

# Algorithmic Taste: Localization, Regional Gastronomic Representation, and Soft Power of Thai Food Content on TikTok

Xin Fan<sup>1</sup>, Salas Supalakwatchana<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Bangkok University International, Bangkok University, Pathum Thani, Thailand

<sup>2</sup>School of Communication Arts, Bangkok University, Pathum Thani, Thailand

Correspondence: Salas Supalakwatchana, School of Communication Arts, Bangkok University, Pathum Thani, Thailand.

Received: May 27, 2026

Accepted: June 29, 2026

Online Published: July 6, 2026

doi:10.11114/smc.v14i4.8871

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v14i4.8871>

## Abstract

Food is playing an important role within modern cultural diplomacy amongst various countries and generally lacks any theoretical basis or support in the way that many algorithms allow food to be viewed and represented on different platforms. This study aims to investigate how Thai culinary culture is represented and localized, as well as how it is impacted by algorithms on TikTok. The method of this investigation is the use of mixed-method content analysis of 87 short-form TikTok videos taken from the official Tasteful Thailand account, which is a documentary produced for the Government Public Relations Department of Thailand. Qualitative content analysis identified six recurring textual themes: ingredient as cultural signifier, narrative voice strategies, pop culture anchoring, destination bundling, the luxury–local tension, and structural representational gaps. Quantitative analysis conducted in SPSS Statistics revealed an uneven regional distribution (Southern and Central regions dominate at 27.6% and 26.4%, while Northern Thailand is markedly underrepresented at 6.9%), a predominantly low-intervention adaptation strategy, and a non-significant relationship between cultural framing and engagement. The only significant predictor of engagement was narrative strategy: pure visual videos significantly outperformed those retaining the original documentary narration on both shares and comments. The convergence of qualitative and quantitative evidence reveals a structural tension between institutional soft power messaging and platform-native viral logic. The study contributes to digital gastrodiploacy scholarship by demonstrating that engagement metrics cannot be treated as proxies for cultural reception, and by identifying two distinct paths to algorithmic visibility on short-form video platforms.

**Keywords:** gastrodiploacy, TikTok, soft power, algorithmic visibility, Thai cuisine, content localization, short-form video, digital food media

## 1. Introduction

As Nye (2009) said, food is increasingly recognized as a tool of soft power, and cuisine also plays a form of cultural resource to attract and influence people. Based on this perspective, there are a number of countries that have utilized gastronomy as a tool of cultural diplomacy, which includes China (Wiratri, 2017; Zreik, 2023), South Korea (Cabral et al., 2024; Fan & Supalakwatchana, 2026; Herningtyas, 2019), Japan (Farina, 2018; Reynolds, 2012), and Thailand (Muangasame & Park, 2019; Tholhah & Wafa, 2024). These studies demonstrate that countries employ their national cuisines as a strategic tool to enhance their international image, get recognized for their culture, and create economic opportunities (Grandi, 2023).

Within this global context, Thailand has positioned itself as a leading culinary destination. The Government Public Relations Department (2025) reported that Thailand ranked first in The Best Countries for Food in the World: 2025 Readers' Choice Awards (Traveller, 2025), highlighting the country's reliance on gastronomy as a key component of its soft power strategy.

Thailand, as a global culinary hotspot, has continued to strengthen its position as an international culinary destination. In the latest ranking of international cuisine, Thailand ranked first using the 2025 Readers' Choice Awards for the best countries for food (The Government Public Relations Department, 2025; Traveller, 2025).

The advent of digital media has also caused a shift in how cultural commodities are shared. Short video sharing platforms can play an essential role in both creating and redefining the significance of symbols throughout our ever-more-disjointed

system of meanings (Saragih et al., 2026). The proliferation of social media platforms such as TikTok (Munro et al., 2024; Prastyo et al., 2025) and Instagram (Ranteallo & Andilolo, 2016) has greatly impacted the way food-related cultural materials are reflected. Food-related content relies particularly on visual representations and sensory experiences of the audience (Wang et al., 2024).

In response to these developments, the Tourism Authority of Thailand teamed up with big streaming and social media sites like WeTV and TikTok to create and share food-related content with international audiences, especially in China (The Government Public Relations Department, 2026). This strategy is also aligned with Thailand's national soft power objective of attracting six million visitors from the Chinese market (The Nation, 2026).

Despite the many studies conducted about gastronomic diplomacy and food as soft power, there are still rooms that remain unexplored. Existing studies have primarily focused on Japan, South Korea, and China, with comparatively limited attention to Thailand (Muangasame & Park, 2019; Tholhah & Wafa, 2024). Most of the research mainly paid more attention to food diplomacy in the context of tourism promotion and national branding. However, the role of short-video platforms such as TikTok in mediating cultural content is interesting to investigate (Munro et al., 2024; Guo et al., 2024). Digital platforms are often seen as fair and unbiased, but they're influenced by algorithms that control what people see and who people see (Duffy & Meisner, 2022; Hastuti et al., 2025; Philp et al., 2022).

Based on the rationale, this study would like to address three research objectives: 1) To analyze how Thai regional culinary culture is represented on TikTok; 2) To examine how regional gastronomic diversity is localized from documentary formats into short-video narratives; 3) To investigate the algorithmic visibility by identifying content features, cultural symbols, and regional representations that are associated with higher user engagement on TikTok.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Food as Soft Power and Gastronomy Diplomacy (Gastrodiplomacy)

Food is now often seen as an important tool of soft power, especially after Joseph Nye's influential work in 2009. Nye described soft power as the ability to influence others' preferences through attraction, rather than using force or money. Solleh (2015, 2018) emphasized that food serves as a national brand, embodying a nation's culture and identity. It can enhance public perception of a country, functioning as a form of cultural soft power.

