and Indonesian youth sample, suggest that stakeholders associate the AEC primarily with tangible socioeconomic benefits. However, national context significantly shapes these perceptions. A persistent awareness and visibility gap among a subset of respondents highlights a governance communication challenge requiring targeted policy attention.

Keywords: ASEAN Economic Community; Mixed Methods; Thematic Analysis; Sentiment Analysis; Chi-Square Test; Stakeholder Perceptions; Text Analytics

INTRODUCTION

Regional economic integration has long been a central concern in the social sciences, examined through the intersecting lenses of political economy, international relations, sociology, and governance studies. Within Southeast Asia, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), formally established in 2015, represents one of the most ambitious institutional undertakings in the region's post-colonial history. Conceived as a mechanism to create a single market and production base, the AEC aims to facilitate the free flow of goods, services, investment, skilled labor, and capital across ten member states (ASEAN Secretariat, 2015). However, as scholars of regional integration have long observed, institutional success depends not merely on policy design and formal compliance, but on how stakeholders understand, interpret, and assign meaning to the integration process (Hurd, 1999; Acharya, 2023). In this sense, stakeholder perceptions constitute a critical, yet frequently underexplored, dimension of regional governance.

Despite the growing body of research on the AEC's economic outcomes, the social and perceptual dimensions of integration remain comparatively under-theorized. Three specific gaps motivate this study. First, existing studies on AEC stakeholder perceptions predominantly rely on closed-ended survey instruments that constrain respondents to pre-defined categories, limiting the emergence of culturally specific or unexpected meaning structures. Second, prior qualitative studies have not been systematically complemented by computational

methods to detect statistical patterns, affective orientations, and lexical structures embedded in large bodies of open-ended text. Third, while disciplines such as computational social science and political communication have increasingly demonstrated the analytical value of sentiment analysis and text-as-data approaches (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013; Liu, 2012), these tools remain largely absent from ASEAN governance research. This study responds to all three gaps simultaneously by integrating reflexive thematic analysis with chi-square tests of independence, VADER sentiment analysis, and word frequency modeling, a combination that, to the best of the authors' knowledge, has not previously been applied to open-ended survey data on AEC stakeholder perceptions.

The novelty of this study therefore lies not in the individual methods employed, each of which is established in its respective domain, but in their systematic integration within a single, coherent analytical framework applied to a substantively important governance problem. The first objective is to identify dominant thematic content in stakeholder responses using the reflexive thematic analysis framework of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). The second objective is to apply chi-square tests of independence, including effect size measures, to examine whether the distribution of themes varies significantly across stakeholder groups, countries of origin, and gender. The third objective is to employ VADER sentiment analysis to assess emotional orientation at aggregate and thematic levels. The fourth objective is to identify dominant keywords per theme through word frequency analysis. Taken together, these objectives aim to produce a richer, more methodologically robust account of AEC stakeholder perceptions than any prior study has achieved.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. ASEAN Economic Community and Regional Integration

The theoretical foundations of regional economic integration draw on neofunctionalism, intergovernmentalism, and constructivism. Haas (1958) argued that economic cooperation generates spillover effects that progressively deepen political and social integration. The AEC reflects a broadly neofunctionalist logic, seeking to establish a single market through the progressive liberalization of trade, investment, services, and labor mobility (ASEAN Secretariat, 2015; Severino, 2006; Jetschke, 2021). Baldwin (2006) documents the efficiency gains associated with preferential trade arrangements, while Petri, Plummer, and Zhai (2012) estimated significant welfare gains from AEC integration. More recently, the ASEAN Secretariat (2023) and the Asian Development Bank (2024) have highlighted the AEC's contribution to supply chain resilience and post-pandemic recovery. However, Menon (2013) and Jones (2015) caution that development disparities and elite-centric governance structures risk marginalizing civil society actors, women, and informal sector workers from the benefits of integration — critiques that directly inform the present study's focus on diverse stakeholder voices.

B. Stakeholder Theory and Regional Governance

Freeman's (1984) foundational stakeholder theory establishes that any individual or group capable of affecting or being affected by an organization's objectives has a legitimate interest in its decision-making, a principle that, applied to the AEC, makes stakeholder perceptions a primary criterion of institutional effectiveness rather than a peripheral concern. Donaldson and Preston (1995) distinguish descriptive, instrumental, and normative dimensions of stakeholder engagement, while Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997) introduce the concept of stakeholder salience, defined by power, legitimacy, and urgency, to explain why some stakeholder groups are more visible in governance processes than others. Fung (2006) and Gerard (2014) extend this framework to encompass questions of voice and deliberative inclusion, emphasizing that the quality of regional governance depends on the substantive participation of diverse social constituencies.

