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Intercultural Empathy and Affective Alignment in English-Dominant TikTok Comment Threads about Thailand



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Abstract

This study examines how intercultural empathy and related affiliative practices are expressed in English-dominant TikTok comment threads responding to experiences in Thailand. Drawing on a corpus of 2,507 publicly accessible comments from 50 videos, it investigates (1) how users display empathy and affective alignment, (2) which linguistic, multimodal, and pragmatic resources they use, and (3) how these practices index Thai relational values and shape public representations of Thailand. Using a discourse-pragmatic framework, the study distinguishes among empathy, ambient affiliation, and positive evaluation, and identifies three recurrent empathic practices: affective resonance, supportive stance-taking, and personal narrative sharing. The analysis shows that commenters build alignment through brief English expressions, Thai pragmatic particles embedded in English, emoji, orthographic intensification, and moral framing linked to Thai relational values. Many Thai commenters draw on 'nam jai' (generous and other-oriented care), hospitality, and family-like belonging, while many international commenters interpret these cues as signs of warmth, safety, and kindness. By showing how commenters use these resources to build solidarity in public, the study extends ELF research beyond intelligibility to affective relational work. Taken together, the findings show how empathy and cultural values are jointly shaped in these TikTok threads and suggest how similar processes may operate in other digital contexts.

Keywords: English as a lingua franca, intercultural communication, empathy, TikTok discourse, Thai digital culture

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Introduction

In recent years, social media platforms have become central spaces where multilingual users share personal experiences and respond to culturally diverse audiences. TikTok is especially important because its short-form videos and visible comment sections invite quick, public reactions to travel stories, everyday encounters, and emotionally charged posts (Abidin, 2020; Cheng & Li, 2023). Comment sections are therefore not just secondary reactions to a video. They are public spaces where users interpret what has happened, show how they feel, and align with others through brief written responses and visual cues. On TikTok, emotional meaning often builds through many short comments that gather around a post.

For users who do not share a first language, English often functions in such spaces as a flexible communicative resource for expressing stance, care, and interpretation. From an English as a lingua franca (ELF) perspective, communicative success in these exchanges depends less on conformity to native-speaker norms than on intelligibility, accommodation, and the achievement of interpersonal goals, while recent work also emphasises interculturality and the role of language ideology in ELF communication (Cogo & Dewey, 2012; Mauranen, 2018; Oliveira, 2024; Sung, 2023). At the same time, intercultural pragmatics reminds us that meaning-making is shaped by culturally grounded expectations about politeness, emotional display, relational sensitivity, and appropriate support (Kádár & Haugh, 2013; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021). English-dominant TikTok comments are thus useful for analysis because users often combine brief English with locally meaningful pragmatic cues to manage relationships in public and asynchronous discourse. Digital interaction does not invent multimodality, but it changes where users find it. Rather than relying mainly on facial expression, prosody, and gesture, users lean more heavily on emoji, punctuation, formatting, and the audiovisual context of the clip (Kress, 2010; Page, 2012; Zappavigna & Logi, 2025).

This study focuses on comment threads responding to TikTok videos about experiences in Thailand. In the dataset examined here, videos about kindness, wellbeing, travel, family life, and cultural explanation repeatedly drew responses from both Thai and non-Thai users. These threads often moved beyond simple reactions to a clip and became broader discussions of what Thailand and Thai social life were taken to represent. International commenters frequently framed Thailand as kind, safe, emotionally restorative, or welcoming, while Thai commenters often replied with reassurance, blessings, hospitality, or cultural explanation. Some of these responses draw on Thai relational values such as ‘kreng jai’ (considerate restraint and sensitivity to imposition) and ‘nam jai’ (generous and other-oriented care), as well as particles such as ‘ka’, ‘krub/kráp’, and ‘na’, which can soften stance or signal politeness (Komin, 1991; Knutson, 2004). Rather than treating such comments as transparent reflections of national culture, this article examines how these meanings are publicly invoked, interpreted, and circulated in English-dominant discourse.

Supportive interaction in online intercultural discourse remains understudied. Research has more often focused on conflict, incivility, misinformation, or miscommunication than on supportive or affiliative interaction. Recent work in digital discourse also shows that short supportive comments can become recurring social practices, including what Georgakopoulou (2025) calls ritual appreciation, while TikTok-specific scholarship has shown that emoji help users align with one another and with the tone of a post (Zappavigna & Logi, 2025). Even so, we still know relatively little about how such resources contribute to other-oriented care in English-dominant intercultural comment threads.

Conceptual precision is therefore important. In this study, empathy refers to other-oriented discursive uptake of an identifiable emotional experience, for example through reassurance, encouragement, blessings, or experience-sharing. This understanding draws on interactional work that treats empathy

as a displayed response to another person's emotional situation rather than as a directly observable inner state (Kupetz, 2014). Ambient affiliation refers to looser displays of shared feeling, while positive evaluation refers to praise that may accompany empathy without itself responding to another person's vulnerability (Herring, 2013; Zappavigna, 2011). Keeping these categories separate helps prevent all positive commentary from being treated as the same interactional practice.

Bringing together ELF, intercultural pragmatics, and digital discourse, this study addresses a more specific gap: how users move beyond general affiliation to perform targeted intercultural empathy in public, English-dominant TikTok threads. It therefore asks:

1. How do users enact empathy in response to emotionally salient content?
2. Which multimodal and pragmatic resources do they use to signal affective alignment?
3. How do these practices construct Thai cultural values and public representations of Thailand?

Literature Review

ELF, Intercultural Pragmatics, and Relationality in Public Online Discourse

Research on English as a lingua franca (ELF) treats English not as a fixed system tied to native-speaker norms, but as a flexible communicative resource used by speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Seidlhofer, 2011). In ELF interaction, communicative success is typically oriented less to formal grammatical accuracy than to intelligibility, accommodation, and the achievement of interpersonal goals, while more recent work also foregrounds interculturality and process-oriented perspectives in ELF communication (Cogo & Dewey, 2012; Mauranen, 2018; Oliveira, 2024). Speakers therefore draw on pragmatic strategies such as reformulation, simplification, and repetition in order to sustain mutual understanding across difference. ELF is thus not simply a reduced code, but a socially situated repertoire shaped by multilingual experience and relational priorities.