The concept of gastrodiplomacy has gained prominence as a form of cultural diplomacy that uses cuisine to enhance national image and influence global perceptions (Grandi, 2023; Suntikul, 2019). South Korea has a cool strategy called gastrodiplomacy. They use their cultural industries to promote their food worldwide. Organizations like the Korean Food Promotion Institute help spread Korean food, and it's all part of the Korean Wave, which includes K-dramas, movies, and others (Nihayati et al., 2022; Rose et al., 2025). Through repeated exposure to Korean culture, Korean food becomes both familiar and appealing to people from all over the world (Kunt & Demirok, 2025). China has effectively utilized digital media to promote its culinary heritage globally through platform-driven strategies, including the engagement of social media influencers (Li & Srijinda, 2025; Yang, 2025; Zhao, 2022) and livestreaming (Han & Tepsan, 2025; Wang et al., 2023), which Enable interactive and immersive forms of engagement that allow users to participate actively and feel fully immersed in the experience.

Thailand is on a mission to spread its cuisine worldwide through initiatives named Global Thai, which are working hard to make Thai restaurants more popular and show off the unique flavors of Thai cuisine (Muangasame & Park, 2019; Tholhah & Wafa, 2024). While there are studies on gastrodiplomacy, they mostly focus on how countries use food to promote themselves and don't really look at how food is shown and told in short videos.

### 2.2 Digital Platforms and Algorithmic Visibility

Digital platforms are becoming increasingly reliant on these fancy algorithms to organize and share content. These algorithms are similar to the content curators, picking and choosing what people see based on what the audience liked and interacted with in the past. Platforms don't just show the information; they actively choose what people see and how people interact with it. Social media uses algorithms to help the audience make sense of all the stuff online; therefore, based on the algorithms, video platforms recommend the content that the audience prefers to watch (Dujeancourt & Garz, 2023). DeVito (2017) further demonstrated that prior user engagement, content timeliness, and overall popularity are crucial factors in algorithmic content selection.

The dominance of digital media platforms is shifting from being based on audience to being determined by platforms. According to Echauri (2026), this shift has more to do with the influence of an algorithm on how content is made available and not just based on the number of likes and shares given to the content by individuals (Bucher, 2012, 2017). Attention and reach are now being managed by machines instead of by humans. This idea corresponds with the research that has also shown that social media platforms function as agents of influence that are responsible for determining how content is produced and circulated on the internet (Bucher 2012, 2017). Additionally, Bucher has demonstrated that algorithms

help to direct the way in which content is collected and curated, as well as establish rules by which content may be included and/or excluded from curation. In other words, there are ways in which to engage with the platform, but some of those methods are not made available.

### 2.3 Short-Form Video, Food Media, and Localization

Short-form video platforms such as TikTok have become increasingly popular for producing food-oriented content. There are many quick video creators on the platform that showcase food items through quick cuts and aesthetically pleasing visuals. These concise food videos captivate audiences due to their ability to offer an effortless and efficient means of consuming food-related content (Munro et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024). Guo et al. (2024) found that food creators on short-form video platforms often strategically apply sensory cues and storytelling techniques to attract viewers and encourage them to engage with the creators' content beyond that platform. In the context of digital food media, digital platforms create what Goodman and Jaworska (2020) described as "digital foodscapes," which are environments in which food-related content is selected, presented, and appreciated according to platform-specific dynamics.

When adapting long-form content into a short-form platform, there are many concerns regarding localization and representation. Localization in media studies refers to the practice of taking existing media content (whether video, audio, or text) and modifying it (e.g., translating) so that it meets the needs of the target audiences regarding culture, language, and platform (Zhao, 2022). When adapting documentary content into short-form video, producers must make narrative voice, audio strategy, visual editing, and audience targeting decisions that can alter the primary message of the long-form original documentary significantly. According to Yang (2025), the narrative strategies used by social media in creating narratives that tell cultural stories not only pass on culture, but they also help shape it through creative processes of how people create their own meanings of culture as they adapt to it, rather than just doing what they are told to do.

Even though digital platforms are frequently overlooked as active agents in shaping cultural meaning, they are instead being treated as passive channels. Research showed that algorithms increase or decrease viewership based on their effects and popularity (Li & Mok, 2025). Nonetheless, additional research is needed to measure whether these same trends can occur with the representation of national dishes and cultural variety. This study aims to address this issue by assessing Tasteful Thailand's use of TikTok to provide insight into the algorithm's role in promoting culinary diplomacy.

## 3. Method

### 3.1 Research Design

This study utilized a mixed-method, content analysis to examine how Thai food culture is represented on TikTok and shaped by the algorithm on the short-form video platform. The study combines two approaches within a single case study. In terms of the qualitative part, it examined the cultural representation carried by text and images from the dataset that was collected by two coders. The quantitative part aims to statistically count how often certain patterns are represented and tests how those patterns relate to user engagement.

For the case is the official TikTok account of Tasteful Thailand in China, a documentary produced by the Government Public Relations Department of Thailand and WeTV. This account was chosen for three reasons. First, it is an official project that promotes Thai food as part of Thailand's soft power strategy. Moreover, the documentary covers a wide range of dishes and food traditions from different regions of the country. Last, the adaptation into short videos on TikTok could provide a clear setting for studying how long-form content transfers when it moves onto a short-video platform. In terms of why TikTok was selected, it is one of the leading platforms for food-related communication. Its recommendation algorithm increases the visibility and circulation of short-form food content, making it an appropriate platform for examining the representation of Thai culinary culture.

