

Shaping Future Maritime Leaders: Vietnamese Youth Perceptions Of South China Sea Diplomacy
(*Pembentukan Pemimpin Maritim Masa Hadapan: Persepsi Belia Vietnam terhadap Diplomasi di Laut China Selatan*)

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ABSTRACT

In the digital era, the South China Sea disputes have expanded from diplomatic tables to the online sphere, where youth emerge as significant political actors. This study investigates the perceptions and diplomatic attitudes of Vietnamese youth to assess their potential as future maritime leaders. Adopting a qualitative approach with issue-based case studies, the research integrates Constructivism, Securitization Theory, and Digital Diplomacy to analyze social media discourse. Key findings reveal that youth construct the sea as a "sacred emotional territory" central to their identity. Through "bottom-up securitization," they actively frame commercial incidents as existential threats, mobilizing collective backlash. However, a critical "digital diplomacy paradox" exists: while digital nationalism is high, legal literacy regarding UNCLOS is alarmingly low, leading to ineffective "mob-like" reactions. The study underscores the urgent need to shift educational paradigms from emotional patriotism to maritime governance and legal competency, ensuring the next generation is equipped for professional diplomatic leadership.

Keywords: South China Sea, Youth, Cybernationalism, Bottom-Up Securitization, Digital Diplomacy

ABSTRAK

Dalam era digital, pertikaian Laut China Selatan telah meluas daripada meja diplomasi ke ruang dalam talian, di mana golongan belia muncul sebagai aktor politik yang signifikan. Kajian ini menyelidik persepsi dan sikap diplomatik belia Vietnam untuk menilai potensi mereka sebagai bakal pemimpin maritim masa depan. Dengan mengguna pakai pendekatan kualitatif menerusi kajian kes berasaskan isu, penyelidikan ini mengintegrasikan Konstruktivisme, Teori Sekuritisasi, dan Diplomasi Digital untuk menganalisis wacana media sosial. Dapatan utama mendedahkan bahawa golongan belia membina tanggapan terhadap laut sebagai "wilayah emosi yang suci" yang menjadi teras kepada identiti mereka. Menerusi "sekuritisasi dari bawah ke atas" (*bottom-up securitization*), mereka secara aktif membingkaikan insiden komersial sebagai ancaman eksistensial, sekali gus menggembeleng penentangan kolektif. Walau bagaimanapun, wujud satu "paradoks diplomasi digital" yang kritikal: meskipun nasionalisme digital berada pada tahap tinggi, celik undang-undang berkaitan UNCLOS adalah amat rendah, seterusnya membawa kepada tindak balas ala "kumpulan perusuh" (*mob-like*) yang tidak berkesan. Kajian ini menegaskan keperluan mendesak untuk mengalih paradigma pendidikan daripada patriotisme beremosi kepada tadbir urus maritim dan kompetensi undang-undang, bagi memastikan generasi akan datang dilengkapi untuk kepimpinan diplomasi profesional.

Kata Kunci: Laut China Selatan, Belia, Nasionalisme Siber, Sekuritisasi Dari Bawah ke Atas, Diplomasi Digital

INTRODUCTION

Context and Problem Statement

The South China Sea dispute lies at the heart of regional security, nationalism, and international diplomacy, and has long been regarded as one of the world's most sensitive and complex maritime conflicts. While existing studies have extensively examined states' geopolitical strategies, military tensions, legal claims under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and the role of regional institutions, youth, as emerging social and political actors, have received far less attention. Yet young people's perspectives are increasingly recognized as shaping public discourse, spreading national narratives, participating in online activism, and influencing both emotional and political understandings of maritime sovereignty.

In the social media era, sovereignty disputes have moved beyond closed-door diplomatic negotiations to become matters of everyday public debate among millions of citizens, especially the younger generation, the so-called digital natives. Their perceptions today may shape the region's future diplomatic landscape. However, current scholarship still lacks a systematic examination of how young people construct, interpret, and respond to the South China Sea issue. As future leaders, policymakers, and voters, their attitudes matter not only for domestic debates but also for future regional cooperation or escalation. Understanding these perceptions is essential for improving maritime literacy, enhancing diplomatic communication, and fostering more constructive regional dialogue mechanisms.

In coastal states, particularly Vietnam, the younger generations (Gen Z and Millennials) have shown unprecedented interest in issues of maritime and territorial sovereignty. Yet this interest often manifests through intense emotional waves on social media platforms (Facebook, TikTok, Twitter) whenever a dispute-related event occurs. While patriotism is a valuable national resource, the lack of fundamental knowledge of international law and professional diplomatic thinking has led to spontaneous, and at times extreme, herd-like reactions. Such actions, instead of supporting the state's diplomatic efforts, can occasionally generate reputational risks or complicate flexible foreign policy strategies.

This study thus raises a central question: How can the powerful energy of "cyber-nationalism" be transformed into genuine "maritime leadership" capacity for the future? To answer this, the paper examines young people's perceptions and attitudes through the analytical lens of international relations

theories and contemporary communication studies.

Literature review

Over the past decade, scholarship on the South China Sea dispute has primarily approached the issue through geopolitical, legal (UNCLOS), and state-centric diplomatic perspectives. Classical studies have focused on state behavior (China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia), maritime incidents, and the role of ASEAN. However, the rise of digital media, social networks, and a generation with unprecedented access to information has created a new layer of actors in the formation and expression of sovereignty perceptions. Existing research on youth mainly addresses national identity formation in education (Acharya, 2020; Le Thanh Truc & Linh Chi Nguyen, 2021), cyber-nationalism (Weiss, 2022; Wang, 2020), and social media in regional conflict. Yet very few studies directly connect youth to diplomacy, especially within the context of the South China Sea. Much of the literature treats them as "communication targets" rather than "informal diplomatic actors." Within this academic landscape, three theoretical frameworks: Constructivism, Securitization Theory, and Digital Diplomacy, are commonly used independently or in combination to explain state and public behavior.

