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K-Pop Hegemony and Ambivalent Digital Resistance: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the SEAblings–Knetz Conflict

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ABSTRACT

Cultural hegemony and digital resistance intersect in the 2026 SEAblings–Knetz conflict, a transnational online dispute between Southeast Asian and South Korean netizens concerning racism, cultural superiority, and K-Pop fandom. Drawing on Gramsci's theory of hegemony, Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, and Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study examines how K-Pop operates as both global popular culture and a mechanism of symbolic domination in digital communication. Using a qualitative approach, the study analyzes comments, hashtags, viral posts, and memes circulated on X, TikTok, and Instagram between January and March 2026. The findings reveal that social media platforms function as contested discursive arenas where engagement-driven circulation amplifies racial stereotypes, conflict narratives, and nationalist sentiment. Racist discourse targeting Southeast Asian netizens reflects asymmetrical power relations associated with the global dominance of Korean popular culture. In response, SEAblings mobilized digital solidarity, counter-discourses, boycott campaigns, and platform-based activism. However, this resistance remains ambivalent, as some counter-discourses reproduce the stereotyping and symbolic violence they challenge. Theoretically, this study extends CDA-based research on cultural hegemony by demonstrating how domination and resistance coexist within digital discourse, challenging binary understandings of online activism. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of platform moderation, media literacy, and ethically reflexive fandom practices in addressing symbolic violence within transnational fan communities.

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INTRODUCTION

Globalization has accelerated cross-border cultural exchange through advances in digital technology and social media, enabling the free flow of information and cultural values across geographical boundaries (Fatikh, 2025). In this process, popular culture has emerged as a dominant instrument in global communication, where elements such as music, film, and digital trends shape a shared narrative that unites audiences across continents (Wondal & Angelin, 2026). Many countries are now leveraging culture as a form of soft power to strengthen diplomatic influence without military coercion, such as

Indonesia's cultural diplomacy through the Indonesian Cultural Outlook 2026, which fosters cross-border collaboration. South Korea is a prime example of success by exporting its culture through the Hallyu wave and K-Pop, which not only generates billions of dollars economically but also builds a positive global image (Suryani, 2015). This dominance reflects how globalization has transformed popular culture into a strategic tool that shapes the world's collective identity today.

Today, K-Pop functions not merely as entertainment, but as a structured global cultural industry closely linked to South Korea's soft-power strategy. Through highly coordinated systems of music production, visual aesthetics, fandom engagement, and digital distribution, K-Pop has established a form of cultural dominance within the global media landscape (Pane, 2025). Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony provides a useful framework for understanding this phenomenon, as he defines hegemony as a form of cultural leadership maintained through public consent rather than direct coercion (Agustin & Sepang, 2026). Within the digital sphere, K-Pop creates a hybrid cultural space in which audiences actively participate in reproducing Korean cultural values, aesthetics, and lifestyles that are increasingly perceived as modern, aspirational, and globally desirable (Oh, 2024).

Social media has transformed communication into a real-time and global phenomenon, enabling cross-cultural interaction without geographical boundaries through platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and X (Twitter), where users from various countries share content instantly (Rizal, 2025). These digital platforms serve as spaces for the production and reproduction of culture, where algorithms amplify trends, memes, and narratives that shape collective identities and disseminate cultural values on a massive scale (Dezhboro et al., 2026). Intensive cross-cultural interaction often yields positive hybridity, such as global content collaborations, but also triggers cultural conflicts when differing values collide, such as stereotypes or digital nationalism (Guo, 2025). Cultural conflicts are more likely to emerge and spread due to features like virality and echo chambers that amplify emotions (Ul Mustafa & Japkowicz, 2024). Just like the 2026 "SEAblings vs. Knetz" phenomenon, where Southeast Asian and Korean netizens clashed over concert etiquette, reproducing racism and identity-based solidarity.

Racism in the digital conflict between Knetz (South Korean netizens) and SEAblings (Southeast Asian netizens) reflects power dynamics in digital communication, where racist comments by Knetz are not merely individual expressions but tools to uphold Korean cultural superiority through the portrayal of negative stereotypes about Southeast Asia—such as mocking physical appearance, cultural poverty, and positioning Southeast Asia as culturally inferior consumers. As a form of symbolic domination as defined by Pierre Bourdieu, this racism operates through the cultural hegemony of K-pop, which dominates the global market, producing a hierarchy of identities in which Korea is placed at the top of the pyramid while demeaning Southeast Asia as "inferior" both economically and aesthetically.