C. Public Perception, Legitimacy, and Regional Identity

Hurd (1999) argues that institutional legitimacy, the social recognition of rules as rightful, is a primary source of compliance and authority in international governance. For the AEC, legitimacy is therefore not a fixed property but a continuously negotiated achievement dependent on stakeholder recognition. Constructivist scholars further argue that ASEAN regionalism is a project of identity formation seeking to cultivate a sense of shared community (Acharya, 2001). However, empirical research has consistently found limited public awareness of ASEAN institutions, particularly among youth and lower-income populations (Narine, 2008;

Stubbs, 2019). This awareness gap, which emerges as a distinct theme in the present study, represents a critical challenge for the AEC's social legitimacy and long-term governance effectiveness.

D. The Digital Turn in Social Science Research

The exponential growth of digitally available textual data has transformed the methodological landscape of the social sciences (Lazer et al., 2009). Text-as-data approaches enable the systematic, replicable analysis of large qualitative corpora that manual methods cannot achieve (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013). Sentiment analysis, the computational identification of emotional orientation in text (Liu, 2012), has been applied across political communication (Young & Soroka, 2012), public health (Guntuku et al., 2017), and international relations (Ceron, Curini, & Iacus, 2016). The VADER model (Hutto & Gilbert, 2014) is particularly suited to short-form English survey responses due to its rule-based design, which accounts for capitalization, punctuation, degree modifiers, and negation effects. Word frequency analysis complements sentiment modeling by revealing the dominant conceptual vocabulary through which stakeholders frame their experiences (Krippendorff, 2018). The integration of these digital methods with qualitative thematic analysis represents a novel contribution to ASEAN regional integration research.

METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2014), in which reflexive thematic analysis is conducted first to generate interpretive categories, which are then subjected to statistical testing (chi-square), sentiment analysis (VADER), and lexical analysis (word frequency). This sequencing ensures that quantitative and computational analyses are anchored in stakeholder-generated categories rather than researcher-imposed variables.

B. Data Collection and Sample

The dataset comprises 480 valid open-ended survey responses to the question: 'In one or two sentences, how would you explain the contribution of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) to its stakeholders to a friend or colleague?' The responses were collected during a public consultation on the AEC Post-2025 Agenda, conducted under the auspices of the ASEAN Secretariat in collaboration with ERIA and GIZ. All responses were submitted in English. Following data screening, 480 valid responses were retained. It is important to note that the sample is demographically concentrated: 44.4% of respondents are from the Philippines, 35.6% from Indonesia, and all respondents fall within the 15–24 age bracket. These characteristics limit the generalisability of findings to the full ASEAN stakeholder population, and all findings should be interpreted as indicative of youth and young adult perceptions within this specific sample rather than as fully representative of ASEAN-wide stakeholder views. Table 1 presents the full respondent profile.

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Country	Philippines	213	44.4
	Indonesia	171	35.6
	Malaysia	40	8.3
	Singapore	27	5.6
	Others (Brunei, Cambodia, Myanmar, Timor-Leste, Viet Nam, Japan, South Korea)	29	6.0
Age Group	15–24 years	480	100.0

Gender	Female	281	58.5
	Male	186	38.8
	Prefer not to say	13	2.7
Stakeholder Group	Individual	291	60.6
	Academe/Research/Think Tank	121	25.2
	Business (incl. MSMEs)	29	6.0
	Civil Society Organization (CSO)	13	2.7
	Government	10	2.1
	International Organisation	6	1.3
	Marginalised Individual	10	2.1

Table 1: Profile of Respondents (N = 480)

C. Analytical Procedures

Phase 1 — Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted following the six-phase reflexive framework of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019): (1) familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of all 480 responses; (2) generation of initial codes capturing meaningful semantic units across the dataset; (3) collation of related codes into candidate themes; (4) review and refinement of themes against the full dataset to ensure internal coherence and external distinctiveness; (5) definition and naming of finalised themes; and (6) production of the analytical account. Coding was conducted independently by two researchers, with disagreements resolved through discussion and consensus. The six finalized themes are defined in Table 2, which also presents representative codes and selected anonymized quotations from respondents for each theme to support interpretive transparency and credibility.