Constructivism emphasizes that young people's perceptions of conflict are shaped by social narratives of national identity, historical grievances, and collective memory. For example, China's narratives of "national humiliation" and "rejuvenation," as well as Indonesia's framing of China as a threat, strongly influence how youth interpret maritime conflicts and their countries' positions (Karim et al., 2024; C. Wirth, 2020; Anna Llanos Antczak, 2021). Advanced constructivist studies on youth cognition suggest that adolescent social reasoning is often associated with pro-social interpretations and reduced aggression, as young people learn to recognize interpretative diversity and avoid hostile attribution in ambiguous situations (Weimer et al., 2017; R. Furman et al., 2003). Research also highlights the role of education, media, and state discourse in shaping these perceptions (Anna Llanos Antczak, 2021).

Securitization Theory in the digital age defines securitization as a speech act that transforms an ordinary political issue into an urgent security threat. Earlier studies focused on political elites (the state) performing securitizing acts to mobilize public support. For example, in Indonesia, the Natuna Islands dispute was rapidly securitized, with youth and the wider public adopting narratives of Chinese security threats

(Karim et al., 2024; P. K. Meyer et al. 2019), showing how securitization can intensify negative perceptions and justify assertive policies. However, recent research on social media has introduced the concept of “bottom-up securitization,” wherein the public, especially youth, initiate waves of framing maritime disputes as existential threats, sometimes exerting reverse pressure on state policy (Jessica Chen Weiss, 2014). James Reilly’s findings similarly show that online public opinion constrains diplomatic room for maneuver and pushes governments toward harder positions than initially intended (Reilly, 2012). Moreover, excessive state propaganda on sovereignty can generate public expectations for military or coercive responses during crises, complicating peaceful conflict-management strategies (Andrew Chubb, 2019).

Youth attitudes toward maritime disputes are shaped by nationalism, media exposure, and conflict interpretation, and they hold significant implications for future diplomacy and regional stability.

Most existing studies on youth attitudes toward maritime disputes focus on China, particularly the East China Sea and the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute with Japan. A study by Hongyu Wang and Tianji Cai finds that Chinese youth exhibit strong nationalism and support assertive stances in maritime conflicts, with confidence in military victory emerging as the strongest predictor of support for naval intervention. Notably, negative attitudes toward Japanese civilians do not significantly

influence support for military action, suggesting that hostility is policy-focused rather than population-focused, and that Chinese youth support the use of force to seize disputed territories. Media environments also shape attitudes: incidental exposure on relationship-oriented platforms like WeChat increases support for strong responses within homogeneous networks, while

cross-cutting exposure on news-oriented platforms like Weibo encourages more moderate views (Wang & Cai, 2018). Another study shows that after conflict events, youth attitudes, particularly negative attitudes among Japanese youth, tend to remain stable for about a year (A. Igarashi, 2018). Contrary to threat theory expectations, individual-level variations such as socioeconomic status, media exposure, and political predispositions do not significantly explain attitude shifts, suggesting territorial salience may be the primary factor (G. Davies, K. Edney, Bo Wang, 2022).

Overall, research on youth attitudes toward maritime disputes remains limited in number, narrow in geographic scope (mainly East Asia), and focused on single-country cases. Another study examining ASEAN youth perceptions of China notes important variations but focuses on China’s public diplomacy rather than maritime disputes themselves (Sape et al., 2021). Due to limited empirical evidence, this is also the only study measuring youth perceptions using survey data. Findings reveal major cross-national differences: 41% of Indonesian youth held positive views of China’s rise, while Thai and Cambodian youth expressed higher institutional acceptance. Chinese youth displayed increasingly strong patriotism and demands for maritime assertiveness, though these findings lack demographic details or survey data. While the study suggests youth act as diplomatic agents, it does not provide empirical evidence on actual youth populations, instead basing arguments on document analysis. Findings suggest that youth perceptions vary systematically according to information environments and political contexts rather than forming a unified regional view. Youth in pluralistic information environments tend to hold more skeptical attitudes toward China, whereas those in state-controlled or highly penetrated media contexts display more unified and assertive positions. For

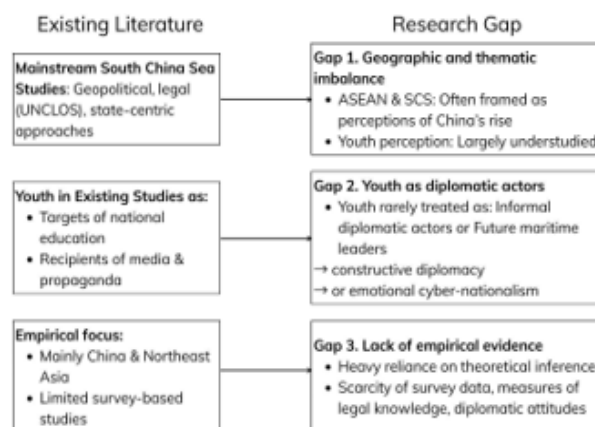


FIGURE 1. Conceptual Map of Existing Literature and Research Gaps on Youth and the South China Sea

future maritime leadership, this heterogeneity poses major challenges, as conflicting national claims create structural tension within the region. However, the ability of existing studies to answer key questions is limited by scarce empirical evidence on youth demographics, attitudes, and diplomatic engagement, with most policy recommendations far exceeding the available data.

Figure 1 below synthesizes the main strands of existing literature on the South China Sea and youth perceptions, and highlights three key research gaps concerning youth's diplomatic agency, geographical imbalance, and the lack of empirical evidence.

Although prior research provides valuable theoretical foundations on constructivism, securitization, and digital diplomacy in maritime disputes, this literature review reveals three significant research gaps that the present study seeks to address: First, there is a geographical and thematic imbalance.