This dominance is evident in how Knetz reproduce negative stereotypes such as "poor" or "uncivilized" to justify that superiority, which in turn reinforces symbolic power structures in the digital space. It is not merely an individual conflict; this phenomenon is part of a broader cultural domination where South Korea's soft power is cracking due to a regional anti-racism backlash, sparking K-drama boycotts and SEAblings solidarity as forms of resistance. This hegemony produces a perpetual hierarchy of identities, where digital racism perpetuates asymmetrical power relations, forcing SEAblings to unite against narratives of Korean superiority.

As a form of digital resistance against this Korean cultural hegemony, a collective solidarity among netizens from Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and other countries has emerged on the X platform to combat racist speech, giving rise to the term "SEAblings." This resistance is a form of opposition to Korean cultural dominance, which has long prevailed through Hallyu—a phenomenon in which the SEA region was positioned as passive consumers—and has now been transformed into agents of regional solidarity challenging the hierarchy of identities. Through memes, parodies, and digital campaigns

like #PurpleRibbonForRM in response to racist attacks on idols, SEAblings are not only fighting back but also seizing the narrative, strengthening regional bonds, and undermining Korea's symbolic hegemony.

The digital conflict between Knetz and SEAblings in early 2026 had a significant impact on South Korea's tourism and entertainment industries, particularly through boycott calls issued by Southeast Asian netizens. The decline in interest in Korean cultural products, such as K-Pop, K-dramas, and tourism, indicates that digital public opinion has tangible economic implications. This phenomenon also prompted institutional responses from the government and entertainment agencies as a form of crisis communication management. Additionally, South Korea's global image as a soft power has come under pressure due to racism issues emerging in the digital sphere. Overall, this conflict underscores the role of social media as a strategic actor in contemporary international communication dynamics.

Research on the Hallyu phenomenon has thus far tended to emphasize South Korea's success in leveraging K-Pop as an instrument of soft power and global cultural diplomacy, and to view it as a form of cultural hybridity capable of challenging Western dominance (Alves de Oliveira, 2025). Furthermore, studies on digital activism in Southeast Asia have largely focused on political and democratic issues (Putra, 2024), while research on digital celebrity culture highlights the transformation of cultural production and consumption without situating it within global power relations (Akter & Shorna, 2025). However, these various studies have not comprehensively examined how the dominance of K-Pop popular culture also has the potential to generate resistance, conflict, and identity negotiations at the global audience level, particularly in the context of cross-cultural digital interactions. Therefore, there is a research gap in understanding how K-Pop cultural hegemony not only operates as a form of soft power but also triggers collective digital resistance manifested in transnational online conflicts, as seen in the case of the conflict between Southeast Asia and South Korea in 2026.

This study offers a novel perspective by examining the conflict between SEAblings and Knetz as a form of contestation over cultural hegemony in the digital sphere, using Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis model. Unlike previous research that focused on K-Pop as an instrument of soft power or cultural consumption, this study specifically highlights the interconnection between symbolic domination, digital racism, and collective resistance in cross-cultural interactions. Furthermore, this study also uncovers contradictions within Southeast Asian digital resistance, where resistance practices are not always emancipatory but also have the potential to reproduce the same logic of domination. Thus, this study offers a new contribution to understanding the dynamics of hegemony and resistance in global digital communication in a more critical and comprehensive manner.

This study also aims to analyze how the hegemony of K-Pop popular culture operates in the global digital space and how Southeast Asian digital resistance has emerged in response to this dominance. Specifically, this study seeks to examine power relations in cultural communication practices that arise through cross-national online interactions, while also identifying forms of collective resistance mediated by social media. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to enriching the field of cultural communication studies, particularly in understanding the dynamics of hegemony and resistance within the context of digital popular culture. Furthermore, this study is relevant to the developments of globalization and the transformation of digital media, which are accelerating cultural exchange while simultaneously creating space for conflicts and negotiations of identity at the global level.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach using Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework to examine the dynamics of power, hegemony, racism, and resistance within the SEAblings–Knetz digital conflict. Fairclough's CDA approach views language as a social practice embedded within ideological and power relations, making it particularly suitable for analyzing how discourse constructs cultural hierarchies and legitimizes symbolic domination in digital communication spaces. This

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approach is consistent with recent Indonesian communication scholarship that applies critical discourse analysis to trending Twitter (X) controversies, demonstrating how such methods effectively reveal the shift from a single triggering issue toward broader public and political discourse (Dirgantari et al., 2025). Gramsci's concept of hegemony and Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence serve as complementary theoretical lenses for interpreting the power relations identified.