Theme	Definition	Representative Codes	Illustrative Quotation (Anonymized)
T1: Economic Growth & Trade	Responses framing the AEC primarily in terms of macroeconomic growth, trade liberalization, and investment flows.	trade flows, tariff reduction, investment, GDP, supply chain	"Free flow of goods, services, investments, capital, and labor will allow the development of production networks and enhance ASEAN's capacity as the global supply chain."
T2: Regional Integration & Connectivity	Responses emphasizing the AEC as a mechanism to deepen regional interconnectedness and economic integration.	single market, integration, connectivity, ASEAN unity	"AEC helps Southeast Asian countries to work together by making the flow of people, goods, and knowledge more seamless and interconnected."
T3: Business Development & Market Opportunities	Responses focusing on entrepreneurship, market access, MSME development,	entrepreneurs, MSMEs, market access, export, business	"The AEC has created opportunities for ASEAN countries to collaborate, including pushing exports and imports

	and cross-border business opportunities.		between ASEAN countries and digitalization of MSMEs."
T4: Stakeholder Benefits & Quality of Life	Responses linking the AEC to tangible improvements in citizens' welfare, employment, mobility, and daily living conditions.	quality of life, jobs, mobility, welfare, benefits, equality	"AEC contributed significantly in making the lives of every ASEAN citizen great, ensuring a more conducive, accessible, vibrant, and resilient economy."
T5: Cooperation & ASEAN Solidarity	Responses emphasizing collective action, mutual support, and the shared identity of ASEAN member states.	solidarity, cooperation, together, partnership, unity	"The AEC connects ASEAN countries and creates strong relationships between them."
T6: Limited Awareness & Visibility Gap	Responses expressing limited knowledge of the AEC, uncertainty about its relevance, or absence of perceived impact.	unaware, not sure, limited impact, invisible, unclear	"Its impact is only felt by certain people; it has not yet had a broadly positive effect on ASEAN society as a whole." (translated from Bahasa Indonesia)

Table 2: Theme Definitions, Representative Codes, and Illustrative Quotations

Phase 2 — Chi-Square Tests of Independence

Chi-square tests of independence were conducted using Python's SciPy library to examine whether the distribution of themes differed significantly across three grouping variables: stakeholder group, country of origin, and gender. Effect sizes were calculated using Cramer's V, where $V = 0.10$ – 0.29 indicates a small effect, 0.30 – 0.49 a medium effect, and ≥ 0.50 a large effect (Cohen, 1988). Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. It should be noted that the assumption of adequate expected cell frequencies (≥ 5 in at least 80% of cells) was not fully met for the stakeholder group (31.0% of cells meeting the threshold) or country (25.0%) analyses, owing to small sample sizes in several categories (e.g., International Organization, $n = 6$; Government, $n = 10$). These results should therefore be interpreted with caution, and the chi-square findings are reported as exploratory rather than confirmatory. Future research with larger and more balanced samples across stakeholder categories would strengthen the statistical conclusions.

Phase 3 — Sentiment Analysis

Sentiment analysis was performed using the VADER (Valence Aware Dictionary and sEntiment Reasoner) model (Hutto & Gilbert, 2014), implemented via the vaderSentiment Python library. VADER is a rule-based lexicon model designed for short, informal English texts, making it well-suited to the survey responses in this dataset. All 480 responses were submitted in English, as English was the designated survey language and the platform through which responses were collected. However, a small number of responses, primarily in the T6 theme, contained non-English terms, predominantly in Bahasa Indonesia, reflecting the significant proportion of Indonesian respondents. These responses were retained in the thematic analysis, but their VADER scores should be interpreted cautiously, as the model may not accurately classify sentiment in non-English text. This is an acknowledged limitation of the sentiment analysis component, and future research should consider multilingual sentiment tools, such as XLM-RoBERTa, for datasets with linguistically diverse responses. Responses were classified as Positive (compound ≥ 0.05), Neutral ($-0.05 < \text{compound} < 0.05$), or Negative (compound ≤ -0.05), following the thresholds recommended by Hutto and Gilbert (2014).

Phase 4 — Word Frequency Analysis

Word frequency analysis was conducted for each theme using Python's NLTK library. Responses were pre-processed by lowercasing, removing punctuation and numerals, tokenizing, and removing stopwords. Standard

English stopwords were supplemented with domain-specific terms (e.g., 'asean', 'aec', 'community') to ensure theme-distinctive vocabulary was captured. The top 12 most frequent content words per theme were visualized as horizontal bar charts. Word clouds were generated using the WordCloud Python library as supplementary visual aids.

RESULTS

A. Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis identified six themes characterizing stakeholder perceptions of the AEC. Table 3 presents the frequency distribution. Stakeholder Benefits and Quality of Life (T4) emerged as the dominant theme (34.4%), reflecting that respondents primarily evaluate the AEC through the lens of tangible welfare outcomes rather than institutional metrics. The Limited Awareness and Visibility Gap (T6) was the least frequent (4.0%), but, as the subsequent analyses reveal, its distinctive analytical profile across the sentiment and word-frequency dimensions makes it substantively significant.

Theme	Frequency (n)	%
T1: Economic Growth and Trade	93	19.4
T2: Regional Integration and Connectivity	68	14.2
T3: Business Development and Market Opportunities	55	11.5
T4: Stakeholder Benefits and Quality of Life	165	34.4
T5: Cooperation and ASEAN Solidarity	80	16.7
T6: Limited Awareness and Visibility Gap	19	4.0
Total	480	100.0

Table 3: Theme Frequency Distribution (N = 480)

To illustrate the thematic categories, representative quotations are provided below. These are presented verbatim from anonymized respondents and serve to ground the thematic interpretations in participants' actual voices.