Oliveira (2024) is especially useful here because it treats intercultural communication not as a meeting between fixed national cultures, but as an interactional process in which participants negotiate common ground, appropriate stance, and acceptable relational behaviour in the moment. This perspective is especially relevant in digital settings, where users orient not only to linguistic diversity but also to public visibility, platform norms, and the likelihood of audience uptake. It also helps explain why appropriate language use in online interaction is shaped by language ideology as well as by communicative efficiency, since users are responding not only to what can be understood, but also to what counts as appropriate, polite, or supportive in a public, platformed environment (Oliveira, 2024; Sung, 2023).

Intercultural pragmatics complements ELF by examining how interactants manage face, politeness, relational expectations, and culturally grounded interpretations in interaction (Kádár & Haugh, 2013; Locher & Graham, 2010; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021). In online settings, these meanings are often carried through hybrid forms rather than through one bounded code. Users may combine English with particles, moral explanations, and culturally salient terms. In the Thai context, particles such as 'ka/kaa', 'krub/krap', and 'na' may soften stance or signal politeness, while terms such as 'kreng jai' and 'nam jai' evoke recognisable relational orientations. In this article, such discourse is treated as culturally inflected or locally indexed rather than as culturally "saturated". Culturally inflected means that English remains the main shared medium, but particular particles, value terms, and evaluative formulas carry locally recognisable pragmatic meanings. Locally indexed means that these features point to socially recognisable stances, identities, and relational orientations within the interaction, without

implying that the discourse as a whole is determined by a single bounded culture. This distinction draws on indexical and interactional approaches to meaning, in which linguistic forms are understood as pointing to social positions and relational meanings rather than simply mirroring fixed cultural essences (Ochs, 1992; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Oliveira, 2024).

These dynamics are especially visible in TikTok comment sections. The platform compresses stance, evaluation, and relational work into short public turns. This makes TikTok a useful site for examining how users negotiate alignment across linguistic and cultural differences in highly compressed discourse.

Empathy as Discursive Practice in Interpersonal, Intercultural, and Digital Communication

Empathy is often discussed in terms of cognitive recognition, affective resonance, and compassionate orientation (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Zaki & Ochsner, 2012). In discourse, however, these do not appear as directly measurable internal states. They become visible through interactional acts such as acknowledgement, validation, reassurance, encouragement, blessings, and experience-sharing. A discourse-pragmatic approach therefore treats empathy as something participants display and ratify in interaction rather than as a purely private feeling.

In this study, the phrase the phenomenon of empathy within intercultural communication refers to empathic uptake under conditions of linguistic and cultural difference. This does not imply a separate psychological type of empathy. Rather, it refers to cases in which recognising, validating, and supporting feeling must be negotiated across potentially different norms of emotional display, directness, and care. This framing is consistent with interactional and sociopragmatic approaches to emotion, which treat emotional meaning as publicly inferable through situated responses rather than simply private or internal (Kupetz, 2014; Alba-Juez & Haugh, 2025; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021).

This phenomenon is more complex because norms of emotional display, support, and directness are not always shared or mutually transparent. For example, a brief reassurance such as “I hope you feel better” may be interpreted as caring and appropriately restrained in one interactional context, but as distant, insufficient, or overly formulaic in another, depending on relational expectations and available pragmatic cues. What counts as appropriately caring is therefore not fixed in advance but negotiated through the interaction itself. In ELF interaction, empathic work depends on flexible interpretation and pragmatic calibration rather than on pre-given shared norms (Alba-Juez & Haugh, 2025; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021).

Empathy must also be distinguished from broader forms of affiliation. Social media users often align with a post through praise or affective echoing without directly taking up an identifiable emotional experience. A comment such as “so sweet” or “Thailand is amazing” may contribute to a supportive atmosphere, but it is not necessarily empathic unless it responds to a recognisable experience of vulnerability, relief, joy, fear, or care (Herring, 2013; Zappavigna, 2011). This distinction matters in highly affective online settings, where positive commentary can otherwise be collapsed into a single category.

Digital communication also changes how empathy becomes visible. Multimodal cueing is not unique to online interaction, since face-to-face communication also relies on gesture, facial expression, and prosody. What changes online is the set of resources that carry this work. In comment spaces, much of it is done through emoji, punctuation, formatting, and the audiovisual context of the clip (Derks et al., 2008; Kress, 2010; Page, 2012). Herring (2013) accordingly notes that online empathic alignment is often collective rather than dyadic, emerging through accumulated responses around a shared emotional narrative.

Digital Discourse, Ambient Affiliation, and Affective Practices on TikTok

Digital discourse scholarship has long shown that online interaction is multimodal and platform-shaped (Kress, 2010). In text-based comments, users often build interpersonal meaning through brief wording, stylised spelling, punctuation, emoji, and short narrative fragments (Derks et al., 2008; Page, 2012). These resources matter because they allow stance and affect to be communicated even when comments are brief and asynchronous.

Ambient affiliation is especially useful for understanding such interactions. Zappavigna (2011) uses the term to describe how social media users bond through brief, stance-laden expressions rather than through extended turn-by-turn exchange. Georgakopoulou's (2025) notion of ritual appreciation helps explain why short supportive comments on TikTok still carry interactional force. Small responses such as blessings, affectionate formulas, or repeated appreciative comments may look minimal, but they can still perform meaningful social work.

TikTok sharpens these dynamics further. Its short-form format, algorithmic visibility, and dense comment architecture intensify the public circulation of feeling and evaluation (Abidin, 2020; Cheng & Li, 2023). Comment sections often function less as orderly dialogue than as accumulations of stance around a clip. Users do not simply respond to a video; they also help shape what the video comes to mean in public.

Recent TikTok-specific work further shows that emoji do more than intensify feeling: they also help users align with one another and with the tone of a post (Zappavigna & Logi, 2025). In this sense, emoji are not merely decorative add-ons. They help make brief comments interactionally legible. This point is important here because many comments in the corpus signal stance through short wording plus small visual cues.