The primary data comprise comments, discussion threads, hashtags, memes, and viral posts collected from X, TikTok, and Instagram between January and March 2026. Using purposive sampling, the researcher selected 412 comments and 10 high-engagement posts relevant to racism, cultural superiority, digital solidarity, and resistance, particularly those associated with the emergence of the "SEAblings" identity. Data were identified manually using predetermined keywords and hashtags, including #SEAblings, #KNetz, #WarKnetz, "rasisme Korea," and "boikot Korea," alongside related Indonesian- and English-language news coverage. Posts and comments were included when they explicitly addressed cultural superiority, racial stereotyping, cross-national solidarity, or organized resistance, including boycott campaigns. Manual retrieval enabled contextual assessment of each item's relevance without automated scraping tools.

Secondary data consisted of online news reports, media coverage, and academic literature concerning K-Pop, soft power, intercultural communication, and online racism. Engagement statistics attributed to Binokular (2026) were obtained from media reports and treated as secondary quantitative data rather than independently verified analytics. Relevant posts, comments, and discussion threads were documented through screenshots, archived with contextual information such as platform, approximate posting date, and surrounding discussion. The materials were organized by platform and thematic relevance before coding.

Data were analyzed using Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model: textual analysis, discursive-practice analysis, and social-practice analysis. The textual analysis examined linguistic and visual features, including diction, evaluative language, metaphors, stereotypes, forms of address, pronouns, dehumanizing expressions, and "us versus them" constructions. The analysis focused on how these features represented South Korea and Southeast Asia in relation to cultural superiority, racial difference, and social status.

On the other hand, the discursive-practice analysis investigated how discourse was produced, circulated, reproduced, and contested through posting, commenting, replying, reposting, hashtag use, meme circulation, and cross-platform dissemination. Observable engagement and circulation patterns were examined to understand how particular narratives gained visibility and contributed to conflict escalation. The study did not directly investigate proprietary algorithms; algorithmic amplification was interpreted through observable patterns and existing scholarship on platform-mediated communication.

Meanwhile, the social-practice analysis connected textual and discursive findings to broader structures of power and social relations. Gramsci's theory of hegemony informed the interpretation of cultural dominance through normalization, consent, and the internalization of dominant values. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence helped explain how hierarchical meanings and stereotypes are reproduced through everyday digital interactions. This dimension also examined racism, digital nationalism, regional identity, and counter-hegemonic resistance.

The researcher manually coded the dataset into six inductively developed categories: Cultural Hegemony, Racism and Stereotyping, Digital Resistance, Regional Solidarity, Interactional Conflict (reply wars), and Digital Amplification. These categories were interpreted across Fairclough's three CDA dimensions to examine textual representations, discourse circulation, and broader power relations. Given the single-researcher design, coding consistency was checked through two readings conducted several days apart, with divergent decisions re-examined in their discursive context. The integrated analysis examined how digital discourse reproduced or challenged cultural power, domination, and resistance.

The study used publicly accessible content from X, TikTok, and Instagram without direct interaction with account holders or access to private or restricted material. Usernames, profile images, and other personally identifying information were removed or anonymized before analysis and reporting. Only content relevant to the research questions was retained, minimizing the exposure of individual users while preserving the discursive material necessary for analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Cultural Hegemony and K-Pop's Global Dominance

K-Pop has become a significant force of cultural influence in the global digital sphere, with platforms such as X, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube facilitating its transnational circulation. This influence can be understood through Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, whereby dominance is sustained through consent rather than coercion (Jin, 2024; Sau, 2025). International fans voluntarily adopt and circulate Korean aesthetic standards, lifestyles, and values, contributing to the normalization of Korean popular culture as a desirable global reference. In Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia and the Philippines, K-Pop consumption is substantial, with approximately 7.4 billion on-demand streams in Indonesia and 4.2 billion in the Philippines recorded in 2023 (Dasom, 2023). The Global Hallyu Survey 2025 further reported that 17.8% of global respondents primarily associated Korea with K-Pop, while 58.9% expressed interest in consuming Korean products (Lee Jung-youn, 2025). Although these figures indicate cultural reach rather than hegemony, they illustrate the extensive circulation through which cultural influence may become normalized (Balraj & Abd Manan, 2022; Maqsood et al., 2022).