Theme T1 (Economic Growth and Trade) is typified by responses framing the AEC in macroeconomic terms:

"Currently, AEC has a huge influence in my country due to economics, workers, business, and the government as well."

"The AEC facilitates the implementation of trade, services, investment, and other reforms necessary in each ASEAN Member State, thereby improving each country's competitive position."

Theme T4 (Stakeholder Benefits and Quality of Life), the dominant theme, captures both aspirational and critical perspectives:

"AEC contributed significantly in making the lives of every ASEAN citizen great, ensuring a more conducive, accessible, vibrant, collaborative, and resilient economy."

"The ASEAN Economic Community is a potential with benefits yet to be enjoyed by ordinary citizens."

"It has definitely helped improve connectivity, but has yet to succeed in bridging intra-ASEAN economic inequality."

Theme T6 (Limited Awareness and Visibility Gap) is characterized by uncertainty and limited engagement, including several non-English responses reflecting Indonesian respondents' limited familiarity with the AEC:

"Its impact is only felt by certain people; it has not yet had a broadly positive effect on ASEAN society as a whole. [translated from Bahasa Indonesia]."

B. Chi-Square Test Results

Table 4 presents the chi-square results, degrees of freedom, p-values, and Cramer's V effect sizes for all three grouping variables. As noted in Section III, the small expected cell counts in the stakeholder group and country analyses warrant treating these results as exploratory.

Grouping Variable	χ^2	df	p-value	Cramer's V	Interpretation
Stakeholder Group vs Theme	44.17	30	0.046	0.136	Significant; small effect (exploratory)
Country vs Theme	119.80	55	< 0.001	0.223	Highly significant; small-to-medium effect (exploratory)
Gender vs Theme	16.41	10	0.088	0.131	Not significant

Table 4: Chi-Square Test Results with Effect Sizes

The country-level result ($\chi^2 = 119.80$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.223$) is the most robust finding, indicating that national context is associated with meaningful variation in stakeholders' perceptions of the AEC. However, the effect size is small to medium rather than strong, and the geographic concentration of the sample in the Philippines and Indonesia limits the scope of this conclusion. The stakeholder group result ($\chi^2 = 44.17$, $p = 0.046$, Cramer's $V = 0.136$) indicates a small but statistically significant association between sector affiliation and theme distribution. Business respondents showed the highest proportion of T3 (Business Development) responses (31.0%), CSO respondents were most strongly associated with T4 (Stakeholder Benefits, 53.8%), and International Organization respondents skewed toward T1 (Economic Growth, 33.3%). Gender was not significantly associated with theme distribution ($p = 0.088$). Figure 1 visualizes these distributions across all three grouping variables, enabling a comparative reading of how national and sectoral contexts shape thematic orientation.

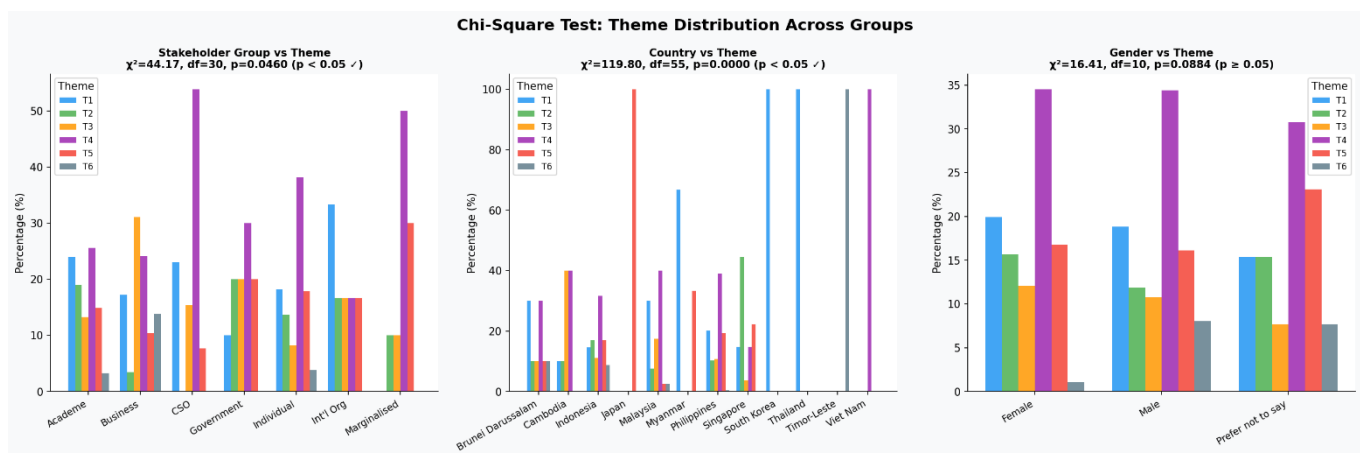


Figure 1: Chi-Square Test — Theme Distribution Across Groups

C. Sentiment Analysis

Sentiment analysis using the VADER model revealed a predominantly positive overall tone across the 480 responses. Table 5 presents the overall distribution. The overwhelmingly positive-to-neutral ratio (97.3%