### 3.2 Data Collection

This study used all short-form videos that were published on the official *Tasteful Thailand* TikTok account between January 26 and April 30, 2026, and were included in the analysis. This timeframe included a total of five individual episodes of the original documentary produced and aired, encompassing an overall number of 87 total videos utilized for the final data set of this research. Each video had information extracted directly from the TikTok platform, including the total number of likes, comments, and shares recorded at the time that the data was collected. The individual video served as the unit of analysis in this study.

A coding sheet was created based on research and literature about cultural representation in short videos. Each video was analyzed using categories like regional culinary representation, cultural representation, adaptation strategies, audio elements, and engagement metrics. Regional representation focused on Thailand's four main culinary areas: Central, Northern, Northeastern, Southern, Non-regional, and fusion. Cultural representation was divided into royal cuisine, regional cuisine, street food culture, everyday food culture, and no explicit cultural representation. Adaptation strategies included changes to the original documentary for TikTok, such as editing style, narration, subtitles, and audiovisual presentation.

### 3.3 Validity and Reliability

An official TikTok account provided a controlled dataset to ensure the reliability of the analysis and minimize variation from non-related content. The metrics of engagement (likes, comments, and shares) were obtained directly from the platform, ensuring their accuracy. All videos that were available were coded by two coders; a second coder coded 30% of the data with the intention of ensuring that data reliability was improved. Inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa. The results indicated almost perfect agreement for overall score,  $\kappa = 0.91$ .

## 4. Finding

The analysis of 87 annotated videos identifies six distinct themes regarding the representation of Thai food and culture on the Tasteful Thailand TikTok account. Themes include: non-linear storytelling; an audience who has an interest in cooking; and an intention to present their culture through food.

### 4.1 Ingredient as Cultural Signifier

In all regional clusters, the overall strategy revolves around creating an episode focused on one main ingredient. Main ingredients go beyond being merely substances but also become associated with elements that create regional identity, historical memory, and cultural belonging. This is similar to gastrodiploacy by using food items as a way to project a country's image (Solleh, 2015, 2018). Table 1 presents 6 distinct ways in which main ingredients are used for conveying meaning, the normal locations in which they exist, and how people interact with them.

Table 1. Ingredient-as-cultural-signifier constructions

| Ingredient | Region        | Textual construction                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Engagement                |
|------------|---------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Palm sugar | Phetchaburi   | Preserving heritage through the stories of the elderly (V25). The caption of V16 cleverly alludes to the Thai film First Love to resonate with Chinese audiences.                                                         | Moderate (avg. 568 likes) |
| Lemongrass | Khon Kaen     | Lemongrass serves as the frames which symbolize Khon Kaen's distinctive identity. The chef's testimony enhances its authenticity, demonstrating that it is more than just a recipe but a living tradition.                | High (V14: 13,000)        |
| Coconut    | Koh Samui     | V56 portrays a close bond between a protagonist and a coconut, making it an integral part of Southern identity. V28 cleverly uses a coconut as a viral hook, paired with a trending beat.                                 | High (V28: 11,000)        |
| Holy basil | Kanchanaburia | Basil, a sacred herb in Northern religious practices, is linked to the V42 link. Pad krapao, popular street food, is also featured in the V73 link, representing a symbol of unity for people from different backgrounds. | High (V73: 2,364 shares)  |
| Fish sauce | Udon Thani    | V77 sees fish sauce as a symbol of fate and affinity for Northeastern people. V81 takes fish sauce and somtam to a level of near-sacred national status.                                                                  | Very high (V81: 13,000)   |
| Chili      | Phuket        | V32, 36, 39 build a cumulative argument that chili is the axis of Phuket's multi-ethnic cultural identity.                                                                                                                | Low (avg. 138 likes)      |

The findings revealed that when stories in videos are framed with emotional or personal elements, they tend to attract more attention compared to those that simply provide recipes or instructions. For instance, the fish sauce videos (V77 and V81) present fish sauce as a tool that stirs emotions rather than just a cooking ingredient, resulting in the highest number of views. In contrast, the chili ingredient videos, despite being culturally based, only describe the flavors and receive fewer views. It appears that when the focus shifts from instructing people on how to cook to explaining the cultural significance, the videos become more impactful. This aligns with Nye's (2009) concept that soft power is effective by resonating with people's emotions rather than only presenting facts.

### 4.2 Narrative Voice Strategies

There are four primary types of food-related storytelling methods. The most common method has the chef being the authoritative narrator of the story. Food culture is viewed as a form of transmission of knowledge through generations and not just acquired knowledge via a cookbook or class. Examples of this might be: V60 - the chef is wearing traditional Thai clothing as opposed to a standard chef's uniform. The next method has the storyteller as a member of the community who is elderly and valuable to the community. The stories told are tied to the food culture of the community and create a sense of collective memory about each dish served. An example of this is: V46 - a group of elders from Koh Samui discussing noodles with curry and calling it a "Thai memory." Two innovative storytelling methods diverge from the traditional ones. V19 employs AI to generate a Chinese voice-over, replacing the Thai narration, which alters the story's perception among Chinese audiences. V13 introduces a Chinese influencer to demonstrate how to prepare Thai food in her daily life, aligning the documentary's tone with the expectations of viewers on the platform (Duffy & Meisner, 2022).

### 4.3 Pop Culture Anchoring

Some videos cleverly incorporate references to Thai culture that Chinese speakers will enjoy. These references are hidden in the captions and act as audience targeting devices. For instance, video V16 uses the Thai movie First Love to make

Phetchaburi sound familiar. Video V64 includes a dessert recipe in the drama *Perfect Match*. Video V79 uses a LISA (BLACKPINK) social media image to change the look of a Northeastern landscape. Video V83 uses a Teresa Teng song to evoke feelings of nostalgia between China and Thailand before introducing Bangkok Chinatown food.