The South Korean entertainment industry, including major agencies such as HYBE and SM Entertainment, reinforces the normalization of Korean popular culture by contributing to the global distribution of cultural content. Through repeated exposure and audience participation, Korean representations of beauty, success, and modern identity can become part of everyday cultural references (Mayani et al., 2025; Putri & Purwadi, 2025). Southeast Asian fans actively sustain this process by producing and circulating derivative content, often through unpaid digital labor motivated by loyalty and non-material recognition (Raihani & Kurnia, 2025). Similar patterns in transnational Asian fandoms show how audiences may reproduce dominant cultural hierarchies through routine fan practices without necessarily perceiving them as domination (Shimauchi, 2024). From a Gramscian perspective, such participation illustrates how cultural hegemony operates through active audience involvement rather than direct coercion.

Joseph Nye's concept of soft power further explains K-Pop's global influence by highlighting its capacity to enhance South Korea's attractiveness, shape international perceptions, and support cultural diplomacy (Sunyogita, 2024). Concerts, digital streaming, merchandise, brand collaborations, and international tours extend K-Pop's economic and symbolic reach (Amali & Putri, 2024; Shafie, 2025). Meanwhile, Korean language expressions, fashion trends, and idol-related social norms circulate as prominent cultural references (Alves de Oliveira, 2025). However, soft power and cultural hegemony are not synonymous: attractiveness explains how cultural influence becomes possible, whereas hegemony directs attention to how dominant values may be normalized. Moreover, Hallyu's soft-power narrative is itself constructed through the discourses of Korean media and government actors rather than representing a neutral account of international reception (Yoon, 2023).

Viewed through a center–periphery perspective, South Korea occupies a prominent position in global cultural circulation, while Southeast Asian audiences consume and reproduce Korean cultural products. However, audiences are not merely passive recipients; they can negotiate and challenge dominant representations. This tension is evident in the SEAblings–Knetz conflict, where Southeast Asian fans mobilize digital platforms to contest perceived cultural and racial hierarchies, revealing how cultural influence, symbolic domination, and resistance coexist within transnational fandoms.

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Platform-Based Discourse and Algorithmic Amplification

At the level of discursive practice, the findings show that social media functioned not merely as channels for communication but as spaces in which the SEAblings–Knetz discourse was produced, circulated, contested, and reproduced. The development of the conflict demonstrates how digital platforms can transform a localized cultural controversy into a transnational discourse through interconnected practices of posting, commenting, reposting, hashtagging, and cross-platform circulation. As a result, social media simultaneously enables the reproduction of dominant cultural narratives and provides users with opportunities to challenge and reinterpret those narratives.

Within the context of the SEAblings–Knetz phenomenon, platforms such as X, TikTok, and Instagram became important sites for the production and circulation of competing narratives. Users did not simply consume information about the controversy but actively participated in its reproduction through comments, replies, memes, hashtags, and reposts. This participatory process is central to Fairclough's concept of discursive practice because discourse is understood not only in terms of what is said, but also in terms of how texts are produced, circulated, and interpreted within particular social conditions. Data indicate that conversations related to SEAblings involved more than 34.2 thousand accounts, generated 56,929 online discussions, and reached approximately 10.8 million engagements between February 11 and 17, 2026 (Binokular, 2026). The highest level of interaction occurred on February 12, reaching 2.8 million engagements and demonstrating the substantial viral capacity of digitally mediated conflict. These figures demonstrate the scale of discourse circulation and the extent to which the controversy gained visibility within the digital environment.

Such engagement patterns are consistent with the possibility that platform mechanisms contribute to the visibility of contentious and emotionally charged content, repeatedly exposing users to polarizing narratives on their timelines. Consequently, social media infrastructures may contribute not only to the circulation of information, but also to the rapid escalation of localized tensions into transnational digital controversies.

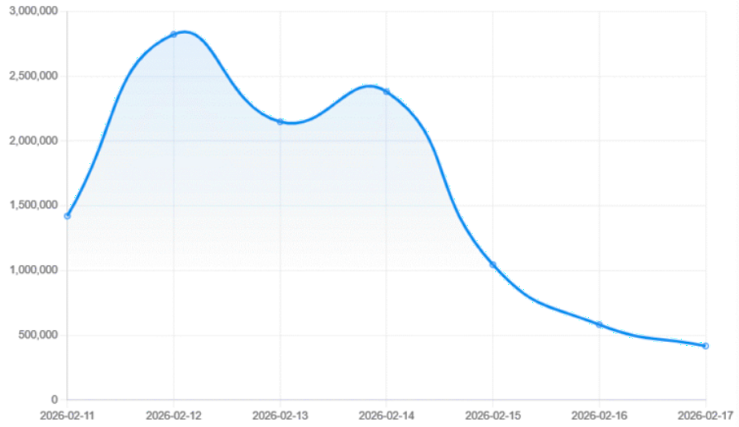


Figure 1. SEAblings social media engagement, February 11–17, 2026
Source: Binokular (2026)