combined) indicates that respondents approach the AEC with a broadly constructive orientation. Theme-level analysis, visualized in Figure 2, reveals significant variation. T1 (Economic Growth and Trade) exhibited the highest mean VADER compound score, consistent with the enthusiastic economic growth framing of responses in that cluster. T6 (Limited Awareness and Visibility Gap) registered entirely neutral sentiment, with zero positive responses, an analytically striking finding: stakeholders who are unfamiliar with the AEC cannot feel positively about it, and their responses reflect not antagonism but absence of affective engagement. T4 (Stakeholder Benefits and Quality of Life), despite being the most common theme, contained the majority of negative responses (n = 11), suggesting a subset of respondents who feel AEC benefits remain unrealized in their lived experience, a finding consistent with critical scholarship on uneven integration benefits (Menon, 2013).

Sentiment	n	%	VADER Threshold
Positive	239	49.8	≥ 0.05
Neutral	228	47.5	-0.05 to 0.05
Negative	13	2.7	≤ -0.05
Total	480	100.0	

Table 5: Overall Sentiment Distribution (N = 480)

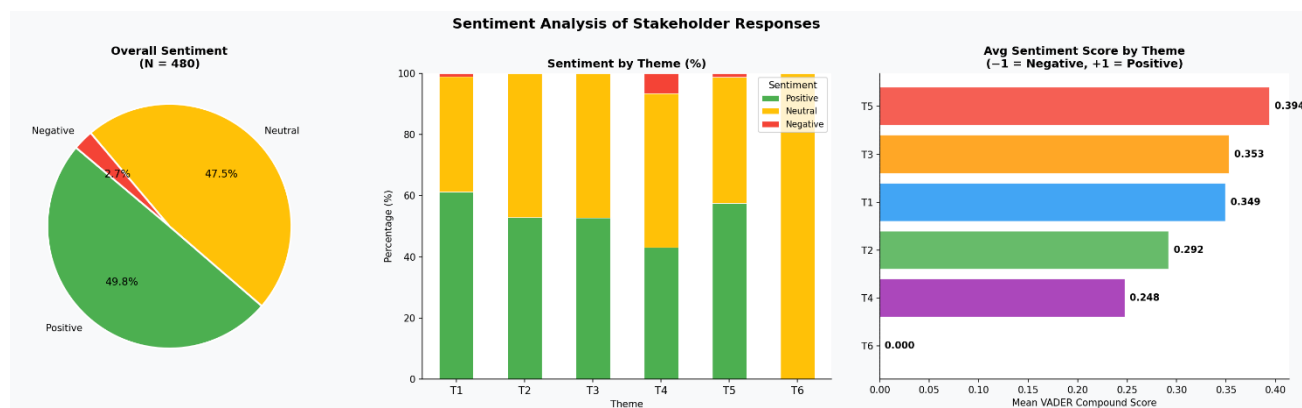


Figure 2: Sentiment Analysis Results

D. Word Frequency Analysis

Word frequency analysis identified distinctive vocabulary profiles for each theme. Across all themes, terms such as 'growth', 'trade', 'integration', 'opportunities', 'benefits', and 'cooperation' appeared most frequently. Theme-specific patterns confirm and extend the thematic interpretations: 'investment' and 'development' dominate T1; 'market' and 'connectivity' dominate T2; 'business' and 'entrepreneurs' dominate T3; 'opportunities', 'quality', and 'welfare' dominate T4; 'together' and 'solidarity' dominate T5; and T6 shows conspicuously sparse word lists with low per-term frequencies, reflecting the limited and uncertain vocabulary of respondents unfamiliar with the AEC. Figure 3 presents these patterns as six-panel horizontal bar charts. The word 'opportunities' appears frequently across T1, T3, T4, and T5, suggesting a broadly aspirational, cross-thematic framing of the AEC. By contrast, institutional process vocabulary ('policy', 'framework', 'governance') is largely absent across all themes, confirming that stakeholders narrate the AEC in terms of lived outcomes rather than structural arrangements. The contrast between T5's solidarity vocabulary ('together', 'unity') and T6's knowledge-deficit vocabulary ('aware', 'know', 'limited') maps directly onto the sentiment profiles identified above, reinforcing the convergent validity of the multi-method analytical approach.