The most important case is V40. While it has 3,071 Likes, an interesting thing is that it's not focused on food; it's mainly talking about the lead actor from a Thai drama series named *I told sunset about you*. This indicates that if the cultural significance is substantial, the message about food will not resonate with the audience. There exists a considerable disparity between how much people like something and how they respond to it; thus, there is an understanding of the workings of digital Soft Power.

#### 4.4 Destination Bundling

Food is a strong way to attract visitors to a place, and many countries use it this way. Several videos in the dataset do the same thing. V7 shows Chiang Mai's Lantern Festival and temples. V36 highlights Phuket's chili-based food culture. V31 promotes the Rawai fishing village through its shrimp paste heritage. V27 focuses mostly on Koh Samui scenery, with food in the background. V72 uses the contrast between Kanchanaburi and Bangkok as the main hook. One video stands out from the rest. V51 is the only video where the creator clearly mentions "soft cultural power". This suggests that the producer may have planned the destination promotion as part of a soft power strategy. V1 is the most shared video in the dataset, with 1,432 shares. It combines all four regions with tourism attractions in a single short video. This wide mix may explain why people share it so often.

#### 4.5 The Luxury–Local Tension

The fifth pattern is how the videos move between two different images of Thai food. One is high-end, royal dishes, Michelin restaurants, and ceremonial cooking. The other is everyday food, street food, markets, and community meals. V66 shows this best. The video demonstrated it switches "between market and high-end, which shows the mix of luxury and local". Other videos follow the same pattern. V60 shows a chef in traditional dress preparing a royal dessert, while V63 shows Bangkok market sweets that are "very local but not cheap". V52 features a refined coconut crab that "breaks the street food empire image," while V73 shows pad krapao eaten by people from all walks of life. By moving between these two images, the account avoids reducing Thai food to a single stereotype. It also appeals to viewers with different incomes and tastes. This matches how modern gastrodiploacy often manages several culinary images at once rather than just one (Cabral et al., 2024; Grandi, 2023).

#### 4.6 Representational Gaps and Structural Silences

Table 2. Structural representational gaps in the dataset

| Structural feature                               | Evidence and significance                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Northern Thailand underrepresented               | Compared to South (24 videos), Central region (23 videos), there are only 6 videos for the North. The majority of these platforms highlight Chiang Mai landmarks and not food but still don't depict Lanna or hilltribe food. The number of representations will ultimately affect how much soft power is created.                                                                                                                                                 |
| Cultural stripping in viral formats              | There are 87 videos in total. 7 of the videos do not have any type of cultural reference included. V33, which is a short clip of scenery from Phuket with the addition of one the beat of the theme song from the popular series called, "I Told Sunset About You." This video has (47,000) forty-seven thousand likes, and it is the most popular video in the dataset. This is an example of how virally successful videos can exist within specific cultures.   |
| Sino-Thai heritage confined to Chinatown cluster | The V83 to V87 represented, Chinese Diaspora Cuisine, Fermented Tofu from the Teochew Community and the Historical Aspects of Food in Chinese Diaspora. The videos were created in such a way to connect to the audience living in China and will observe similarities in their culture to those of the other subjects presented on the program. It should also be noted that all these narratives as separate entities are not connected within a larger context. |

The underrepresentation of the North region raises a question that data alone can't answer: Does it show the original documentary's production priorities or how it was adapted for the platform? The finding that the North was stripped of its culture is the most interesting of the three: V33's 47,000 likes, the most engagement on the dataset came from zero cultural content. This shows that the platform's logic and gastrodiploacy logic can be harmful to each other instead of helping each other, which is in line with Bucher's (2012) argument that platform algorithms enforce rules that are different from what the institution wants to say.

The quantitative analysis of all 87 videos was conducted in IBM SPSS Statistics. Given the highly skewed distribution of engagement variables (all Shapiro-Wilk  $W < .40$ ,  $p < .001$ ; skewness values 4.67–6.55), non-parametric tests were employed throughout. Findings are reported in three subsections corresponding to the three research objectives.

#### 4.7 Representational Distribution

Frequency analysis revealed substantial asymmetry across the regional representation of Thai cuisine. Southern Thailand

and Central Thailand dominated the dataset (27.6% and 26.4% respectively), while Northern Thailand was markedly underrepresented at 6.9%, and Fusion regions accounted for only 4.6% (Table 3).

Table 3. Frequency Distribution of Region

| Category     | n  | %     |
|--------------|----|-------|
| Southern     | 24 | 27.6% |
| Central      | 23 | 26.4% |
| Non-regional | 21 | 24.1% |
| Northeastern | 9  | 10.3% |
| Northern     | 6  | 6.9%  |
| Fusion       | 4  | 4.6%  |
| Total        | 87 | 100%  |

Cultural framing was concentrated in the Regional/Local category (42.5%), followed by No Cultural Reference (19.5%), Street and Everyday cultures (13.8% each), Royal culture (6.9%), and Fusion (3.4%) (Table 4).