The pattern of engagement also indicates that the visibility of the SEAblings discourse was closely connected to the participatory characteristics of social media platforms. Highly engaging content can become more visible through platform mechanisms that prioritize content based on patterns of interaction. However, the present study does not directly examine the technical operation of platform recommendation algorithms. Existing research suggests that provocative, emotionally charged, and conflict-oriented content tends to generate substantial levels of interaction, including likes, comments, reposts, and shares (Metzler & Garcia, 2024). In the SEAblings–Knetz conflict, similar dynamics can be

observed in the circulation of content containing racial stereotypes, cultural ridicule, nationalist narratives, satire, and counterattacks. Thus, rather than treating algorithms as the sole cause of the conflict's escalation, the findings suggest an interaction between platform affordances, user participation, and the discursive characteristics of the content itself.

The rapid circulation of #SEAblings illustrates how hashtags connect geographically dispersed users into a shared discourse of criticism, satire, solidarity, and resistance toward perceived Korean cultural superiority. Beyond labeling the controversy, the hashtag links individual posts and encourages users to reproduce and reshape existing narratives through reactions and counter-reactions. Algorithmic amplification therefore operates within broader conditions of digital visibility, interacting with user engagement through commenting, reposting, and parodying (Perera et al., 2023). This interaction can generate a “digital conflict spiral,” in which successive responses intensify the controversy. At the same time, content-moderation systems may struggle to identify harmful discourse expressed through culturally specific language, coded expressions, and evolving online vernaculars (Gongane et al., 2022).

The discursive-practice dimension therefore reveals that the SEAblings–Knetz conflict was sustained not simply by the existence of racist or exclusionary statements, but by the processes through which those statements were repeatedly reproduced, circulated, challenged, and transformed across digital platforms. The same infrastructures that facilitated the circulation of dominant narratives also enabled Southeast Asian users to construct counter-discourses through regional solidarity, boycott campaigns, satire, and other forms of digital resistance. Social media consequently operated as a contested discursive space in which users simultaneously reproduced existing narratives and generated alternative interpretations of the conflict.

Digital Racism and Symbolic Violence

The screenshot data reveal recurring forms of digital racism through which racial, cultural, and socioeconomic hierarchies are constructed in the SEAblings–Knetz conflict. Following Fairclough’s three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this section examines how linguistic and visual representations construct social groups and reproduce broader power relations. Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence further explains how discriminatory meanings can normalize inequality through everyday digital interactions.

One example appears in the comment, “you bastards are less open… You are still inferior. A lowly being. You are all below us.” The terms “inferior,” “lowly,” and “below us” establish an explicit hierarchy between the speaker’s in-group and Southeast Asian users. These expressions portray inferiority as an inherent group characteristic rather than a socially constructed judgment. Such language illustrates how discourse legitimizes unequal relationships through ideological representations of social reality (Fairclough, 2001). When repeatedly circulated, these representations can embed racism within platform cultures and online vernacular practices (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021).

Socioeconomic stereotyping provides another mechanism of symbolic domination. A comment describing Southeast Asians as “ugly, poor people living in the wilderness” combines appearance-based insults with assumptions of poverty and geographical backwardness. These descriptions transform economic differences into judgments about cultural and human worth, positioning Southeast Asians as less civilized. From Bourdieu’s perspective, this constitutes symbolic violence because hierarchical meanings shape how groups are perceived and valued without requiring physical coercion (Fatmawati & Sholikin, 2020). Such representations normalize inequality by presenting social and economic differences as evidence of cultural inferiority.

Cultural denigration similarly appears in the statement, “I feel sorry for you, who have to depend on the culture of another country because your own culture is so bad.” The expressions “depend on the culture of another country” and “your own culture is so bad” portray Southeast Asians as culturally dependent and their cultural identities as deficient.

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Rather than recognizing K-Pop consumption as cultural exchange, the comment interprets it as evidence of cultural inadequacy. This framing establishes Korean culture as a superior standard against which Southeast Asian identity is judged, reflecting cultural racism in which cultural differences justify exclusion and hierarchy (Chua, 2017).