Top Keywords by Theme
Stakeholder Perceptions of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC)

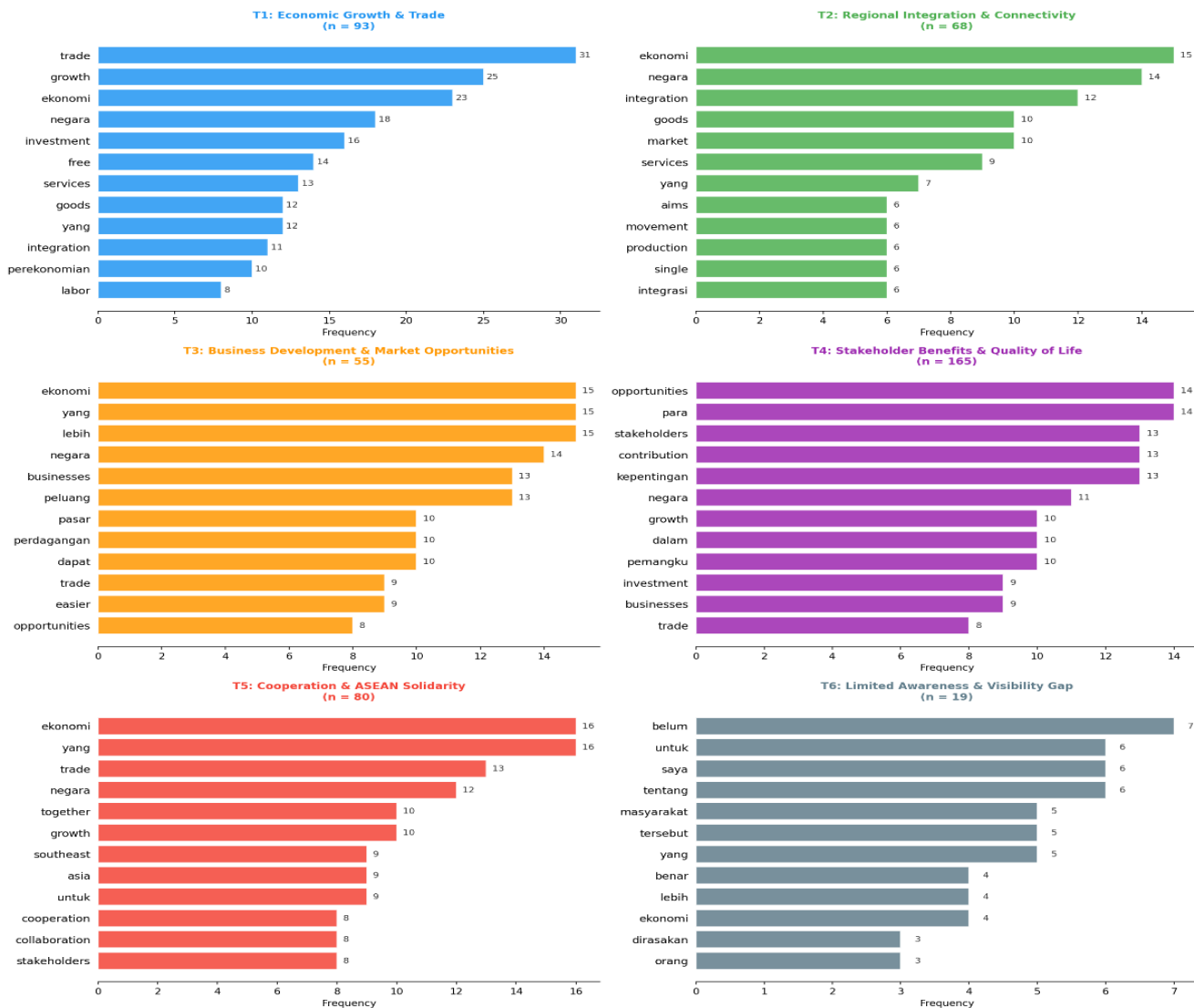


Figure 3: Word Frequency by Theme

Taken together, Figures 1, 2, and 3 constitute mutually reinforcing evidence across three analytical dimensions. Figure 1 reveals the structural patterning of perceptions across social groups; Figure 2 adds the affective dimension; and Figure 3 anchors both in respondents' actual vocabulary. The consistency across layers, T6 appearing statistically distinct (Figure 1), affectively flat (Figure 2), and lexically sparse (Figure 3), strengthens confidence in the validity of the overall findings.

Note: A word cloud visualization of theme keywords and a cross-tabulation heatmap are provided in Appendices A and B for supplementary reference.