Empirical studies of youth attitudes toward maritime disputes are dominated by Northeast Asian cases, particularly China–Japan relations and the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute (Wang & Cai, 2018; Igarashi, 2018). Research on Southeast Asia (ASEAN) and the South China Sea is scattered and typically focuses on perceptions of China's rise rather than youth responses to sovereignty claims and legal events in the South China Sea. The psychological and socio-political dynamics of Vietnamese youth, one of the principal claimant states, remain understudied, especially through an integrated lens combining Securitization Theory and Digital Diplomacy.

Second, existing scholarship lacks an approach that treats youth as genuine diplomatic actors. Most studies (Acharya, 2020; Nguyen, 2021; Weiss, 2022) frame youth passively as recipients of national education or media propaganda, or negatively as participants in “herd-like” online conflicts. Very few works directly connect youth to informal diplomacy in the South China Sea context. While studies identify the presence of bottom-up securitization (Weiss, 2014; Reilly, 2012), they do not explore whether this energy can be transformed into leadership and constructive diplomatic attitudes, or whether it remains emotional cyber-nationalism.

Third, there is a major shortage of empirical evidence. As discussed, most conclusions about “future maritime leadership” or “youth perceptions” rely on secondary sources or theoretical inference. Quantitative data (surveys) measuring legal knowledge, diplomatic attitudes, and demographic predictors of youth perspectives on the South China Sea are scarce and lack systematic rigor. This absence of direct data weakens the practical foundation of policy recommendations

related to youth education and diplomatic capacity-building.

This study addresses these gaps by examining youth attitudes toward the South China Sea and reframing youth as potential future maritime leaders who require digital-diplomatic competencies. However, due to its qualitative and document-based design, it does not fully cover the third gap concerning large-scale empirical survey data.

Research objectives

The primary objective of this study is to explore the cognitive structures that shape young people's perceptions of the South China Sea issue and how they respond to specific dispute-related events in online spaces. Specifically, the article aims to:

- i. Analyze how young people construct the image of the South China Sea as an inseparable element of national identity.
- ii. Assess the effectiveness and limitations of spontaneous forms of “people-to-people diplomacy” on social media.
- iii. Identify gaps in legal knowledge and diplomatic thinking among the next generation of potential leaders.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this research lies in its ability to provide a practical foundation for educational and diplomatic policymakers. Instead of merely calling for generalized patriotism, the findings reveal the necessity of reforming educational approaches, from emotional messaging to equipping young citizens with legal literacy and competencies in maritime governance.

Research Questions

Drawing on the aforementioned context and theoretical foundations, the paper addresses the following research questions:

- iv. How do young people construct national identity and perceptions of the South China Sea through online discourses? (Constructivist perspective)
- v. How are maritime dispute events “securitized” in online reactions, and what forms of behavior do these processes produce? (Securitization theory & Case study approach)
- vi. To what extent do young people's legal knowledge and diplomatic attitudes meet the

requirements of becoming future “maritime leaders”? (Digital Diplomacy & Education perspective)

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design with the aim of deeply exploring young people’s perceptions, discourses, and behaviors in online interactions related to the South China Sea. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate because the phenomenon under investigation cannot be meaningfully captured through quantitative indicators; instead, it is embedded

in the ways young people interpret, feel, and respond to information, elements closely tied to identity, collective emotions, and the social construction of meaning.

In parallel, the study adopts an issue-based case study approach, selecting several real-world events (e.g., incidents involving incorrect maps, controversial statements by key opinion leaders, hashtag campaigns, or boycotts of international brands) to observe how young people react and how discourses are circulated and escalated. This method enables a detailed examination of securitization mechanisms within each case, including triggering actors, key messages, the designated threat, and the forms of action mobilized.

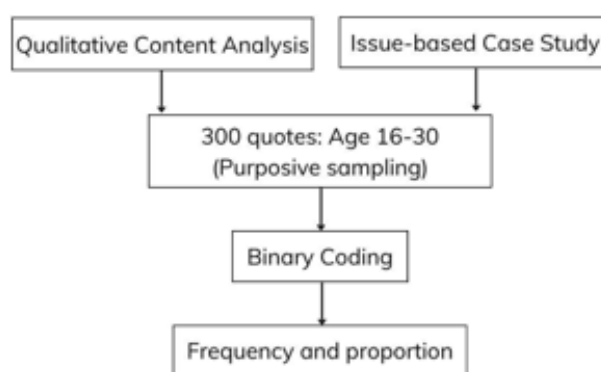


FIGURE 2. Methodological Flowchart

This study employs Qualitative Content Analysis and an Issue-Based Case Study approach to manually identify purposively selected cases involving young people aged 16–30. As direct inquiries about age are not feasible in online environments, proxy indicators were employed. Youth participants were identified through self-disclosure, language style, and platform-specific demographic tendencies. Data were collected from comments and replies posted under news-related content across multiple digital media platforms, including Facebook, X, TikTok, and online news sites, and were systematically organized using NVivo. A total of 300 quotes were collected. Each quote was then subjected to binary coding, whereby every quote was assigned a code of 1 if it constituted a legal-based argument, and 0 if it did not, where only comments explicitly citing UNCLOS, PCA rulings, or maritime legal concepts were coded as legal-based.

The analysis subsequently generated the

frequency and proportion of legal-based arguments employed by young people. Finally, the integrated theoretical framework was applied to interpret these findings and to identify Vietnamese youth perceptions of the South China Sea issue.