Table 4. Frequency Distribution of Cultural Framing

| Category              | n  | %     |
|-----------------------|----|-------|
| Regional/Local        | 37 | 42.5% |
| No Cultural Reference | 17 | 19.5% |
| Street                | 12 | 13.8% |
| Everyday              | 12 | 13.8% |
| Royal                 | 6  | 6.9%  |
| Fusion                | 3  | 3.4%  |
| Total                 | 87 | 100%  |

A chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine the association between Region and Cultural framing. The relationship was statistically significant with a moderate effect size,  $\chi^2(25) = 101.66$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cramér's  $V = .483$ . This indicates that specific cultural framings cluster with specific regions: Central Thailand was predominantly associated with Regional/Local ( $n=11$ ) and Street culture ( $n=7$ ), while non-regional videos clustered with No Cultural Reference ( $n=7$ ) and Everyday framings ( $n=5$ ). However, 91.7% of cells had expected counts below 5, indicating that the chi-square assumption is violated; this result should therefore be interpreted with caution and read alongside the qualitative findings.

#### 4.8 Adaptation and Localization Strategies

Three adaptation variables captured how documentary content is reformatted into short-form video. Narrative strategy (V9) was overwhelmingly conservative: 75.9% of videos retained the original documentary narration, only 14.9% deployed re-dubbed or TikTok-style narration, and 9.2% were pure visual without verbal narration.

Table 5. Frequency Distribution of Adaptation Strategies

| Variable     | Category           | n  | %     |
|--------------|--------------------|----|-------|
| V9 Narrative | Visual Only        | 8  | 9.2%  |
|              | Original Narration | 66 | 75.9% |
|              | Re-dubbed          | 13 | 14.9% |
| V10 Audio    | Original Audio     | 74 | 85.1% |
|              | Trending BGM       | 13 | 14.9% |
| V11 Visual   | Original Edit      | 62 | 71.3% |
|              | Fast Cut           | 2  | 2.3%  |
|              | On-screen Text     | 23 | 26.4% |

Audio strategy (V10) was even more cautious: 85.1% kept the audio from the original documentary, while only 14.9% replaced it with trending TikTok background music. Visual enhancement (V11) showed similar restraint: 71.3% of videos used original documentary footage, 26.4% added on-screen text overlays, and only 2.3% used speed-up or fast-cut effects. Overall, the documentary's institutional aesthetic was largely retained, rather than adapted to suit the platform's viral formats.

#### 4.9 Algorithmic Visibility and Engagement

Engagement data showed a huge right-skew across all metrics (Table 6). The average Total Engagement ( $M = 2,305.48$ ) was way higher than the median ( $Mdn = 305.00$ ). This is because a few viral outliers, like V33, had a huge impact. V33 alone got 56,851 total engagements, which is way more than the average of 305.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics for Engagement Metrics

| Variable         | M        | SD       | Mdn    | Min | Max    | Skew |
|------------------|----------|----------|--------|-----|--------|------|
| Time of Video    | 56.16    | 20.02    | 58.00  | 15  | 129    | —    |
| Likes            | 1,978.91 | 5,792.94 | 284.00 | 34  | 47,000 | 5.86 |
| Shares           | 301.07   | 1,124.67 | 20.00  | 3   | 9,389  | 6.55 |
| Comments         | 25.51    | 64.23    | 6.00   | 1   | 462    | 4.67 |
| Total Engagement | 2,305.48 | 6,914.42 | 305.00 | 38  | 56,851 | 6.07 |

Kruskal-Wallis H tests were conducted to examine whether engagement differed significantly across the categorical predictors (Table 7). Contrary to expectation, neither Region nor Cultural framing produced significant differences in any engagement metric. Total Engagement did not differ significantly across regions,  $H(5) = 6.02$ ,  $p = .305$ ,  $\epsilon^2 = .070$ , nor across cultural framings,  $H(5) = 0.80$ ,  $p = .977$ ,  $\epsilon^2 = .009$ .

Table 7. Kruskal-Wallis H tests for Engagement Across Categorical Predictors.

| Predictor         | Outcome          | H       | df | p    | $\epsilon^2$ |
|-------------------|------------------|---------|----|------|--------------|
| Region            | Total Engagement | 6.015   | 5  | .305 | .070         |
| Region            | Likes            | 5.687   | 5  | .338 | .066         |
| Culture           | Total Engagement | 0.797   | 5  | .977 | .009         |
| V9 Narrative      | Shares           | 6.916   | 2  | .032 | .080         |
| V9 Narrative      | Comments         | 10.615  | 2  | .005 | .123         |
| V9 Narrative      | Total Engagement | 2.599   | 2  | .273 | .030         |
| V11 Visual        | Total Engagement | 2.847   | 2  | .241 | .033         |
| V10 Audio (M-W U) | Total Engagement | U=365.5 | —  | .171 | r=.147       |

The only significant differences emerged for the narrative strategy variable (V9). Shares differed significantly across V9 categories,  $H(2) = 6.92$ ,  $p = .032$ ,  $\epsilon^2 = .080$ , as did Comments,  $H(2) = 10.62$ ,  $p = .005$ ,  $\epsilon^2 = .123$ . Post-hoc Dunn's tests with Bonferroni correction revealed that Pure Visual videos generated significantly more Shares ( $p_{\text{bonf}} = .034$ ) and more Comments ( $p_{\text{bonf}} = .006$ ) than videos retaining the Original Narration. No significant differences were detected between Re-dubbed/TikTok and the other two categories, possibly due to small subgroup sizes.

Spearman rank-order correlations among continuous variables are reported in Table 8. Video duration was not significantly correlated with any engagement metric (all  $|\rho| < .17$ ,  $p > .05$ ), indicating that longer videos do not systematically attract more engagement on this account. The three-engagement metrics were strongly intercorrelated (all  $\rho > .79$ ,  $p < .001$ ), suggesting that Likes, Shares, and Comments operate as a coherent engagement construct rather than as independent dimensions of audience response.