Dehumanization and cultural gatekeeping further reinforce these boundaries. Images comparing Southeast Asians to monkeys, accompanied by captions such as “Angry Southeast Asian Woman,” use degrading visual associations to diminish the humanity and social standing of the targeted group. Such representations demonstrate how visual and linguistic resources construct ideological meanings about social groups (Fairclough, 2001). Meanwhile, the statement “Don’t touch Korea” symbolically frames Korean cultural identity as exclusive territory, positioning outsiders as illegitimate participants. Together, these practices construct Southeast Asians as inferior, uncivilized, culturally dependent, or excluded from legitimate participation in Korean cultural spaces.

These findings suggest that digital racism extends beyond isolated interpersonal hostility, reflecting broader tensions surrounding cultural globalization and unequal symbolic recognition. Although K-Pop circulates globally as a symbol of South Korean modernity and cultural attractiveness, exclusionary discourse challenges the assumption that cultural globalization automatically promotes inclusive intercultural relations. The findings also complicate interpretations of K-Pop through the lens of soft power: cultural attractiveness does not necessarily produce mutual respect, and the behavior of individual netizens may influence perceptions of South Korea without representing the state or its cultural diplomacy.

The analysis further reveals a developmentalist bias in which economic advancement becomes a measure of cultural worth. Descriptions of Southeast Asia as poor or backward transform socioeconomic differences into symbolic distinctions between supposedly superior and inferior societies. From a CDA perspective, such labels acquire ideological significance when used to justify the unequal valuation of entire populations. Economic development consequently becomes a symbolic resource through which cultural hierarchies are constructed and reinforced.

Importantly, resistance to these representations does not always escape the logic of symbolic violence. Some Southeast Asian responses reproduce similar strategies of ridicule and stereotyping directed toward South Korea, including appearance-based, cultural, and national generalizations. Although these counter-discourses challenge the subordinate position assigned to Southeast Asians, they may reproduce the discriminatory practices they oppose. The conflict therefore demonstrates the ambivalence of digital resistance: domination and opposition can coexist within the same discursive arena, a tension that informs the subsequent analysis of digital counter-discourse.

Digital Resistance and Regional Solidarity

At the level of discursive and social practice, Southeast Asian digital resistance emerged collectively through the formation of a shared regional identity represented by the hashtag #SEAblings. This identity symbolized a form of cross-border solidarity that transcended longstanding regional rivalries among Southeast Asian countries. Users from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and other countries explicitly articulated this solidarity through statements such as “I stand with my SEAblings” and “Indonesia is ready to help sister Malay.” In some cases, this solidarity was framed strategically, as reflected in comments such as “you know things are serious when MY and ID stop bickering and join forces.” These expressions demonstrate how individual responses to the conflict were transformed into a collective regional discourse through the repeated use of shared linguistic and symbolic markers. In this sense, #SEAblings functioned not merely as a hashtag but as a discursive resource for constructing a collective identity among users from different Southeast Asian countries. This pattern of hashtag-driven collective identity formation mirrors similar transnational anti-racism movements, such as #StopAsianHate, in which fan communities and public figures—including K-Pop artists themselves—became key nodes in amplifying counter-discourse against racial hostility (Shahin & Hou, 2025).

Discursively, this phenomenon reflects the construction of a counter-discourse in response to perceived cultural and symbolic inequality. Within this discourse, Southeast Asia is no longer represented as fragmented national entities, but rather as a symbolic community united by shared experiences of marginalization within a global cultural system dominated by South Korea. The repeated circulation of solidarity-oriented statements allowed users to shift the discursive position of Southeast Asians from the objects of racial representation to active producers of alternative representations. Beyond symbolic solidarity, resistance also emerged through counter-discourses that directly challenged narratives of Korean superiority. Statements such as “do you want to racially equal Indonesian netizens? wrong choice” and “We debate to relieve stress; Koreans get stressed from debating. We are not the same” illustrate attempts to renegotiate the inferior position historically attached to Southeast Asian identity. Such narratives were often reinforced through humor, irony, and satire, including comments such as “we must not insult God’s creations, but doctors’ creations may,” implicitly criticizing South Korea’s beauty standards while undermining their symbolic legitimacy.

From the perspective of social practice, these counter-discourses challenge cultural hierarchies by contesting representations of Southeast Asians as inferior. Through solidarity and collective resistance, users constructed alternative identities that challenged dominant cultural narratives, reflecting Gramsci’s concept of counter-hegemony, whereby subordinated groups contest dominant meanings and promote alternative interpretations of social reality. Digital platforms facilitated this process by connecting users across national boundaries. However, challenging dominant hierarchies does not necessarily eliminate symbolic domination. Practices of comparison, exclusion, and group-based judgment may persist within counter-discourse, blurring the boundary between resistance and domination. Thus, digital resistance can challenge cultural inequality while potentially reproducing the hierarchies it seeks to overcome.