Theoretical framework

To unpack the complexity of youth cognition and behavior toward the South China Sea issue, this research develops an integrated, multi-layered analytical framework rather than relying on a single theoretical lens. The framework incorporates Constructivism (to explain the origins of perceptions), Securitization Theory (to explain patterns of reaction and escalation), and Digital Diplomacy (to assess capability and impact). An integrated theoretical framework aligned with each research objective of this study is presented in Figure 2 below:

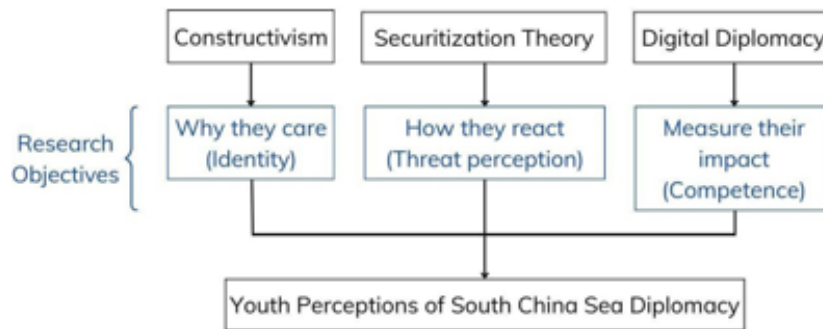


FIGURE 3. Integrated Theoretical Framework for Analyzing Youth Perceptions of South China Sea Diplomacy

Constructivism provides the foundation for understanding how young people's sense of national identity is formed and reinforced. Although maritime sovereignty is often discussed as a legal issue, for many young Vietnamese it is intertwined with collective emotions, historical memory, and consistent messaging from education and the media. As Wendt (1992) argues, national identities and interests are not fixed but socially constructed through interaction. In Vietnam, these interactions take place through textbooks, documentaries, state media, public communication campaigns, and, most prominently, repeated online discourses. Consequently, the South China Sea becomes imagined as a "sacred space", an extension of the national self. This explains why young people tend to approach maritime disputes emotionally before approaching them rationally, and why many comments emphasize slogans ("Hoàng Sa, Trường Sa belong to Vietnam") rather than legal reasoning grounded in UNCLOS or the PCA ruling. Constructivism thus forms the first analytical layer, illuminating how beliefs and identity shape youth interpretations of South China Sea information.

Perceptions, however, are only one part of the story. To explain why some young people react intensely to South China Sea-related events, from foreign influencers' posts to misprinted maps on commercial products, securitization theory becomes essential. According to Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998), an issue becomes a matter of security when it is articulated as an existential threat, enabling the legitimization of extraordinary measures. On social media, this process unfolds rapidly and with limited control: a brand using the "nine-dash line" can be instantly framed as violating national sovereignty; an ambiguous comment may be interpreted as endorsing China's position; and within hours, large-scale boycott or mass-commenting campaigns may emerge. Examining concrete events allows this study to identify how issues are "triggered" into security concerns, the actors who amplify tensions,

and the collective actions mobilized in response. Securitization thus constitutes the second analytical layer, explaining escalation dynamics, polarized reactions, and confrontational language in online youth discourse.

The most crucial dimension of this research lies in assessing the diplomatic significance of these reactions. Digital Diplomacy, as described by Manor (2019), captures the shift from state-centric diplomacy toward a model where individuals and online communities become influential actors. When young people comment in English on international pages, launch hashtag campaigns, run explanatory fanpages, or counter misinformation, they effectively engage in a form of non-state public diplomacy. However, a key question emerges: Do these behaviors strengthen national soft power, or do they backfire by appearing emotional, lacking legal grounding, or generating negative responses? Digital Diplomacy provides tools to evaluate the diplomatic maturity of today's youth: Do they understand UNCLOS correctly? Can they argue calmly and persuasively? Do their online actions support or hinder official foreign policy efforts? This forms the third analytical layer, assessing both external impact and the future maritime leadership capacity of the younger generation.

By combining these three theories, the study constructs a coherent model: Constructivism explains how young people's initial perceptions are formed; Securitization Theory explains how these perceptions translate into escalatory reactions within digital environments; Digital Diplomacy evaluates the foreign policy implications and diplomatic competence reflected in these reactions.

This integrated framework enables the study to address three central questions: (1) How do young people construct identity and perceptions of the South China Sea on social media?; (2) How are dispute-related events securitized, and what behaviors do they generate?; and (3) Do current levels of legal literacy

and diplomatic attitudes align with the requirements of a future maritime-leadership generation?

MAIN FINDINGS

Drawing on qualitative methods, including social media discourse analysis (across Facebook, TikTok, and X), passive participant observation, and issue-based case studies, the study coded and categorized more than 300 quotes from young individuals aged 16–30 related to the South China Sea. These data were subsequently grouped into thematic clusters. The discourse analysis was then mapped onto the study's three-layer theoretical framework: (1) Constructivism, (2) Securitization and (3) Digital Diplomacy, enabling the identification of recurring behavioral patterns and the underlying mechanisms that shape youth perceptions and diplomatic responses.

Through qualitative content analysis of online discussions and selected case events, the findings illuminate the complex landscape of Vietnamese youth cognition and behavior concerning the South China Sea. The results are organized into three overarching themes: (1) The construction of national identity in digital spaces; (2) Securitization dynamics in youth reactions; (3) Actual diplomatic capacity and performance. These themes together provide a consolidated understanding of how young Vietnamese conceptualize the South China Sea, why certain events trigger strong escalatory responses, and how these dynamics translate, positively or negatively, into forms of digital diplomacy. *Constructing Identity and Emotional Territory*

The discourse analysis shows that young people approach the South China Sea primarily as an issue of identity, rather than a legal or geo-strategic matter. The most common comments revolve around sovereignty-affirming slogans, for example: “Hoàng Sa - Trường Sa belong to Vietnam, no debate,” “Touch the islands and you touch the Vietnamese people,” “We stand united to defend our sovereignty!” These excerpts reflect a cognitive structure that has been socialized through education, mainstream media, and online discourse, precisely as explained by Constructivism. The South China Sea is understood as a sacred symbol, giving rise to a form of cyber-nationalism, nationalism reproduced through digital platforms.