Table 8. Spearman rank-order correlations among continuous variables.

|                  | Duration | Likes   | Shares  | Comments | Total Eng. |
|------------------|----------|---------|---------|----------|------------|
| Duration         | —        | -.167   | -.151   | -.110    | -.168      |
| Likes            | -.167    | —       | .883*** | .802***  | .998***    |
| Shares           | -.151    | .883*** | —       | .791***  | .900***    |
| Comments         | -.110    | .802*** | .791*** | —        | .813***    |
| Total Engagement | -.168    | .998*** | .900*** | .813***  | —          |

Note. \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed).

Three findings emerge from the quantitative analysis. First, the representational distribution is highly uneven: Southern and Central regions dominate, Northern Thailand is markedly underrepresented, and Regional/Local cultural framing accounts for nearly half of all videos. Second, the adaptation strategy is overwhelmingly low intervention: the original documentary's narration, audio, and visual format are preserved in roughly three out of four videos. Third and most consequentially for the soft power argument, neither regional representation nor cultural framing produced significant differences in engagement. Engagement was instead associated with narrative strategy, specifically with the absence of verbal narration: Pure Visual videos significantly outperformed Original Narration videos on Shares and Comments. This finding aligns with the qualitative analysis presented in Section 4.1, which identified a structural tension between cultural depth and platform-native virality. The quantitative data confirm that, statistically, the categorical features intended to encode soft power messaging (Region, Culture) are not the features driving algorithmic visibility on this account.

## 5. Discussion

This study examines how Thai food culture is shown, changed, and affected by algorithms on TikTok, with a focus on the Tasteful Thailand documentary account. By using both qualitative and quantitative methods, the study identifies three main implications for digital gastrodiploacy.

The study first shows that gastrodiploacy on short-form video platforms uses a complex approach rather than a single message. The account of Tasteful Thailand has showcased Thailand's cultural heritage through both photographs of the country, chefs who have preserved their cooking traditions, elderly Thais who have served as "living memory banks of their communities' history, geographical sites that could be described as fantasy-like, and food as both a luxury and an affordable thing. This very complex strategy avoids imposing Western-style national stereotypes while allowing viewers to relate to Thailand's depth of culture and richness. This correlates with the findings from recent studies related to contemporary gastronomy diplomacy, whereby no longer simply highlighting one country's national cuisine, it focuses on managing multiple culturally diverse food images that target different audiences. This approach also aligns with Solleh (2018)'s assertion that employing food items as a means of representing or promoting their nation's image.

Next, the finding reveals a conflict between institutional communication objectives and the logic of individual platforms. Approximately three out of every four videos on the Tasteful Thailand account are shot using the institutional style of the documentary (using original narration and ambient sound while maintaining the content from the original documentary). However, analysis of the data has revealed that cultural soft power elements such as geography and cultural framing do not contribute to video engagement. Rather, the data indicate that videos without verbal narration have a higher rate of sharing and commenting than those with verbal narration. These observations provide both qualitative and quantitative evidence to suggest that platform algorithms can operate independently from, or against, the intention of the institution that produced the content. Consistent with findings from studies of South Korea's K-food branding strategy, videos that adopted native platform production styles generated higher levels of sharing and commenting than those that incorporated more explicit cultural elements (Cabral et al., 2024)

The case analysis also has a major methodological implication for digital soft power research in that it reveals a disjunction between cultural receptivity and engagement on social media platforms; specifically, using engagement metrics as proxies for receptivity to cultural content is an unreliable measure. For example, Video V40 had a total of 3,071 likes from Thai drama fans, and A limited number of food enthusiasts expressed positive feedback on the video. While the number of likes is an indicator of high engagement, it does not necessarily imply that the video communicated effective soft power. Video V33, in turn, was the most highly engaging video in the data set, but the video had no cultural reference. Both examples suggest that there is a partially independent relationship between algorithmic visibility and cultural receptivity that future research on gastrodiploacy should consider separately, rather than as an interchangeable indicator of success.

These three implications further demonstrate two pathways to virality on short-form video platforms, one based on cultural depth through regional ingredient connection to memory/emotion, and the other focused on visually driven content without an accompanying cultural context. Institutional actors utilizing TikTok as a means of soft power must now evaluate their choice of pathway not only as a tactical decision but also as an aspect of their overall diplomatic message.

## 6. Conclusion

This study demonstrated how Thai food culture is shown and shaped by TikTok's algorithms by examining 87 videos from the official Tasteful Thailand account. The qualitative component revealed six central themes surrounding the videos: (1) ingredients as cultural symbols; (2) narrative techniques; (3) references to popular culture; (4) connected destinations; (5) luxury vs local; and (6) the lack of structural representation in the content. The analysis also revealed a wide variation regarding the regional representation of members of the Thai diaspora; primarily low-intervention adaptation strategies were identified; and there was no clear connection between cultural framing and subsequent engagement with the videos.

The findings of this study also demonstrated that measures of digital gastrodiploacy cannot solely be determined by their user engagement/participation. The elements that convey soft power messaging, as opposed to increasing visibility within the social media platform, differ in this context. These results expand existing literature pertaining to the topic of gastrodiploacy that has predominantly examined the content and the intent of the content, through an analysis of how platforms convey cultural messages. In addition, this study provides a framework for determining whether a short-form video platform enhances, displaces, and/or modifies the official cultural messaging.

## 7. Limitations

There are still a few limitations. The study only looks at one official account, which might not represent user-generated Thai food content or other national accounts on TikTok. As the data were collected from a single institutional account, the findings mainly reflect its official communication strategy. Therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution and cannot be generalized to the broader TikTok environment or other forms of Thai food content. Regarding the size of the sample, the data only included 87 videos collected during that time; although all available videos from the official account were included, the relatively small number of videos may limit the ability to detect smaller effects and to examine less frequently represented categories, such as fusion cuisine or specific regional food traditions. Another limitation is that the engagement metrics used in this study are based on users' interactions on TikTok and do not provide qualitative insights into audience perceptions of the content. Therefore, more research is needed to understand how audiences interpret different forms of Thai food representation and how these representations influence perceptions of Thai culture and soft power.