DISCUSSION

A. Tangible Benefits Drive Stakeholder Perceptions

The dominance of T4 (Stakeholder Benefits and Quality of Life, 34.4%), combined with overall positive sentiment (49.8%), supports the argument that stakeholders evaluate the AEC primarily through its perceived impact on everyday socioeconomic welfare rather than institutional achievement. This is consistent with Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory, which holds that institutional legitimacy is grounded in creating tangible value for those affected by the institution's activities. The quotation 'The ASEAN Economic Community is a potential with benefits yet to be enjoyed by ordinary citizens' is emblematic of this orientation; respondents recognize the AEC's promise but remain watchful for evidence of its realization.

B. National Context Shapes Perceptions

The highly significant country-level chi-square result ($\chi^2 = 119.80$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.223$) indicates that national context is meaningfully associated with how stakeholders frame AEC contributions, consistent with Menon's (2013) argument that uneven development trajectories across ASEAN member states generate differentiated experiences of integration. However, given that 80% of respondents are from the Philippines and Indonesia, both founding ASEAN member states with relatively high levels of AEC engagement, the findings may overrepresent perspectives from higher-salience national contexts. They should not be generalized to less-represented member states. Future studies should aim for stratified sampling across all ten ASEAN member states.

C. Stakeholder Type Influences Thematic Orientation

The significant stakeholder group result ($\chi^2 = 44.17$, $p = 0.046$, Cramer's $V = 0.136$), while small in effect size, is consistent with Mitchell, Agle, and Wood's (1997) concept of stakeholder salience. Business respondents' orientation toward T3 reflects sector-specific interests in market access and entrepreneurial opportunity. CSO respondents' concentration in T4 reflects their mandate to advocate for social welfare. Academic respondents exhibit the most evenly distributed thematic profile, consistent with their broader analytical perspective on regional integration. These distinctions support the design of differentiated, stakeholder-sensitive AEC communication strategies.

D. The Awareness Gap as a Governance Challenge

The entirely neutral sentiment profile of T6 responses, with zero positive responses and sparse, uncertain vocabulary, indicates that the awareness gap is not merely an information deficit but an affective one. Respondents in T6 are not critical of the AEC; they are disengaged from it. This finding supports Jetschke's (2021) argument that ASEAN's long-term relevance depends on communicating tangible value to citizens, and Acharya's (2023) call for broader societal ownership of the regional project. The presence of non-English responses in T6, primarily in Bahasa Indonesia, further suggests that language accessibility may be a barrier to AEC engagement for some stakeholder communities.

E. Policy Implications

The findings carry specific implications for AEC communication strategy and the Post-2025 Agenda. First, for individual and youth stakeholders, who constitute the largest group (60.6%) and show strong T4 orientation, communication strategies should lead with tangible quality-of-life outcomes: employment opportunities, labor mobility, cost-of-living impacts, and access to services. Messages framed around abstract economic indicators are unlikely to resonate with this group.

Second, for business stakeholders, particularly MSMEs, engagement should center on concrete market access provisions, cross-border trade facilitation mechanisms, investment incentive frameworks, and digitalization support programs. The quotation 'The AEC is the reason why you can enjoy your Dove skin products that were manufactured in Malaysia affordably' exemplifies the kind of accessible, product-level benefit narrative that resonates with business-oriented respondents.

Third, for civil society organizations and marginalized individuals who show the strongest T4 orientation, AEC communication should foreground social protection, inclusion, welfare provisions, and the equity dimensions of integration. Given the critical undertone visible in some T4 responses ('has yet to succeed in bridging intra-ASEAN economic inequality'), policymakers should actively communicate progress on redistributive measures and acknowledge remaining gaps.

Fourth, the T6 awareness gap calls for dedicated, accessible public education and outreach initiatives, particularly in languages other than English, targeting youth and community-level stakeholders who remain outside the communicative reach of current AEC messaging. Digital channels, social media platforms, and school-based civic education programs offer the most direct routes to this demographic.

F. Methodological Contribution

This study demonstrates that the systematic integration of reflexive thematic analysis, chi-square testing with effect-size reporting, VADER sentiment analysis, and word-frequency modeling yields analytical insights that exceed those of any single method. The multi-method approach is directly transferable to other regional governance, public administration, and policy evaluation contexts in which large volumes of open-ended survey data are generated.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined stakeholder perceptions of the ASEAN Economic Community among a sample of youth and young adults across ASEAN member states and regional partners, using a mixed-methods framework that integrates reflexive thematic analysis with chi-square tests, VADER sentiment analysis, and word frequency analysis. Six thematic clusters were identified, with Stakeholder Benefits and Quality of Life (T4) emerging as the most prevalent orientation. Chi-square tests, supported by Cramer's V effect size estimates, revealed that national context and stakeholder type are associated with significant variation in thematic distribution, while gender was not. Sentiment analysis found an overwhelmingly positive affective orientation overall, but the T6 awareness cluster registered as entirely neutral, highlighting a distinct governance communication challenge. Word frequency analysis confirmed and extended these patterns through distinctive vocabulary profiles for each theme.