Nevertheless, this resistance was not entirely free from the reproduction of stereotypes that blurred the distinction between resistance and domination. Some comments mirrored the very practices they sought to criticize, such as statements like “Koreans without plastic surgery have no beauty” or “South Korea should learn brotherhood from Indonesia and Malaysia.” At the textual level, these statements reverse the direction of stereotyping rather than eliminating stereotyping itself. The target of negative representation changes, but the underlying discursive strategy—constructing an in-group as superior by devaluing an out-group—remains present. From Bourdieu’s perspective, this demonstrates that symbolic power is not monopolized exclusively by dominant groups but may also be reproduced through the practices of subordinate groups. Resistance can therefore challenge one form of symbolic domination while simultaneously reproducing another form of symbolic hierarchy.

Furthermore, digital resistance took the form of platform-based collective action, particularly through boycott campaigns and review-bombing practices. Online users organized coordinated efforts to lower the ratings of South Korean businesses and institutions, as reflected in statements such as “Leaving 1-star reviews on Google Maps directly impacts a location’s digital footprint,” alongside tactical recommendations like “don’t use 1-star reviews… use 2 stars so the review remains permanent.” Similar calls extended toward the entertainment industry, including messages such as “Go to Netflix and give K-dramas thumbs down” and “Mission complete… I disliked all Netflix dramas.”

At the level of discursive practice, these actions demonstrate how users transformed discourse into coordinated platform-based practices. The conflict therefore extended beyond exchanging opinions to attempts to influence ratings, visibility, consumption, and the digital reputation of Korean cultural products and institutions. These practices reflect forms of digital activism in which users strategically utilize platform infrastructures to generate symbolic and economic pressure against perceived dominant actors. Within Gramsci’s framework, such actions can be interpreted as forms of counter-hegemony, namely collective attempts by subordinate groups to challenge dominant narratives through mobilization and counter-discourse production (Davies, 2025). This orientation is reinforced by statements such as “our goal is not to win but to make them upset,” indicating that the

objectives of resistance are not always rational or economic, but are often emotional and symbolic in character.

Taken together, the findings show that Southeast Asian resistance operated through two interconnected processes: the construction of a collective regional identity and the mobilization of digital platforms as instruments of counter-discourse and collective action. However, these practices also reveal a fundamental tension. While #SEAblings enabled users to challenge their subordinate symbolic position and construct regional solidarity, some forms of resistance reproduced exclusionary representations of the opposing group. This tension becomes particularly important for understanding the ambivalent character of digital resistance, discussed in the following section.

The Ambivalence of Resistance

At the same time, critical voices also emerged from within Southeast Asian communities themselves, questioning both the effectiveness and ethical implications of retaliatory discourse. Comments such as “Fighting racism with more racism isn’t the answer” and “we don’t have to stoop so low” demonstrate forms of internal reflection regarding the boundaries and consequences of digital resistance. This suggests that digital spaces are not ideologically homogeneous but consist of competing perspectives and ethical negotiations. These internal disagreements are significant because they indicate that resistance itself became an object of discursive contestation. In other words, Southeast Asian users did not respond to the conflict through a single, unified discourse; instead, competing interpretations emerged regarding what constitutes legitimate and ethical resistance.

Southeast Asian digital resistance within the SEAblings–Knetz conflict therefore cannot be understood simply as a wholly progressive or emancipatory movement. Instead, it reveals significant internal contradictions in which efforts to oppose domination may simultaneously reproduce similar forms of domination. In many instances, Southeast Asian users responded to racist discourse with counter-racist narratives targeting South Korea’s physical appearance, culture, and social systems. At the textual level, these responses demonstrate a reversal of the direction of negative representation: the group previously positioned as inferior becomes the producer of representations that position the opposing group as inferior. This suggests that resistance within digital environments often remains embedded within discursive frameworks inherited from earlier structures of power.

Such contradictions reveal the ambivalent character of resistance within hegemonic systems (Femia, 1987). On the one hand, resistance seeks to delegitimize South Korea’s symbolic superiority within the global cultural industry. On the other hand, strategies based on appearance-based ridicule or developmental comparisons ultimately reaffirm the same hierarchical logic underpinning hegemonic discourse itself. Resistance, therefore, does not fully dismantle structures of domination, but frequently operates within them through reversed symbolic positioning. From Fairclough’s perspective, this demonstrates that counter-discourse does not necessarily exist outside dominant discourse. Rather, it may appropriate, reverse, and reproduce existing representational patterns while attempting to challenge their original target.