Surveyed comment threads related to the South China Sea reveal a clear shift in the expressive language used by young people. Instead of administrative-legal terms such as “sovereign waters,” “continental shelf,” or “jurisdictional rights,” the language of Gen Z and Millennials is highly emotive and deeply personalized.

Frequently recurring phrases include: “the nation’s flesh and blood,” “the land of our ancestors,” “inseparable,” and especially direct statements of ownership such as “our sea,” “our islands.”

In trending TikTok videos posted during major national holidays or moments of heightened tension, images of naval soldiers are often paired with heroic or solemn music, accompanied by captions honoring sacrifice. Comments underneath typically express gratitude mixed with a sense of commitment: “Ready to serve when the Motherland calls,” “Willing to die for the nation.” Notably, such content often receives five to ten times more engagement than posts providing policy analysis or standard news updates.

Under the lens of Constructivism, these data show that the socialization process regarding maritime sovereignty in Vietnam has been highly effective in embedding this issue into personal identity. Young people do not perceive the South China Sea as a physical maritime zone containing oil, gas, or fisheries; rather, they are “constructing” it as a sacred space, an inviolable extension of national identity. Through repeated digital rituals such as sharing videos, liking posts, and posting supportive comments, youth reinforce the belief that “patriotism” is synonymous with holding an absolute sense of ownership over the South China Sea. This transformation from “state territory” to “emotional territory” explains why even the smallest dispute linked to the maritime domain touches their most sensitive nerves, triggering instinctive reactions rather than strategic calculation. Data analysis also indicates that most young people equate defending sovereignty with expressing strong emotion, such as changing avatars to the national flag, sharing maps, or using the hashtag #VietnamStrong. These symbolic actions serve to reinforce identity rather than encourage rational debate.

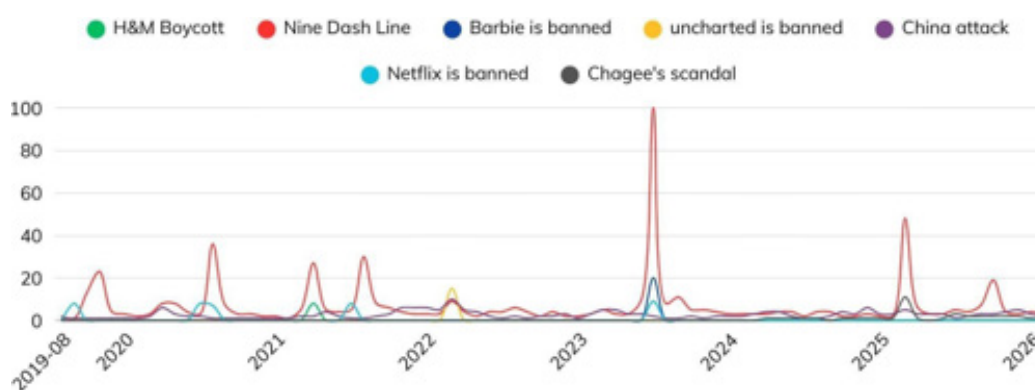
Another prominent phenomenon is the use of maps as a patriotic “totem.” During moments when Facebook offered themed profile frames, or when controversies surrounding nine-dash-line maps appeared, large numbers of young users simultaneously changed their profile images to the Vietnamese flag or a map of Vietnam including the Paracels and Spratlys. On Instagram and Threads, trends involving redrawing maps or creating graphic designs asserting sovereignty also became widespread. This behavior goes far beyond simple information sharing; it is an act of asserting presence. In digital environments where physical borders are blurred, the map becomes the most direct instrument for young people to locate the “Self” and distinguish it from the “Other.” The mass avatar change creates a powerful visual effect, reinforcing a sense of belonging to a large, united

imagined community. However, the heavy reliance on visual symbols also suggests that young people's perceptions tend to emphasize form and symbolism more than substantive legal understanding. Bottom-up Securitization Mechanism: From Commercial Incidents to Existential Threats

The Triggering Process

Research into typical case studies, such as the boycott of the fashion brand H&M (2021)¹, incidents involving the movies *Barbie* (2023)² or *Uncharted* (2022)³, and controversies related to Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs), reveals a consistent response pattern. The "bottom-up securitization" process typically unfolds in three steps:

- i. **Detection & Alert:** An individual or small group detects the "nine-dash line" detail (even if very small or faint) in a cultural or commercial product. An "expose" post is released using urgent warning language.
- ii. **Amplification & Labeling:** Large community Fanpages and KOLs share the information. Here, the error (possibly due to technical faults or the brand's lack of awareness) is relabeled as a hostile political motive: a "cultural invasion plot," "distorted propaganda," or "disrespect for sovereignty."
- iii. **Mobilization:** The online community rapidly escalates the issue to a "critical" level, demanding immediate punishment.



Source: Google trends⁴

FIGURE 4. Trends in public attention over time toward major sovereignty-related events in Vietnam

In the H&M case, within just 24 hours, the hashtag #BoycottHM climbed to the top trending list. Tens of thousands of angry comments flooded the brand's fanpage. In the *Barbie* movie case, pressure from social media discussions created significant strain on the National Film Evaluation Council, leading to a ban decision, despite the producer's claim that the map image was simply a 'child-like crayon

drawing'. A notable pattern is the simultaneous surge in search volumes for event-related keywords and those associated with the nine-dash line, indicating a strong linkage in Vietnamese youth's attention between sovereignty issues and China's territorial claims.

Research identifies a recurring mechanism: when a new event related to the East Sea (South China Sea) arises, young people quickly "securitize" the

¹ The 2021 boycott of H&M in Vietnam originated after online users discovered that the company had adjusted its website map for the Chinese market to include the "nine-dash line." Although the modification appeared to be a compliance decision targeting the Chinese regulatory environment, it was interpreted by Vietnamese youth as a political endorsement of China's maritime claims. A single "exposé post" circulated rapidly on Facebook, triggering mass outrage. Within hours, major community pages, influencers, and youth groups amplified the incident, reframing it as evidence of cultural aggression and disrespect toward Vietnam's sovereignty. The hashtag #BoycottHM surged to the top of local trending lists, and thousands of critical comments flooded the brand's official social media pages.