TikTok comments also participate in what Papacharissi (2015) calls affective publics: loose collectivities formed through the circulation of shared feeling. Much scholarship on online discourse has understandably focused on antagonism, incivility, or misinformation. Supportive and appreciative discourse also deserves attention, especially in intercultural settings where brief public responses can model reassurance, hospitality, and care.

Thai-Indexed Relational Values and the Public Interpretation of Thailand

Because this study focuses on videos about experiences in Thailand, it is important to clarify how Thai cultural values are treated analytically. The aim is not to essentialise Thai culture or to assume that any single comment transparently represents a collective norm. Instead, the analysis attends to how commenters themselves invoke culturally recognisable values and how those invocations are taken up by others. Scholarship on Thai values has long discussed orientations such as 'kreng jai', smooth interpersonal relations, and other-directed care as salient in Thai communicative life (Komin, 1991; Knutson, 2004).

These Thai relational concepts are treated here as interactionally available resources rather than as timeless cultural essences (Kádár & Haugh, 2013; Oliveira, 2024; Spencer-Oatey, 2008). In English-dominant TikTok comments, Thai users may draw on particles, blessings, hospitality formulas, or culturally named values to frame acts of kindness as normal and desirable. International commenters, in turn, may interpret these resources as signs of warmth, safety, humility, or collective care. What emerges is not a simple transmission of culture, but a public process in which local pragmatic meanings become legible within wider comment publics.

This is also where empathy and cultural positioning intersect. Culturally indexed comments are not automatically empathic, but they may provide the moral framing through which empathy becomes intelligible. A blessing, a caution, or a brief explanation of why help is offered can validate feeling, explain practice, and position Thailand as a morally meaningful place (Kádár & Haugh, 2013; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021). The present study therefore treats Thai-indexed values not as background variables but as discursive resources that can accompany empathy, ambient affiliation, hospitality, or positive evaluation.

Research Gap and Orientation of the Present Study

Taken together, these strands support an intercultural account of English-dominant TikTok comments in which shared English and locally inflected pragmatic resources work together in public meaning-making. They also show that supportive interaction in online spaces cannot be reduced to one process alone. Empathy, ambient affiliation, moral interpretation, and public affect overlap, but they are not identical.

Existing work has more often emphasised ambient affiliation, general social media affect, or broad interpersonal alignment than the narrower question of other-oriented empathic uptake. It has also more often treated TikTok as a platform of visibility and engagement than as a site where culturally inflected relational practices become publicly interpretable. The present study addresses this gap by examining how empathy is enacted in English-dominant TikTok comments about Thailand, how it differs from ambient affiliation and positive evaluation, and how these practices contribute to public meanings of Thailand.

Research Methodology

Research Design

Rooted in a social constructivist epistemology, this study adopted a qualitative, discourse-pragmatic design to examine how empathy and related affiliative practices are enacted in English-dominant TikTok comments responding to experiences in Thailand. Rather than treating comment threads as linear conversations, the study approaches them as public clusters of short responses in which users display stance, affect, and interpretation around a shared post. A discourse-pragmatic approach was appropriate because it allowed close analysis of how commenters use language, emoji, punctuation, and culturally meaningful resources to make emotional meaning publicly interpretable in an asynchronous environment (Alba-Juez & Haugh, 2025; Herring, 2013; Zappavigna & Logi, 2025).

Within this framework, English was treated not as a fixed native-speaker standard but as a flexible communicative resource through which users pursue intelligibility, affective clarity, and interpersonal goals (Cogo & Dewey, 2012; Mauranten, 2018; Seidlhofer, 2011). The study also recognises that English-dominant discourse on TikTok is often shaped by local pragmatic meanings, especially through culture-specific terms, pragmatic particles, emoji, and moral framing. This design was therefore suited to examining how empathy becomes publicly visible in short, multimodal, and culturally textured comment practices.

Data Collection and Corpus Construction

The dataset comprised comments extracted from 50 publicly accessible TikTok videos featuring experiences in Thailand. The sampled videos included recurring themes such as kindness, wellbeing and

recovery, travel, cultural explanation, family- and child-related scenes, everyday encounters, and occasional moments of misunderstanding or controversy. These clips were selected purposively because they repeatedly generated visible audience engagement around emotion, evaluation, support, and intercultural interpretation.

Comments were extracted between October 2025 and January 2026 using ExportComments, an online data-export tool for public social media posts. During this period, the study captured TikTok's high-visibility comment layer (Version 32.0 or equivalent), in which public comments were ranked by engagement at the time of export. The tool allowed retrieval of up to 150 comments per post. When a video had more than 150 comments, only the first 150 most visible comments were retrieved. Each export included the comment text, username, date and time stamp, number of likes, commenter ID, and source-view information.

Across 50 clips, the maximum number of retrievable comment slots was 7,500. The working dataset used for filtering contained 4,072 comments. The difference mainly reflects videos with fewer than 150 comments and comments that had been deleted by users or the platform before extraction. Disagreement, criticism, or contestation were not excluded because of stance. Comments were retained or excluded on formal corpus criteria, not on whether they were positive.

Data cleaning proceeded in stages. First, exact duplicates and clearly non-interactional material were removed. This included advertisements, spam, bot-like or template posts, link-heavy entries, empty comments, emoji-only reactions, and non-lexical strings. Bot-like or template posts were identified by repeated promotional language, identical phrasing across clips, or material whose main purpose was advertising rather than interaction.

Second, the remaining comments were filtered for language status. To enter the analytic corpus, a comment had to meet three conditions: English carried the main propositional content; the comment remained interpretable without translating a full Thai clause or sentence; and any Thai material was limited to brief pragmatic particles, culture-specific lexical items, or short formulaic insertions embedded in otherwise English-dominant discourse. Comments written entirely in Thai, comments whose main message depended on Thai or transliterated-Thai phrasing, emoji-only responses, and ambiguous mixed-language cases were excluded. When classification remained uncertain, the comment was excluded rather than retained.

The commenter-identification procedure was deliberately conservative. Comments were classified as Thai, international, or unspecified using exported metadata and identity cues in the comment text. Comments were coded as Thai when they showed strong Thai-identity indicators, such as Thai script in the username or comment, Thai pragmatic particles embedded in English, Thai lexical items such as 'nam jai' or 'kreng jai', or explicit self-identification. Comments were coded as international when they contained non-Thai self-identification cues and lacked the Thai indicators above. Where no reliable identity cue was available, comments were coded as unspecified rather than merged into the international category.