## 8. Future Research

Although this research has examined the culinary culture represented and the algorithm in short-form videos, based on limitations and results of this study, there are three remaining potential areas for future research regarding short-form video platforms. Future research should seek to investigate structural tensions in cultural depth and platform virality through comparative research frameworks for international examples of gastrodiploacy, like K-food campaigns from



South Korea, or Japanese cuisine promotion. In addition, in-depth audience investigations using comment analysis, interviews, and reception studies with TikTok users would help to determine whether quantitative engagement indicators reflect qualitative audience reception of cultural content. Finally, longitudinal studies will be able to monitor adaptation strategies by institutional accounts to determine whether they improve at navigating the tension between the low-depth of cultural content and the virality of platform content, and whether or not a shift occurs in the balance between content made through low-intervention and platform-native strategies as producers improve their ability to navigate the algorithm.

### **Acknowledgments**

We would like to express our appreciation to Bangkok University International and the School of Communication Arts for their academic support.

### **Author contributions**

Xin Fan was responsible for Conceptualization, Literature review, Data collection, and Analysis for this manuscript. Salas Supalakwatchana was responsible for Literature Review, Data collection, Data visualization, and Analysis. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

### **Funding**

Not applicable

### **Competing interests**

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.

### **Informed consent**

Obtained.

### **Ethics approval**

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Redfame Publishing.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

### **Provenance and peer review**

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

### **Data availability statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

### **Data sharing statement**

No additional data are available.

### **Open access**

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

### **Copyrights**

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

### **References**

- Bucher, T. (2012). Want to be on the top? Algorithmic power and the threat of invisibility on Facebook. *New Media & Society*, 14(7), 1164–1180. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812440159>
- Bucher, T. (2017). The algorithmic imaginary: exploring the ordinary affects of Facebook algorithms. *Information Communication & Society*, 20(1), 30–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2016.1154086>
- Cabral, Ó., Lavrador, L., Orduna, P., & Moreira, R. (2024). From the kitchen to the embassy: A rapid review of gastronomic approaches in diplomacy. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 21(2), 259–271. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-024-00363-4>
- DeVito, M. A. (2017). From editors to algorithms. *Digital Journalism*, 5(6), 753–773. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2016.1178592>
- Duffy, B. E., & Meisner, C. (2022). Platform governance at the margins: Social media creators' experiences with algorithmic (in)visibility. *Media Culture & Society*, 45(2), 285–304. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221111923>

- Dujeancourt, E., & Garz, M. (2023). The effects of algorithmic content selection on user engagement with news on Twitter. *The Information Society*, 39(5), 263–281. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2023.2230471>
- Echauri, G. (2026). Algorithmic-driven exposure: Hyper-saturation and ever-expansion in the content creator ecosystem. *Celebrity Studies*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2026.2634045>
- Fan, X., & Supalakwatchana, S. (2026). KPop demon hunters: Cultural representation in contemporary Korean animation. *Asian Journal of Arts and Culture*, 26(1), e16. <https://doi.org/10.48048/ajac.2026.16>
- Farina, F. (2018). Japan's gastrodiploacy as soft power: Global washoku and national food security. *Journal of Contemporary Eastern Asia*, 17(1), 131–146. <https://doi.org/10.17477/jcea.2018.17.1.152>
- Goodman, M. K., & Jaworska, S. (2020). Mapping digital foodscapes: Digital food influencers and the grammars of good food. *Geoforum*, 117, 183–193. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2020.09.020>
- Grandi, L. K. (2023). Branding, diplomacy, and inclusion: The role of migrant cuisines in cities' local and international action. *Societies*, 13(7), 151. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc13070151>
- Guo, R., Yang, Z., & Gao, H. (2024). From screen to table: How Douyin food bloggers stimulate and convert viewer interests. *Behavioral Sciences*, 14(7), 602. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs14070602>
- Han, F., & Tepsan, W. (2025). Food live streaming e-commerce in China: Enhancing consumer purchase intentions through sensory marketing. *British Food Journal*, 128(1), 255–273. <https://doi.org/10.1108/bfj-02-2025-0140>
- Hastuti, H., Maulana, H. F., Lawelai, H., & Suherman, A. (2025). Algorithmic influence and media legitimacy: A systematic review of social media's impact on news production. *Frontiers in Communication*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2025.1667471>
- Herningtyas, R. (2019, October). Korean gastro diplomacy: Strategy to enhance country promotion toward moslem countries. In *3rd International Conference on Sustainable Innovation 2019–Humanity, Education and Social Sciences (IcoSIHESS 2019)* (pp. 247–252).
- Kunt, S., & DemiRok, R. (2025). The experience of Korean cuisine among Korean drama viewers in Türkiye: A cultural diplomacy perspective. *Journal of Gastronomy, Hospitality, and Travel*, 9(1), 316–331. <https://doi.org/10.33083/joghat.2025.497>
- Li, G., & Mok, K. (2025). More than two decades of gastrodiploacy: A review of the concept, current characteristics, and future trends. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2025.1659162>
- Li, X., & Srijinda, P. (2025). The impacts of Chongqing food through Chinese influencers via TikTok. *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 2161–2170. <https://doi.org/10.64753/jcasc.v10i4.3156>
- Muangasame, K., & Park, E. (2019). Food tourism, policy and sustainability: Behind the popularity of Thai food. In *Perspectives on Asian tourism* (pp. 123–142). [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-3624-9\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-3624-9_9)
- Munro, E., Wells, G., Paciente, R., Wickens, N., Ta, D., Mandzufas, J., Lombardi, K., & Woolard, A. (2024). Diet culture on TikTok: A descriptive content analysis. *Public Health Nutrition*, 27(1), e169. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1368980024001381>
- Nihayati, A., Pertiwi, E. A., & Haripa, T. I. (2022). The analysis of South Korean gastrodiploacy towards the increase of South Korean kimchi export. *Journal of World Trade Studies*, 6(2), 53–66. <https://doi.org/10.22146/JWTS.V6I2.3607>
- Nye, J. S. (2009). *Soft Power: The means to Success in world politics*. United Kingdom: PublicAffairs.
- Philp, M., Jacobson, J., & Pancer, E. (2022). Predicting social media engagement with computer vision: An examination of food marketing on Instagram. *Journal of Business Research*, 149, 736–747. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.05.078>
- Prastyo, B., Wisamitanan, D., Kaewkong, P., & Sasanapradit, W. (2025). The Impact of social media on food culture: A comparative analysis of flavor, tradition, and identity in Thai and Indonesian cuisines. *Journal of Buddhist Education and Research (JBER)*, 11(2), 301–310. <https://so06.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/jber/article/view/282547>
- Ranteallo, I. C., & Andilolo, I. R. (2016, September). Food representation and media: experiencing culinary tourism through foodgasm and foodporn. In *Balancing Development and Sustainability in Tourism Destinations: Proceedings of the Tourism Outlook Conference 2015* (pp. 117–127). Singapore: Springer Singapore.
- Reynolds, C. (2012). The soft power of food: A diplomacy of hamburgers and sushi?. *Food Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 1(2), 47–60.