² The controversy surrounding *Barbie* (2023) in Vietnam began when online users circulated screenshots of an animated map in the film that appeared to resemble the "nine-dash line." Although the map was later clarified by the studio as a childlike, nonsensical doodle with no geopolitical intent, Vietnamese youth on Facebook

and TikTok quickly reframed it as an implicit political statement. The issue escalated when influential fanpages and KOLs amplified the interpretation, asserting that Hollywood was "normalizing" or "smuggling in" China's maritime claims. Public pressure intensified rapidly, generating heated online debates and calls for an immediate ban. Facing the momentum of this bottom-up securitization, the National Film Evaluation Council ultimately prohibited the movie's release in Vietnam.

³ *Uncharted* (2022) was removed from Vietnamese cinemas after viewers spotted a brief map containing the "nine-dash line." Although the image was incidental, young social media users quickly framed it as political intent. Viral posts and KOL amplification turned the scene into a perceived sovereignty violation, generating strong public pressure that led authorities to ban the film.

⁴ The keywords were entered in Vietnamese, restricted to searches within Vietnam, and the corresponding search volumes were collected from Google's website.

issue, viewing it as a serious threat, even if the reality is sometimes just a technical error or misunderstanding.

According to the Securitization Theory of the Copenhagen School, typically only the elite (the state) possesses the power to declare an issue a "security threat" in order to apply special measures. However, these findings demonstrate the strong rise of "Bottom-up Securitization." Young people, thanks to the power of social media, have usurped a portion of this power. They establish their own "red lines." Any violation, whether in entertainment or commerce, is "securitized" into an existential threat to the nation, triggering a collective response. The driving force of this process is the fear of "normalizing" the wrong, leading to a mindset of "better to strike by mistake than to let one slip through" (giết nhầm còn hơn bỏ sót).

In other cases, if there are any ambiguous statements by celebs or foreigners regarding island sovereignty, Vietnamese youth tend to activate a preemptive securitization mechanism, leading to even statements that do not directly mention the East Sea being potentially interpreted as threats.

Mob Mentality & Cancel Culture

The reactions of the youth are often collectively extreme. Content analysis of comments shows an absence of moderate viewpoints. Opinions calling for calm, careful contextual examination, or suggesting flexible diplomatic solutions are often counter-attacked and labeled as "traitors," "ba que" (reactionaries), or

"lacking patriotism."

This polarization reveals a major limitation of "digital patriotism": it eliminates space for multi-dimensional discussions. The "Securitization" mechanism has pushed the mindset of the youth into a binary opposition: You are either a patriot (agreeing to boycott) or an enemy (if you have a different opinion). This creates social pressure forcing individuals to conform to the crowd to seek safety or recognition, rather than acting based on rational understanding. The Digital Diplomacy Paradox: High Enthusiasm but Legal "Deficit"

Forms of Engagement

When observing how Vietnamese youth interact on international platforms (Twitter/X, foreign news sites like BBC, CNN, SCMP), research records a massive effort of spontaneous "public diplomacy." They actively use English to comment, share links to historical articles, and create content (explainers) regarding sovereignty.

However, when engaging in dialogue with foreigners, many comments fall into two categories. The most common method remains "spam" (repetitive comments). When an international news page posts an article favorable to China or unfavorable to Vietnam, a mass of Vietnamese user accounts will drop red flag with yellow star emojis and copy-paste identical text segments: "Hoang Sa, Truong Sa belong to Vietnam. China get out!". The other form is personal attacks (ad hominem): "If you don't understand history, don't talk!".

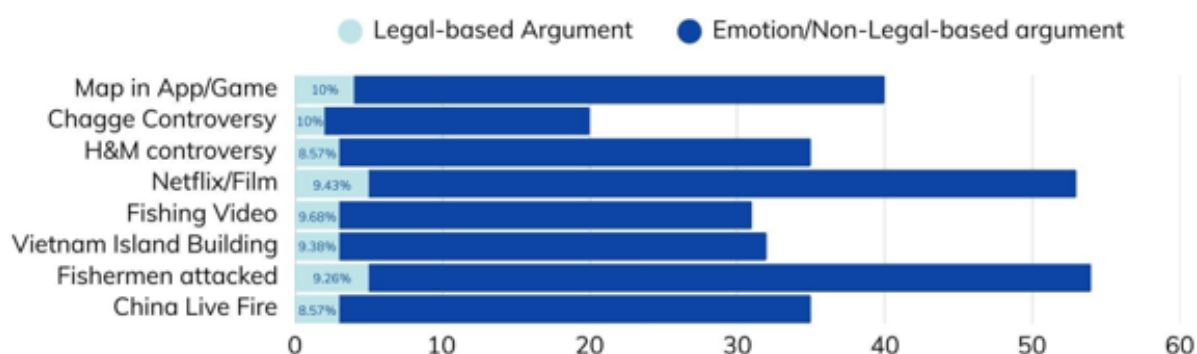


FIGURE 5. Distribution of Legal-Based and Emotion-Based Arguments Across Media Events (N =

Data collected from 300 samples shows that only about 8–10% of citations mention UNCLOS, the 2016 PCA, or legal principles. The majority of young people state they "know of them but are unclear on details" or are "not confident debating in English." This pattern is consistent across different types of incidents, including controversies related to digital maps, international

brands, films, and maritime confrontations. The findings suggest that online reactions are predominantly driven by emotional expressions, nationalist sentiments, and identity-based narratives rather than formal references to international law or legal frameworks.