Within the 4,072-comment working dataset, only comments meeting the study's English-dominant inclusion criteria were retained for analysis. The final English-dominant analytic corpus comprised 2,507 comments across 50 clips. Of these, 536 were coded as Thai, 162 as international, and 1,809 as unspecified. In line with this conservative approach, comments coded as unspecified were used for broad patterning and frequency counts but excluded from interpretive cross-group comparison. Table 1 reports the filtering pathway and final corpus composition.

Table 1 *Filtering Pathway and Final Corpus Composition*

Metric	Count	Notes
Working dataset used for corpus filtering	4,072	Compiled comment dataset used for the English-dominant corpus analysis
Spam, advertisements, bot-like/template posts removed	8	Promotional or non-interactional content
Empty, non-lexical, or emoji-only entries removed	841	No analyzable verbal content
Thai-only or other non-English comments removed	671	Outside the English-dominant corpus
Thai-dominant or transliterated-Thai-dominant comments removed	45	Main propositional content not in English
Ambiguous mixed-language cases removed	0	Excluded conservatively when classification was uncertain
Final English-dominant analytic corpus	2,507	Core corpus used for Results and Discussion
Thai-coded comments within final corpus	536	Identity inferred conservatively from available cues
International-coded comments within final corpus	162	Identity inferred conservatively from available cues
Unspecified-coded comments within final corpus	1,809	Not merged into the international category and excluded from interpretive cross-group analysis

Analytical Framework

The analysis brought together discourse pragmatics, intercultural pragmatics, and digital affect studies. Because TikTok comment threads are not organised through orderly turn-taking, the analysis focused on recurrent discursive patterns rather than conversational sequence. Empathy was treated not as an internal state directly accessible to the analyst, but as a publicly inferable discourse practice that becomes visible through patterned uptake, multimodal cueing, and relational positioning in interaction (Kádár & Haugh, 2013; Alba-Juez & Haugh, 2025).

For the purposes of this study, empathy refers to other-oriented discursive moves that explicitly take up, validate, or support an identifiable target's emotional experience, for example through reassurance, encouragement, sympathy, blessings, or experience-sharing (Kupetz, 2014; Alba-Juez & Haugh, 2025). Ambient affiliation refers to brief stance displays that convey shared feeling or appreciation without clearly taking up another person's vulnerability (Zappavigna, 2011; Zappavigna & Logi, 2025). Positive evaluation refers to praise of Thailand, Thai people, or the clip itself that may co-occur with empathy but does not, on its own, constitute empathic action (Herring, 2013; Zappavigna, 2011).

The analysis reports three core empathic practices: affective resonance, supportive stance-taking, and personal narrative sharing. Cultural positioning was treated not as a co-equal empathic practice, but as a cross-cutting interpretive dimension that often accompanied all three by providing moral framing, relational explanation, or culturally grounded interpretation.

Coding Procedures

The analysis followed a staged hybrid coding strategy that combined inductive discovery with theory-informed refinement.

In the first stage, the corpus was read iteratively using open inductive coding. This stage was guided by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and focused on naturally occurring patterns related to empathy, affective alignment, cultural evaluation, and identity positioning. Comments were coded line by line for observable moves such as reassurance, encouragement, blessings, hospitality, experience-sharing, praise, moral explanation, Thai pragmatic particles, emoji, punctuation, and stylised orthography.

In the second stage, focused coding drew on sensitising concepts from ELF pragmatics, interpersonal and intercultural pragmatics, and digital discourse studies, especially stance-taking, relational work, affective intensification, softening, narrative alignment, and cultural explanation (Herring, 2013; Kádár & Haugh, 2013; Locher & Graham, 2010; Page, 2012; Spencer-Oatey, 2008). At this stage, the analysis asked not only what a comment said but what it was doing interactionally. For example, direct reassurance addressed to a vulnerable creator was retained as empathic, whereas destination praise without emotional uptake was coded separately as ambient affiliation or positive evaluation.

Emoji, punctuation, and formatting were treated as pragmatic resources rather than decorative features because digital discourse research has shown that they contribute to stance display, affective meaning, and interpersonal alignment (Derks et al., 2008; Kress, 2010; Page, 2012; Zappavigna & Logi, 2025). These features were examined alongside affective wording, supportive formulas, blessings, personal anecdotes, Thai particles embedded in English, value terms, and normative claims.

In the third stage, thematic consolidation grouped the focused codes into broader analytic patterns. This produced the three overarching empathy practices reported in the Results: affective resonance, supportive stance-taking, and personal narrative sharing. Cultural positioning was retained as a cross-cutting interpretive dimension because it frequently co-occurred with all three practices by supplying culturally grounded moral, relational, or explanatory framing. Table 2 summarises the final analytic structure.

Trustworthiness Procedures

Coding was conducted solely by the author. For this study, a single-coder approach is methodologically appropriate because the analysis prioritises deep, iterative interpretation and contextual sensitivity over simple statistical agreement (Saldaña, 2016). Trustworthiness was further supported through an audit trail documenting code definitions, analytic memos, and repeated comparison across clips to check whether categories travelled consistently across different thematic contexts.

Negative-case analysis was also used to maintain a clear boundary between empathy and positive evaluation. For example, a comment such as “Thailand is so warm and welcoming” was coded as positive evaluation rather than empathy because it did not take up an identifiable emotional experience. This procedure helped prevent the category of empathy from expanding to cover all positive commentary.

Limitations and Platform Effects

Several limitations related to platform affordances, corpus construction, and interpretive scope should be acknowledged. ExportComments restricted retrieval to a maximum of 150 visible comments per video, so the sample represents a curated high-visibility layer rather than a population-level account of all comments. In addition, the study focuses on an English-dominant analytic corpus and therefore does not represent the full multilingual range of responses. Thai-only and other non-English comments were excluded by design because the study addresses one specific public layer of intercultural discourse.