- Rose, G. H. N., Rahmatulummah, A., & Mardanita, S. (2025). From kitchen to diplomacy: Korean cuisine as soft power. *Budi Luhur Journal of Strategic & Global Studies*, 3(2), 88–112. <https://doi.org/10.36080/jsgs.v3i2.58>
- Saragih, N., Ganiem, L. M., Hi, A. R., Erlita, N., Astuti, S. W., Umarella, F. H., & Purwitasari, I. (2026). Beyond consensus: Symbolic convergence and affective polarization in algorithmically mediated YouTube discourse on Trump's 2025 inauguration. *Studies in Media and Communication*, 14(2), 311–326. <https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v14i2.7998>
- Solleh, F. M. (2015). Gastrodiplomacy as a soft power tool to enhance nation brand. *Journal of Media and Information Warfare*, 7, 161–199. <https://jmiw.uitm.edu.my/images/Journal/v7c5.pdf>
- Solleh, F. M. (2018). Gastrodiplomacy: Psychological persuasion via national cuisine. In *Advances in intelligent systems and computing* (pp. 129–139). [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-8612-0\\_15](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-8612-0_15)
- Suntikul, W. (2019). Gastrodiplomacy in tourism. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 22(9), 1076–1094. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2017.1363723>
- The Government Public Relations Department. (2025, October 20). *Thailand crowned world's best country for food in 2025* [Press release]. The Government Public Relations Department. Retrieved April 21, 2026, from <https://thailand.prd.go.th/en/content/category/detail/id/2078/iid/433170>
- The Government Public Relations Department. (2026, January 16). *Thailand taps Tencent, WeTV, and Sichuan TV to reach New-Generation Chinese travelers* [Press release]. Retrieved April 21, 2026, from <https://thailand.prd.go.th/en/content/category/detail/id/2078/iid/466153>
- The Nation. (2026, March 13). TAT sets 2026 target of 6 million Chinese visitors as Thailand leads Lunar New Year travel. *Nationthailand*. <https://www.nationthailand.com/blogs/news/policy/40063752>
- Tholhah, T., & Wafa, S. N. (2024). Thailand's strategy to change the image of sex tourism through gastro diplomacy in 2017-2020. *Journal of Islamic World and Politics*, 8(2), 151–166. <https://doi.org/10.18196/jiwp.v8i2.41>
- Traveller, C. N. (2025, October 7). The best countries for food in the world: 2025 Readers' Choice Awards. *CN Traveller*. <https://www.cntraveller.com/gallery/best-countries-for-food>
- Wang, C. A., Sher, S. T., & Chung, C. (2024). From viral content to real-life cuisine and beyond: Examining teenagers' interactions with TikTok food videos and the influence on their food practices. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 8(CSCW2), 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3686928>
- Wang, G., Zhang, Z., Li, S., & Shin, C. (2023). Research on the influencing factors of sustainable supply chain development of Agri-Food products based on Cross-Border Live-Streaming E-Commerce in China. *Foods*, 12(17), 3323. <https://doi.org/10.3390/foods12173323>
- Wiratri, A. (2017). Cultural negotiation through food case study: Chinese soft diplomacy in Indonesia. *Kawalu: Journal of Local Culture*. 4 (1). 71- 88 <https://doi.org/10.32678/kawalu.v4i2.1865>.
- Yang, M. (2025). Social media as a tool for cultural storytelling: The influence of narrative strategies on Chinese cultural identity construction. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2025.2560005>
- Zhao, H. (2022). Research on short videos to enhance the influence of international communication of traditional Chinese culture. *International Communication of Chinese Culture*, 9(1–2), 45–56. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40636-022-00244-6>
- Zreik, M. (2023). Stirring up soft power. In *Advances in logistics, operations, and management science book series* (pp. 292–306). <https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-0250-7.ch015>