Viewed from a Digital Diplomacy perspective, this action resembles a "digital swarming" rather than

persuasive diplomatic activity. Although the intention is good (protecting sovereignty), the method of execution is intrusive and harassing. This is clearly not an effective method of public diplomacy, as for others to listen, providing evidence and legal grounds is more important than one's emotions. Instead of generating "soft power" (attraction, understanding), this approach easily causes "repulsive power," making the international community feel attacked rather than persuaded. This runs counter to the goal of building an image of responsible, multilateral maritime leadership that adheres to international law.

The Legal Literacy Gap

This is the most important and concerning finding. Deep analysis of the debate content reveals a serious deficit in knowledge regarding UNCLOS 1982.

Many young people cannot distinguish the differences between "Territorial Sea," "Exclusive Economic Zone" (EEZ), and "Continental Shelf." They often apply a terrestrial mindset ("my house") to the sea, leading to erroneous statements regarding the right of innocent passage or freedom of navigation for international vessels. Furthermore, in debates with foreign netizens (especially from the Philippines or China), Vietnamese youth often find themselves out-argued when opponents present legal arguments or cite diplomatic notes. A common reaction when backed into a corner is to switch to personal attacks, body shaming, or using racist language.

This result points to a large gap between "Attitude" and "Competence." Young people possess an abundance of diplomatic assertiveness but lack professional diplomatic competence. The education and media systems seem to have done a very good job of sparking patriotism ("Truong Sa belongs to Vietnam"), but have not sufficiently equipped them with tools ("Why does Truong Sa belong to Vietnam according to international law?"). Consequently, on the digital diplomatic front, Vietnamese youth appear as enthusiastic "suicide warriors" lacking the sharp

weapon of international law. This poses a risk: if this generation becomes future leaders without being "re-equipped" in their thinking, they could lead the country into diplomatic deadlocks or unnecessary conflicts due to a misunderstanding of international "rules of the game."

In summary, the youth are a massive potential political resource with fervent patriotism reinforced by digital culture. However, this energy is operating on a spontaneous mechanism, dominated by emotions and crowd effects (Securitization), while lacking a solid legal foundation (Legal Literacy). This is precisely the "bottleneck" that needs to be resolved to transform them from "angry netizens" into true "maritime leaders."

DISCUSSION

Based on key findings and the integrated theoretical framework, this section delves into the paradoxes and strategic implications of the "digital patriotism" phenomenon for the future of Vietnam's foreign policy and regional stability.

The study's key findings indicate that the diplomatic perception and behavior of Vietnamese youth regarding the East Sea issue are formed and operated through a tightly knit sequence of identity, collective emotion, and online discourse. When cross-referencing these results with the integrated theoretical framework, it becomes clear that each theoretical layer contributes to a different aspect of the phenomenon; only by combining all three can we fully explain the psychological, social, and diplomatic dynamics of the youth.

The "Double-Edged Sword" of Emotional Nationalism

Research results confirm that through the process of social construction, Vietnamese youth have internalized the East Sea as a sacred part of their personal identity. From a state governance perspective,



FIGURE 6. The Double-Edged Sword of Emotional Nationalism

this is both a strategic asset and a potential burden. The Positive Aspect is that the deep concern of the youth creates a "solid base of public support." Any external infringement meets with natural and powerful resistance from the public, creating legitimacy for the State to maintain a hard stance on sovereignty.

The Negative Aspect is the burden of "sacralization." When a territorial issue is elevated to a "sacred" level and tied to "identity," it becomes "non-negotiable." In International Relations theory, diplomacy requires flexibility, compromise, and sometimes trade-offs to achieve larger goals (peace, development).

- i. The youth's approach to the East Sea via emotional absolutism can create public pressure that narrows the government's negotiation space.
- ii. If the State implements flexible diplomatic steps

(e.g., shelving disputes for joint development), they risk being accused by the domestic public of "conceding" or being "weak."

- iii. This is the "nationalism trap" that scholars (like Weiss, 2014) have warned against: governments stimulate patriotism to consolidate power, but subsequently find their hands tied by that very wave of patriotism.

Risks from "Bottom-up Securitization": When Foreign Policy is "Hijacked"

Findings regarding the "Bottom-up Securitization" mechanism in cases like H&M or Barbie reveal a significant power shift in the digital era. The State no longer holds a monopoly on defining what constitutes a "threat."

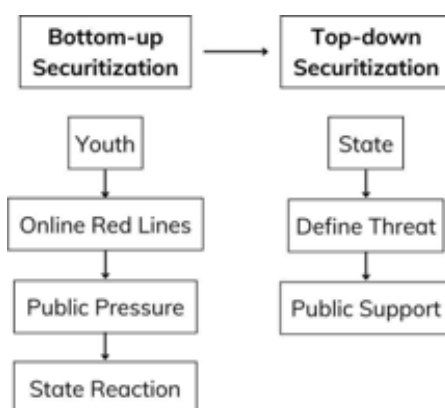


FIGURE 7. The Shift from Top-Down Securitization to Bottom-Up Securitization

When young people arbitrarily establish "red lines" on social media (e.g., an absolute ban on any image of the nine-dash line regardless of context), they inadvertently create a populist foreign policy. Pressure from boycott campaigns forces cultural and diplomatic regulatory bodies to react in a way that "appeases the public" (bans, heavy fines) to maintain domestic political stability, sometimes running counter to economic interests or the image of an open, integrated Vietnam. The State risks an erosion of control.

A crucial observation is that youth tend to place conflicts within a broad securitization framework (national defense) rather than a diplomatic-legal framework (dispute resolution via international law). This not only explains extreme online behaviors but also raises the issue of the capacity to "de-securitize" in the current digital information context.