Table 2 *Final Analytic Structure, Operational Definitions, and Typical Realisations*

Analytic status	Category	Operational definition	Common linguistic, multimodal realisations	Typical function in thread
Core empathic practice	Affective resonance	Displays emotional alignment with an identifiable stance or feeling in the clip or thread.	Sympathy tokens (“so sad,” “made me cry”), affective lexis (“love,” “hope”), emoji, repeated punctuation.	Signals shared feeling and acknowledges the emotional stance; often initiates empathic uptake.
Core empathic practice	Supportive stance-taking	Provides other-oriented reassurance, encouragement, blessings, or hospitality to an identifiable target.	Direct support (“stay strong”), blessings, hospitality invitations, Thai particles (‘ka’, ‘krub’, ‘na’), supportive emoji.	Validates feelings and performs care, solidarity, or welcome; positions commenters as peers or hosts.
Core empathic practice	Personal narrative sharing	Shares a comparable personal experience to validate or extend another person’s emotional experience.	First-person anecdotes, comparative narratives, time/place references, narrative fragments.	Builds solidarity and experiential credibility by demonstrating “I have felt or experienced something similar.”
Cross-cutting interpretive dimension	Cultural positioning	Frames events through Thai cultural values, identity labels, or moral explanations that contextualise affect.	Value terms (‘nam jai’, ‘kreng jai’), moral explanations, national identity labels, emoji, particles.	Provides culturally grounded interpretation and explains why certain forms of care are presented as meaningful.
Related but non-empathic layer	Ambient affiliation/positive evaluation	Expresses shared feeling, admiration, or praise without clear uptake of another person’s emotional state.	“So sweet,” “Thailand is amazing,” “dream country,” emoji-only admiration, evaluative fragments.	Sustains a supportive or appreciative atmosphere but does not itself constitute direct empathic uptake.

High-visibility sampling may privilege emotionally salient, supportive, or highly engaging comments and may under-represent lower-visibility disagreement, ridicule, antagonism, or hate speech. The findings should therefore be read as a focused account of supportive practices rather than a claim that TikTok is free of negative digital tendencies. The identity categories used here should also be treated cautiously. Thai, international, and unspecified are analytic heuristics based on publicly available cues and cannot fully capture the fluidity of diasporic identities, expatriate positions, or digital nomad trajectories.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed ethical guidelines for internet-based research (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). All data were taken from publicly accessible TikTok posts without interacting with content creators or commenters. To protect user privacy, usernames, profile images, commenter IDs, and other identifying details were removed.

Particular care was taken in handling quotations because TikTok is a highly searchable platform. To minimise the risk of re-identification through reverse searching, comments are reported only with broad labels such as “Thai commenter, Clip X,” without time stamps or direct links.

Findings

Overview of the Dataset

The English-dominant corpus comprised 2,507 comments across 50 TikTok clips depicting diverse experiences in Thailand. Table 1 reports the filtering pathway and final corpus composition, including the separate Thai, international, and unspecified identity labels described in the methodology above. Because the study retains only English-only and English-dominant comments, the results below are based exclusively on this final English-dominant analytic corpus rather than on the larger multilingual export.

For transparency, Appendix 1 provides a complete overview of all 50 clips in the corpus. Each clip is listed once using a brief non-identifying descriptor, a primary thematic orientation, and its main analytic relevance. Some clips were relevant to more than one interactional environment, so those overlaps are taken up in the analysis below rather than treated as mutually exclusive categories. The threads that yielded the clearest evidence for this study were those in which a clip foregrounded vulnerability, care, reassurance, or culturally legible acts of help. This corpus overview provides the context for the three research questions below.

It is important to note that each clip is listed once by primary theme. Brief non-identifying descriptors are used to reduce re-identification risk, consistent with the study's ethical approach. Some clips were analytically relevant to more than one interactional environment and are therefore discussed across multiple Results sections.

How Users Enact Empathy

Across the corpus, three recurrent empathic practices were visible: affective resonance, supportive stance-taking, and personal narrative sharing. These practices often overlapped, but the coding framework does not treat all positive commentary as empathy proper.

Affective Resonance

Affective resonance refers to brief comments that register emotional uptake of a creator's experience or stance. These comments were often short, but they still showed that the commenter had heard, recognised, or emotionally joined the feeling made visible in the clip. This pattern was especially clear in vulnerability-oriented clips, where commenters relied on compact supportive wording rather than extended explanation.

Excerpt 1: "Love and Hugs, from a stranger. 🙏❤️" (International commenter, Clip 3)

Ambient Affiliation and Positive Evaluation

Not all supportive feeling in the corpus took the form of empathy proper. Some comments instead expressed admiration for Thailand, return desire, or a broadly positive orientation toward the clip without taking up an identifiable emotional experience. In Clips 37 and 48, for example, commenters helped sustain a warm atmosphere, but their comments were better understood as ambient affiliation or positive evaluation than as direct empathy.

Excerpt 2: "This, this is why Thailand is my dream country, their culture their people and less toxicity." (International commenter, Clip 37)

Excerpt 3: “My fav country so far. The people, the food, the beauty. I can’t wait to go back ❤️” (International commenter, Clip 48)

Supportive Stance-Taking

Supportive stance-taking involved direct reassurance, welcome, blessings, or hospitality directed toward an identifiable target. This was especially visible when Thai commenters responded to foreign creators or families in a host-like voice. In these moments, commenters did more than approve of the post; they publicly addressed the creator with care, encouragement, or well-wishing.

Excerpt 4: “I am so glad you and your family had a good time here. You and your family are welcome back anytime. Have a safe flight back home.” (Thai commenter, Clip 36)

Excerpt 5: “good on you for speaking up & putting yourself out there.” (International commenter, Clip 3)

Personal Narrative Sharing

Personal narrative sharing occurred when commenters brought in their own experiences to validate, extend, or reframe the affective meaning of a clip. These comments did not merely praise Thailand. Instead, they used autobiographical comparison to show that the creator’s experience resonated with something personally lived.

Excerpt 6: “I had a seizure on the train in Beijing, nobody helped me.” (International commenter, Clip 41)

Excerpt 7: “Living in Thailand for almost 2 years now. When people ask me how was i cured of depression i say: Thailand!” (International commenter, Clip 4)

Which Multimodal and Pragmatic Resources Signal Affective Alignment?

