

# Making sense of world affairs through social media

**A** VIRAL video may seem trivial at times, but it opens a window into understanding about power, how influence spreads and how we make sense of certain things like diplomacy.

In the last few days, many TikTok videos allegedly showed the origins of Western-branded goods. Much of this content appears to be linked to the broader trade tensions between China and the United States.

As an educator, I often ask students how they engage with this kind of content. Many of them shared these clips in class or during informal discussions on campus, expressing surprise, amusement or scepticism.

Some said they had always suspected the true origins of luxury brands. Others questioned the authenticity of the videos and debated whether they were generated by artificial intelligence or part of a broader political message.

These reactions, though anecdotal,



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suggest a shift in how the younger generation is beginning to engage with global events.

What once seemed like a space for dancing and memes has become a platform for political messaging, economic storytelling and subtle expressions of soft power.

The comments sections are filled with analyses as well as humour and critical observations. These clips are part of a larger geopolitical conversation taking shape in real time.

Alongside this trend, another TikTok topic is the buzz surrounding China President Xi Jinping's visit to Malaysia.

A number of students began asking what state visits really mean. They are starting to realise that such events are not just ceremonial.

These visits signal a shift in alliances and influence, and point to Malaysia's evolving role in the region. They also bring China's relationship with Asean into focus.

The republic plays a prominent role in the region and has been Asean's dialogue partner since 1996. Dialogue partners consult with Asean on matters such as trade, development and regional security.

With Malaysia currently chairing Asean, the visit earlier this week affirms the country's strategic relevance. It also raises an important question: how well do Malaysians understand our role in Asean and what these diplomatic signals truly represent?

It is encouraging to see young people noticing the link between global politics and everyday media. But awareness alone is not enough. If Malaysia is to lead with

clarity and confidence, its citizens need stronger political and media literacy to make sense of what they see and hear.

Political literacy is more than recognising leaders or understanding election cycles. It is about knowing how systems work, what rights and responsibilities citizens hold and how informed decisions shape the collective future.

Meanwhile, media literacy involves the ability to evaluate and question the information we consume — especially on digital platforms like TikTok. It teaches us to recognise bias, examine narratives and detect misinformation.

In the classroom, students often struggle with abstract concepts like diplomacy, Asean, media framing and political bias. While understanding improves over time, many still find it difficult to connect these ideas to the world they experience daily.

We need to normalise discussions on regional politics and diplomacy beyond textbooks and

into more informal, digital spaces — particularly social media, where these narratives are constantly unfolding.

For today's digital natives, that means translating traditional diplomacy into content that resonates.

In the end, both TikTok videos and state visits are carefully crafted performances. While they follow different scripts, speak to different audiences and convey different intentions, both shape how narratives are constructed and understood.

If we want a stronger, people-centred Asean, we need citizens who observe these messages and are able to interpret their deeper meaning.

A viral video is never just a video. It is also a signal of how we comprehend power, and whether we are paying attention.

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