The findings should be interpreted as indicative of youth and young adult stakeholder perspectives within a predominantly Filipino and Indonesian sample, rather than as fully representative of ASEAN-wide stakeholder opinion. Future research should seek more balanced geographic and demographic representation across all ten ASEAN member states, incorporate intercoder reliability protocols, explore multilingual sentiment analysis tools, and consider longitudinal designs to track how perceptions evolve in relation to AEC policy developments. Notwithstanding these limitations, the study makes a dual contribution: substantively, by providing multi-dimensional evidence about how young stakeholders perceive the AEC's contributions; and methodologically, by demonstrating a replicable, transferable framework for the computational analysis of open-ended survey data in regional governance research.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A — Word Cloud by Theme

Figure A1 presents word clouds generated from stakeholder responses within each of the six identified themes. Word size is proportional to term frequency within the respective theme, providing an intuitive visual complement to the frequency bar charts in Figure 3.

Word Cloud by Theme
Stakeholder Perceptions of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC)



Figure A1: Word Cloud by Theme

Appendix B — Cross-Tabulation Heatmap: Theme by Stakeholder Group

Figure B1 presents a cross-tabulation heatmap showing the percentage distribution of themes across stakeholder groups. Darker cells indicate higher proportions, providing a more granular view of theme distribution patterns that supplements Table 4 and Figure 1.

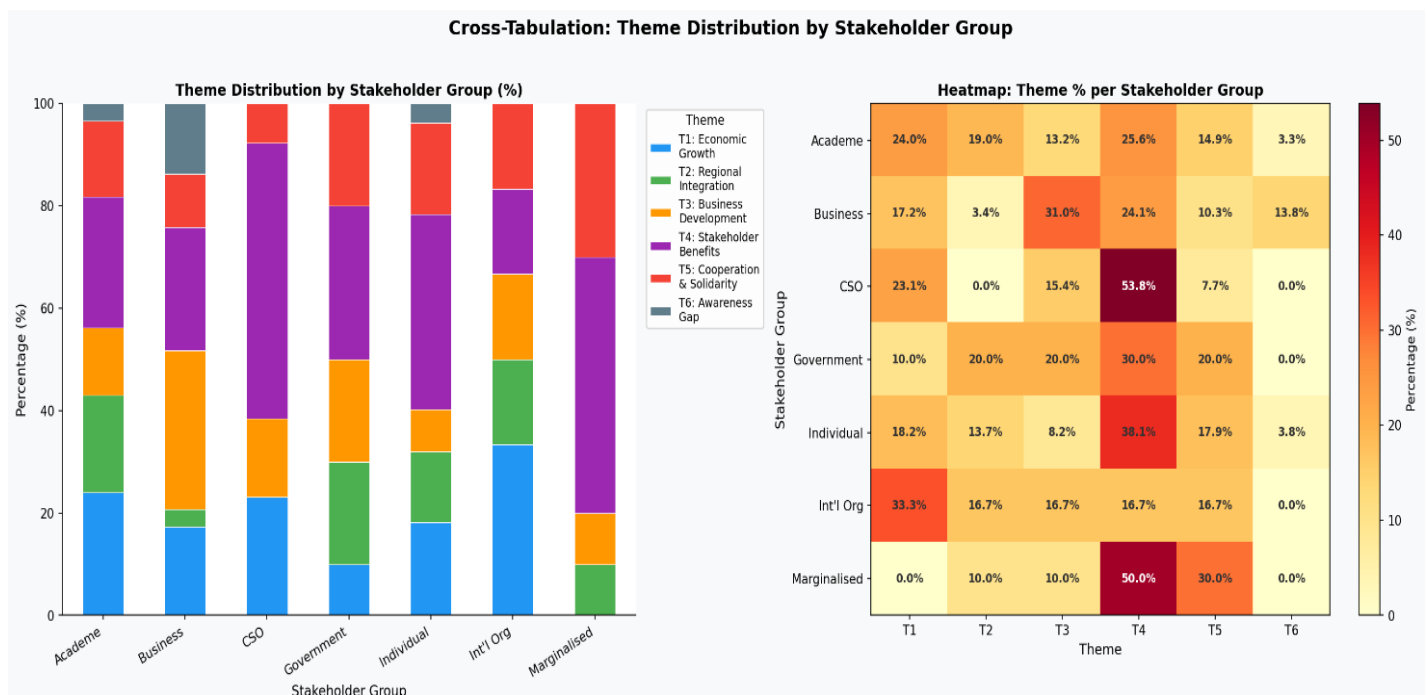


Figure B1: Cross-Tabulation Heatmap — Theme by Stakeholder Group