Affective alignment in the corpus was usually built with small, efficient resources rather than long explanations. Commenters often relied on short English phrases, Thai particles embedded in English, and visible cueing through emoji or spelling-based emphasis. Together, these resources made support legible in fast-moving public threads.

Compact English and Affective Lexis

Many empathic comments used short, grammatically compressed English in which interpersonal force mattered more than formal accuracy. What mattered here was not correctness in a narrow sense, but the ability to express care quickly and intelligibly in a public comment space. In this way, simple English often functioned as an efficient medium for solidarity rather than as deficient language.

Excerpt 8: “hope you better” (Thai commenter, Clip 4)

Excerpt 9: “My country might not be the best, but it will make you happiest.” (Thai commenter, Clip 4)

Thai Pragmatic Particles Blended into ELF

In approximately one-fifth of the Thai-coded responses, commenters inserted particles such as ‘ka/kaa’ and ‘krub/krap’ into English sentences, carrying Thai politeness and relational softening into English-dominant discourse. These particles helped project friendliness, gratitude, or informality while leaving English as the main semantic frame. The result is an ELF register that is locally inflected rather than pragmatically neutral.

Excerpt 10: “Ahh thanks ka! This’d help me a lottt 🥹” (Thai commenter, Clip 6)

Emoji, Orthography, and Visible Warmth

Emoji, punctuation, elongation, and stylised orthography added a visible affective layer to short comments. In many cases, these features made a comment feel warmer, closer, or more emotionally emphatic at a glance. They did not function as decoration alone. They helped readers recognise stance and relational tone quickly in a crowded comment environment.

Excerpt 11: “In ThailandYour child is mean our child. ❤️❤️” (Thai commenter, Clip 28)

Excerpt 12: “Thailand always so kind ❤️” (International commenter, Clip 8)

How Empathy and Affiliation Construct Thai Cultural Values and Public Representations

The corpus suggests that empathic and affiliative practices were repeatedly interpreted through three overlapping orientations: hospitality and affective reciprocity, family-like collectivist care, and broader narratives of safety or restoration. The key point is not that comments transparently reveal a stable national character. Instead, users publicly draw on Thai-indexed values to explain why particular acts of help or warmth matter. The interpretations below draw on scholarship on Thai relational values such as ‘kreng jai’ and ‘nam jai’ (Komin, 1991; Knutson, 2004), while treating these not as fixed cultural essences but as interactionally invoked explanatory resources in discourse (Kádár & Haugh, 2013; Oliveira, 2024).

Hospitality and Affective Reciprocity

Hospitality was frequently constructed through welcome formulas, safe-travel wishes, return invitations, and reciprocal statements of care. In these moments, Thai commenters positioned themselves as hosts or well-wishers, while international commenters often read such moves as evidence of broader national warmth. Clip 36, for instance, centred on a foreign family’s positive travel experience in Thailand and elicited explicitly host-like responses from Thai commenters, as seen earlier in Excerpt 4. This is where values associated with ‘nam jai’ become publicly recognisable, not as direct cultural essences, but as discursive frames for interpreting generosity and care (Komin, 1991; Knutson, 2004; Kádár & Haugh, 2013; Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

Collectivist Care and the Family-Like Framing of Belonging

Child- and family-oriented clips often prompted comments that framed care as collective rather than strictly individual. English-led formulations such as “your child ... our child” compressed collectivist care into publicly shareable phrases, while longer comments from international users extended these framings into narratives of belonging. Together, such comments helped circulate Thailand as a family-like

social environment, drawing on publicly recognisable Thai value orientations around communal warmth, relational sensitivity, and care for others (Komin, 1991; Knutson, 2004), while still remaining interactionally negotiated in discourse rather than treated as fixed cultural facts (Oliveira, 2024).

Moral Realism, Safety, and Restorative Narratives

A third strand linked empathy and affiliation to broader narratives of safety, healing, and moral evaluation. In Clip 43, which centred on reactions to negative media coverage of Thailand, some comments explicitly defended the country against critical representation, while others described it as emotionally restorative or unusually safe. Consequently, claims about Thailand being “safe” or “healing” are treated analytically as discursive representations and normative framings mobilised by users, rather than as objective social facts.

Excerpt 13: “BBC try to dig negative side, but ppl don’t agree. Good try!!” (International commenter, Clip 43)

Excerpt 14: “I have lived there and I have found it to be the safest place I have ever been to.” (International commenter, Clip 43)

Excerpt 15: “Thailand dose something magical to your soul 🥰” (International commenter, Clip 43)

The Co-Construction of “Thailand” as a Cultural Narrative

Across the corpus, Thailand emerged not simply as a location but as a public narrative assembled through repeated acts of support, welcome, admiration, and explanation. International commenters frequently described Thailand as kind, safe, healing, or transformative, while Thai commenters often ratified such evaluations through hospitality formulas, reassurance, and relational softening, thereby mobilising Thai-indexed moral frames within English-dominant discourse (Kádár & Haugh, 2013; Komin, 1991; Knutson, 2004; Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

For example, Thai responses such as “You and your family are welcome back anytime” show how international praise was often not resisted but ratified. In doing so, Thai commenters helped sustain the affective framing of Thailand as morally warm, emotionally supportive, and socially attentive.

Discussion

The findings show that empathy is a recurring and analytically important dimension of English-dominant TikTok interaction about Thailand. At the same time, the corpus also contains ambient affiliation, destination-oriented praise, and broader positive evaluation. Keeping these layers separate matters because it prevents all supportive feeling from being treated as the same phenomenon. It also extends existing work on digital affiliation by showing that brief supportive comments do more than circulate shared feeling: in some cases, they take up an identifiable emotional experience and therefore function as empathic action. In this respect, the study builds on Zappavigna’s (2011) account of ambient affiliation, Georgakopoulou’s (2025) discussion of ritual appreciation, and Herring’s (2013) observation that online alignment often emerges collectively rather than in strictly dyadic exchange.