From Bourdieu’s perspective, this dynamic may also be understood as a reproduction of symbolic power by subordinate groups (Bourdieu, 2018). Southeast Asian netizens, previously positioned as objects of symbolic subordination, may reproduce dominant discursive structures and redeploy them in the form of counter-discourse. The findings therefore suggest that symbolic violence can circulate in multiple directions within digital interaction. While the initial racist discourse establishes a hierarchical distinction between “Korea” and “Southeast Asia,” retaliatory discourse may reproduce the same hierarchical structure by reversing the positions of the groups involved. Consequently, resistance becomes paradoxical: rather than fostering a more egalitarian digital space, it risks perpetuating symbolic violence and reproducing the inequalities it seeks to challenge.

Nevertheless, internal criticism among Southeast Asian users demonstrates that digital resistance can be a reflexive practice. Some participants rejected racist retaliation and collective hostility, emphasizing that “fighting racism with racism is not the answer.” Such perspectives reveal the potential for counter-hegemonic discourse to question its own strategies and consequences. The SEAblings–Knetz conflict therefore illustrates that resistance is not inherently emancipatory: while challenging dominant cultural hierarchies and fostering collective agency, it may simultaneously reproduce stereotyping, exclusion, and symbolic violence.

Ultimately, the relationship between hegemony and resistance is not binary but ambivalent, as both can coexist within the same digital spaces. Digital resistance matters not only because it can challenge dominant representations but also because it can foster critical self-reflection and transformation. These dynamics demonstrate that global cultural relations remain shaped by inequalities in social perception and symbolic recognition, highlighting the importance of ethical intercultural communication and critical awareness.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the SEAblings–Knetz conflict reflects how cultural hegemony operates within transnational digital communication through both the global prominence of Korean popular culture and the reproduction of symbolic hierarchies in online discourse. Racist and culturally hierarchical discourses toward Southeast Asian netizens reflect broader asymmetrical cultural relations rather than merely isolated expressions of individual prejudice. In response, Southeast Asian netizens mobilized the collective identity of “SEAblings” through regional solidarity, counter-discourses, boycott campaigns, and platform-based activism. However, this resistance remained ambivalent, as attempts to challenge domination sometimes reproduced stereotyping, exclusion, and symbolic hostility, positioning digital spaces as contested arenas where domination and resistance coexist and may reproduce one another.

Theoretically, this study integrates Gramscian hegemony, Bourdieu’s symbolic violence, and Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis to demonstrate how domination and resistance coexist within digital discourse. It conceptualizes digital resistance as a relational and contradictory process in which counter-discourse challenges dominant cultural hierarchies while potentially reproducing symbolic violence. The findings also highlight how platform infrastructures shape the visibility and circulation of these competing narratives. Practically, the study emphasizes the importance of inclusive intercultural communication among entertainment industries, fandom communities, and digital platforms. Strengthened content moderation, media literacy, and ethically reflexive fan practices are essential to reducing discriminatory discourse and fostering more equitable digital spaces grounded in reciprocity, inclusivity, and mutual recognition.

Future research should expand this analysis through comparative cross-platform studies to examine how hegemony, resistance, and discourse circulation vary across different digital environments. Digital ethnography and interviews could further illuminate how users experience and negotiate transnational online conflicts beyond their textual representations. At the same time, research on entertainment agencies, influencers, fandom organizations, and platform companies could clarify the role of non-state actors in shaping intercultural tensions. Computational and platform-oriented approaches are also needed to examine how algorithmic visibility and content circulation relate to the amplification of antagonistic discourse, an issue beyond the present study's empirical scope.

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Khayranil Ula: Conceptualization; Methodology; Investigation; Data curation; Formal analysis; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing. **Kamaruzzaman Kamaruzzaman**: Writing – review & editing.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES

During manuscript preparation, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI), Claude (Anthropic), Perplexity (Perplexity AI), and Grammarly (Superhuman) in 2026. The authors used these tools for literature search assistance, language refinement, translation assistance, grammar checking, and editorial support. The author used them only to identify relevant academic references and improve the manuscript's language and clarity. All AI-assisted outputs and suggested references were critically reviewed and independently verified by the author. The author takes full responsibility for the manuscript's accuracy, originality, integrity, and ethical compliance.

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