In the complex context of the East Sea, the greatest risk comes not necessarily from vessel

collisions at sea, but from verbal collisions online. A wave of collective attacks by Vietnamese "netizens" on the social media accounts of neighboring countries could be exploited by international media, painting Vietnam as a xenophobic or belligerent nation. This undermines efforts to build Vietnam's image as a "peace-loving" country that "adheres to international law," an image the official diplomatic mission is working hard to cultivate.

The Competence Gap and the Portrait of Future Leaders

When relating to the Digital Diplomacy framework, it is notable that young people have clearly become actors participating in the national image on the international stage, even if they are unaware of that role. Many English comments show an effort to convey Vietnam's stance to the international community, but they lack

knowledge of UNCLOS, the 2016 PCA, or principles of the Law of the Sea. This reduces the effectiveness of public diplomacy and sometimes creates a backlash, especially when arguments are delivered with insulting tones or personal attacks. However, it cannot be denied that the youth have great potential in spreading national soft power if well-directed. Positive examples, such as videos explaining East Sea history in English or hashtag campaigns calling for information transparency, demonstrate their ability to connect with the international public. The problem lies in the lack of foundational knowledge, lack of digital diplomacy skills, and the absence of a guiding mechanism.

The research results point to a serious deficit in legal knowledge (UNCLOS) and Digital Diplomacy skills among the youth. This poses an existential question for the future: How will the next generation of maritime leaders manage the East Sea?

From "Sovereignty Protection" to "Ocean Governance": The current mindset of the youth stops at the level of "defensive nationalism", guarding borders and reacting to infringements. However, a Maritime Leader in the 21st century needs a "governance" mindset. They must understand the Blue Economy, marine environmental protection, scientific research cooperation, and non-traditional security. The lack of this knowledge makes youth discussions impoverished, revolving only around conflict while ignoring opportunities for sustainable development cooperation.

This competence gap reflects the outdated nature of the current education and propaganda system. We have been too successful in teaching "History of Sovereignty" (to nurture love) but have not focused on teaching "Law and Marine Science" (to nurture reason). The analysis shows that the majority of young people do not approach the East Sea issue as a complex legal-political dispute, but as an issue tied to the sacredness of territory and patriotism. This reinforces the Constructivist argument that political identity is socially "constructed," not naturally occurring. Many citations from online comments show an equation between "protecting sovereignty" and "protecting national honor," indicating that perception is formed primarily by the education system and mass media, then amplified in the online environment. Thus, the behavior of the youth is not a random individual reaction, but stems from a collective identity structure built over time. This suggests that future education policies need to reconsider how content is delivered to balance emotion and reason, enabling youth to participate in international discussions with clearer arguments. Without a transformation, Vietnam will possess a generation of enthusiastic digital citizens who

are essentially vulnerable to psychological warfare and lack the ability for civilized debate on the international stage.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the role of Vietnamese youth in the context of the East Sea disputes through the integrated lens of Constructivism, Securitization Theory, and Digital Diplomacy. The results reveal a contrasting picture: a young generation with fervent patriotism, ready to turn cyberspace into a front for protecting sovereignty, but lacking the legal tools and diplomatic mindset necessary to transform that enthusiasm into practical effectiveness.

First, youth perception is closely tied to the process of identity construction. The East Sea is understood not only as a disputed maritime space but also as a symbolic extension of national identity. This emotional attachment helps explain why social media reactions often prioritize symbolic assertions of national pride, hashtags, slogans, boycotts, over arguments based on UNCLOS evidence or arbitral rulings.

Second, the rise of "Bottom-up Securitization" serves as a warning: if undirected, online nationalism can become a barrier to Vietnam's flexible foreign policy (known as "Bamboo Diplomacy"), and even cause unnecessary risks of escalation. The current youth perception of the East Sea is being built on a foundation of emotion and sacred symbols rather than on the basis of international law and governance thinking.

Third, the research detects a persistent gap between patriotic motivation and the actual competence of maritime leadership. Shaping future maritime leaders, therefore, is not about continuing to fan the flames of emotion, but about equipping them with knowledge and diplomatic mettle. It is time for the education and media systems to shift from calling to "Love the East Sea with a hot heart" to training to "Protect the East Sea with a cool head." Only when the youth understand that the power of a maritime nation lies not in outrage against the enemy, but in the capacity to master international "rules of the game" and sustainable ocean governance, will Vietnam truly possess a generation of leaders of sufficient stature to lead the country out to the great ocean.

Overall, findings show that the youth are both a challenge and an opportunity. They can amplify misinformation, polarize public discourse, and pressure states to escalate tensions, but they also have immense potential to become knowledgeable digital diplomats contributing to long-term regional stability.

Transforming this potential requires intentional investment from the state and society in education, dialogue, and institutionalized participation.

To transform this spontaneous "digital nationalism" energy into true maritime leadership capacity, the study proposes the following strategic recommendations:

For Education: A revolution in teaching content is needed, shifting from a history-emotion-oriented approach to universalizing "Ocean Literacy." The education system needs to equip core knowledge of UNCLOS, clearly distinguishing maritime zones (Territorial Sea, EEZ, etc.) and fostering sustainable ocean governance thinking.

For Media: A "de-securitization" strategy is needed by diversifying images of the East Sea. Instead of focusing only on conflict and weaponry, the media needs to introduce aspects of the green economy, scientific cooperation, and law to nurture rational thinking.

For Public Diplomacy: Leverage the technological skills of Gen Z by training a team of "Digital Ambassadors", individuals capable of civilized debate, fluent in international law and foreign languages, to participate in international forums, replacing the current emotional red-flag "spam" reactions.

In summary, shaping future maritime leaders is not about continuing to fan the flames of emotion, but equipping the youth with a "compass" of knowledge and a "rudder" of bravery. Only by shifting from "defensive thinking" to "governance thinking" will Vietnam possess a generation of leaders of sufficient stature to lead the country to the open sea in a peaceful and steady manner.

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Finally, any remaining errors in this paper are the sole responsibility of the author.

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