This has implications for ELF research. Earlier work has rightly emphasised intelligibility, accommodation, and the achievement of interpersonal goals across linguistic difference. The present findings suggest that, in short and public environments such as TikTok, interactional success also depends on affective alignment. Brief English comments in the corpus were not simply reduced forms. They often

functioned as efficient resources for reassurance, warmth, and public care. Read alongside Oliveira's (2024) process-oriented account of intercultural communication, the findings suggest that empathic meaning in digital ELF is negotiated through short, visibility-shaped interaction rather than secured in advance through stable shared norms.

The analysis also contributes to intercultural pragmatics by showing that English-dominant interaction in this corpus was not culturally neutral. Thai commenters regularly textured English with particles, hospitality formulas, family-like framings, and value-oriented explanations. These resources helped make care recognisable without displacing English as the shared medium. The point is therefore not that Thai norms were somehow embedded wholesale in English. Rather, Thai-indexed pragmatic cues became publicly legible within English-led interaction and helped shape how care, welcome, and moral warmth were interpreted. This finding also extends recent work in the sociopragmatics of emotion by showing how emotional meaning is organised not only through explicit emotion words, but also through public uptake, emoji, pragmatic particles, and repeated supportive responses in platformed interaction (Alba-Juez & Haugh, 2025; Zappavigna & Logi, 2025). In this corpus, empathy becomes visible through the ways commenters collectively ratify vulnerability and make care recognisable to a wider audience.

The findings also speak more broadly to research on digitally mediated empathy. Work on affective publics and public alignment has shown how feelings circulate through short, visible, and multimodal forms on social media (Herring, 2013; Papacharissi, 2015). The present study adds that empathy can be publicly organised through these same resources. On TikTok, emoji, particles, short English phrases, and shared moral framings did not simply decorate the interaction; they helped commenters validate vulnerability, offer support, and scale particular meanings of Thailand as kind, safe, and emotionally restorative. In this sense, the study suggests that digital empathy in intercultural settings is not only an individual response to emotion, but also a publicly ratified interactional achievement.

While grounded in Thai-indexed data, the mechanisms identified here also provide broader insight into digital intercultural discourse. The convergence of a shared lingua franca, local pragmatic softening, and multimodal cueing is not unique to Thailand, even if this corpus offers a particularly clear case of it. At the same time, these patterns must be situated within a wider digital ecology that also includes disagreement, incivility, hate speech, and symbolic power asymmetries. The present study does not claim that TikTok is generally supportive, nor that public discourse about Thailand is uniformly warm or affirming. Rather, it analyses one highly visible English-dominant layer in which supportive interaction became especially salient. Future research could compare English-dominant and Thai-only threads, trace comment trajectories over time, or examine how supportive and antagonistic discourse circulate side by side across platforms and topics.

Conclusion

This study has shown that empathy in English-dominant TikTok comment threads about Thailand operates not only as a supportive orientation but as a pragmatic resource shaped by platformed interaction, local pragmatic cues, and public affect. While grounded in Thai-indexed data, the findings suggest that similar mechanisms may be examined in other multilingual digital settings. These findings should nevertheless be read in light of the study's limitations. The analysis focuses on a high-visibility English-dominant layer of TikTok comments and therefore does not represent the full multilingual range of responses, lower-visibility exchanges, or comments not retrieved by the export process. The identity categories used in the study are also conservative analytic inferences based on publicly available cues rather than complete representations of users' backgrounds. Future research could compare English-dominant and Thai-only threads, trace comment trajectories over time, or examine how supportive and antagonistic discourse circulate side by side across platforms and topics.

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Generative AI tools were used in a limited way during the preparation of this manuscript to assist with language editing, clarity, and organisation of the text. All ideas, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and conclusions are the sole responsibility of the author. The author critically reviewed and revised all AI-assisted outputs to ensure accuracy, originality, and academic integrity.

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Appendix

Complete Overview of the 50 TikTok Clips in the English-Dominant Corpus

Clip	Brief non-identifying clip descriptor	Primary theme	Main interactional relevance	Direct analytic use
1	discussion of mental-health stigma and emotional suppression in Thai society	mental health/stigma	comments debate weakness, silence, and the need for mental-health discussion/resources	contextual corpus coverage
2	creator begins or documents a mental-health treatment/retreat programme in Thailand	recovery/treatment	information-seeking about therapy type, staff, cost, and programme details	contextual corpus coverage
3	male creator shares going to a mental-health retreat in Chiang Mai	recovery/vulnerability	strong empathic uptake, encouragement, and programme questions	excerpted in Results (RQ1)
4	creator frames Thailand and nature as emotionally restorative/healing	wellbeing/restorative travel	well-wishing, return invitations, healing narratives, and country-as-remedy framings	excerpted in Results (RQ1–RQ3)
5	follow-up healing reflection by creator seeking recovery in Thailand	healing reflection	encouragement and self-help alignment around a personal healing journey	contextual corpus coverage
6	post sharing English-speaking mental-health resources or coaching in Thailand	resource sharing	resource exchange, gratitude, price questions, and Thai particles in English	excerpted in Results (RQ2)
7	vulnerable male creator discusses healing, loneliness, and moving to Thailand	vulnerability/recovery	reassurance, solidarity, and migration-for-healing responses	contextual corpus coverage
8	creator crying while talking about healing and emotional pain in Thailand	emotional disclosure	dense affective resonance, encouragement, and some destination-oriented admiration	excerpted in Results (RQ1–RQ2)
9	family/mother creator mentions entering rehab or private healing space in Thailand	recovery/family	questions about rehab, family life, and the legitimacy of treatment or retreat	contextual corpus coverage
10	follow-up rehab/holistic recovery post asking for centre information	recovery/treatment	praise, info-seeking, and clarification about addiction/programme type	contextual corpus coverage
11	creator talks about anxiety and the importance of talking while travelling in Thailand	vulnerability/talk	encouragement, normalising emotional openness, and supportive audience alignment	contextual corpus coverage
12	explainer post on what tourists should and should not do in Thailand	cultural explanation	norm clarification about dress, shoes, feet, heads, and respectful conduct	focal cultural-explanation clip
13	creator recounts strangers helping and Thai hospitality toward travellers	everyday help	moral explanation of helping behaviour, empathy, and traveller welcome	focal kindness/value clip
14	explainer post on <i>kreng jai</i> and related Thai relational values	cultural values	users elaborate how consideration, restraint, and empathy are understood in Thai social life	focal cultural-values clip

(continue)

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Clip	Brief non-identifying clip descriptor	Primary theme	Main interactional relevance	Direct analytic use
15	creator jokes that Thailand is dangerously addictive and makes people want to return	return desire	destination-oriented admiration, attachment, and debate over Thailand's appeal	contextual corpus coverage
16	creator describes being informally 'adopted' by Thai parents/older locals	family-like belonging	extended-family framing, fictive kinship, and warmth toward foreigners	focal belonging clip
17	Thai stranger gives water or fruit to a traveller in heat	everyday help	generosity is interpreted as ordinary hospitality and nam jai-like care	focal kindness clip
18	creator contrasts Thai hanging-out culture/ <i>sabai sabai</i> with American hustle	everyday sociability	ambient affiliation around relaxed friendship, boredom, food, and non-productive time	focal sociability clip
19	low-intensity travel admiration thread about kind Thai people	travel admiration	brief evaluative uptake and first-time-travel questions rather than strong empathy	light contextual clip
20	comparison post about Thailand versus Vietnam (pace, traffic, honking, lifestyle)	cross-country comparison	debate over national styles, pace of life, and tourist perception	focal comparison/commentary clip
21	Thai stranger helps mother and baby in sudden rain	family warmth/kindness	kindness to a child triggers praise of Thai warmth and maternal concern	focal family-kindness clip
22	creator back in home country compares everything to Thailand and misses it	homesickness/return desire	Thai commenters invite the creator back and frame Thailand as a second home	focal return-desire clip
23	creator praises Thai people for helping in public when problems arise	public helping	comments morally explain helping as karma, care, and everyday Thai social responsibility	focal values/public-help clip
24	random local gives fruit to the creator in a rural setting	sharing food/rural generosity	spontaneous giving is framed as normal countryside hospitality	focal kindness clip
25	locals warmly engage with a foreign child and smile despite language barriers	child/family warmth	public affection toward children and welcoming responses toward families	contextual family clip
26	discussion of safety, accidents, and being helped in Thailand	safety/help discourse	mixed comments about trust, tourism, risk, and kindness toward visitors	focal safety/help clip
27	foreign family with children experiences public support in Thailand	child/village support	comments frame Thailand as an entire 'village' helping with children	focal family-support clip
28	Thai commenters frame a foreign child as 'our child'	collectivist care	strong collective-childcare framing and shared responsibility for babies	excerpted in Results (RQ2–RQ3)
29	locals dote on a baby so the mother can eat or rest	collective caregiving	children are framed as blessings and public caregiving is normalised	focal family-care clip

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Clip	Brief non-identifying clip descriptor	Primary theme	Main interactional relevance	Direct analytic use
30	appearance-focused post attracting compliments to the creator	light admiration	mainly non-empathic praise of beauty, make-up, and attractiveness	non-empathic contextual clip
31	explainer post on Thai spirit houses and red-drink offerings	cultural explanation	users explain religious/ritual meanings to foreign audiences	focal cultural-explanation clip
32	post about accessibility help in public transport/public space in Thailand	public assistance/accessibility	comments discuss helping disabled travellers and routine assistance	focal helping-practice clip
33	creator recounts roadside help when a motorbike breaks down	everyday help	practical assistance is normalised as typical Thai roadside kindness	focal kindness clip
34	light-hearted cultural performance or singing post linked to Thai welcome	light performance/hospitality	playful responses mix humour, hospitality, and warnings about social conduct	contextual light clip
35	sweet roadside service or fuel-related help from a stranger	everyday help	wholesome practical assistance becomes evidence of routine Thai helpfulness	focal kindness clip
36	foreign family's positive travel experience in Thailand	family travel/hospitality	host-like welcome, blessings, and safe-travel wishes toward a family	excerpted in Results (RQ1–RQ3)
37	communal aid scene prompting admiration for Thai kindness and water-sharing	public commentary/admiration	ambient affiliation and positive evaluation around a dramatic kindness scene	excerpted in Results (RQ1)
38	second family-travel thread with welcome-back invitations and praise of kindness	family travel/hospitality	family-centred hospitality and return invitations	contextual hospitality clip
39	teacher/childcare scene prompting comments on sweetness and work/visa questions	light family/teaching	cuteness, childcare admiration, and practical questions	light contextual clip
40	restaurant or service-setting staff entertain/hold a baby while parents eat	service-setting care	care for parents and children is framed as humane, warm, and ordinary	focal family-care clip
41	public medical emergency (seizure) where Thai people intervene and help	emergency assistance	personal narrative comparison and praise of Thai public intervention	excerpted in Results (RQ1)
42	thread about Thai affection toward foreign babies	child/family warmth	comments explain why babies attract attention and affection	focal family-warmth clip
43	response to negative media coverage of Thailand (e.g., BBC) and national-image defence	controversy/national image	defensive commentary, safety claims, and restorative national narrative	excerpted in Results (RQ3)
44	reflective thread on Thai happiness, balance, and living in Thailand	social reflection	users discuss happiness, balance, babies, pollution, and why Thailand still appeals	contextual commentary clip

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Clip	Brief non-identifying clip descriptor	Primary theme	Main interactional relevance	Direct analytic use
45	health-tourism or dental-care post in Thailand	health tourism/ practical care	congratulations, affordability talk, and welcoming responses	contextual practical clip
46	creator says visitors may not yet have seen the full kindness of Thai people	qualified praise/ realism	praise is balanced with reminders that both good and bad people exist	contextual commentary clip
47	food-and-hospitality scene where locals feed or welcome travellers	food hospitality	welcome formulas, reciprocal warmth, and food-first hospitality logic	focal hospitality clip
48	traveller says Thailand is their favourite country and longs to return	return desire/ admiration	brief positive evaluation and longing-to-return responses	excerpted in Results (RQ1)
49	foreign creator praises Thai people's warmth, kindness, and hospitality	public praise of Thai kindness	Thai commenters reciprocate with thanks, agreement, and national-image ratification in response to foreign praise	contextual national-image clip
50	travel/homecoming thread about trust, daily life, and returning with backpacks	travel comparison/ return	questions, welcome, and comparisons with safer or friendlier everyday life	contextual travel clip