



The Cross-Cultural User Reception Mechanism of Thai Commercials in the Chinese Social Media Context: A Grounded Theory Study of Douyin Comments

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Abstract

This study examines the mechanism through which Thai commercials are received on Chinese short-video platforms, with particular attention to how “foreignness” is transformed into comprehension, empathy, and diffusion through comment interaction. Using user comments on Thai-advertising-related videos on Douyin as qualitative data, the study adopts a constructivist grounded theory approach (open, axial, and selective coding) to develop a process model structured by the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) logic. Findings show that users first form three-dimensional content perceptions—narrative structure, audiovisual presentation, and cultural features (Stimulus)—then engage in dual-pathway processing through emotional experience and meaning understanding (Organism), and finally externalize reception via a cost-tiered ladder of behaviors from liking and brief appraisal to saving, recommending, and sharing (Response). Cultural translation (Chinese subtitles and creator narration) functions as both a threshold-reducing and frame-providing condition, strengthening conversion from internal processing to outward diffusion. Two relatively stable pathways are further synthesized: an emotion-driven path associated with fast engagement and short-cycle diffusion, and a meaning-driven path supporting saving and sustained circulation. The study contributes an evidence-chain-based mechanism explanation for cross-cultural advertising in platform settings and highlights “enterability” as a practical lens for understanding cross-cultural communication on short-video platforms.

Keywords: Thai advertising; Cross-cultural communication; Short-video platforms; Grounded theory; S–O–R

1. Introduction

In platform-driven cross-cultural communication, advertising circulation is increasingly embedded in short-video infrastructures characterized by algorithmic recommendation and user interaction. On platforms such as Douyin, advertising has shifted from a one-way persuasive text to a socially distributed event that can be watched, commented on, re-narrated, and further diffused. User comments become a key site where meanings and emotions are articulated and negotiated, shaping how content is received and circulated (Cheng & Wang, 2024; Cao et al., 2024). Under such conditions, cross-cultural reception should not be assumed to follow a simple linear logic of “cultural difference → lower acceptance”; rather, it is likely contingent on platform-mediated interpretive processes.

Thai commercials have gained high visibility and intense discussion in Chinese social

media, providing an empirically valuable case for understanding how non-Western cultural content travels and becomes accepted in a digital platform context. Prior research has examined the “Thai advertising phenomenon” by identifying its emotional narratives and cultural communication logic (Li & Shang, 2023; Liu & Zhou, 2024). Related work also highlights that transnational circulation involves re-invention and re-organization within local media practices, rather than mere one-way exportation (Yan et al., 2024). Yet a central question remains underexplored: how viewers transform cultural distance into comprehension, empathy, and ultimately acceptance and diffusion, especially when such processes unfold through interactive comment spaces.

Classic perspectives offer a starting point. The notion of cultural discount suggests that cultural differences increase comprehension costs and reduce resonance, thereby weakening cross-cultural performance of media content (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988). In contrast, cultural proximity argues that audiences gravitate toward content aligned with their values, narrative conventions, and lived experiences, lowering interpretive barriers and enhancing affective identification (Straubhaar, 2021). While these lenses explain general constraints and enablers, they do not fully account for a platform condition in which “not understanding / unfamiliarity” can be transformed into “understanding / emotional engagement” through user interaction and secondary interpretation. Importantly, platform dissemination often involves translation and re-narration—subtitles, creator narration, and commentary videos—which may reduce language barriers and organize interpretive frames, thereby reshaping meaning-making and emotional experience (Ye, 2024; Hu et al., 2025).

To model such processes, this study adopts the S–O–R (Stimulus–Organism–Response) logic as an integrative macro framework: content features act as stimuli (S), users’ affective and cognitive processing constitutes the organismic mechanism (O), and acceptance and diffusion behaviors emerge as responses (R) (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). S–O–R has been widely applied in short-video and content marketing contexts to explain how platform stimuli translate into user attitudes and behavioral outcomes (Cao et al., 2024; Hu & Chen, 2022). However, explaining cross-cultural acceptance of Thai commercials in Chinese social media still requires inductive extraction of categories and relationships from naturally occurring user discourse rather than imposing a fully pre-specified variable system.

Accordingly, using Thai-commercial comment texts on Douyin as the core empirical material, this study employs grounded theory to build a process model from user-generated expressions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Comments capture what users attend to (e.g., narrative, audiovisual cues, cultural elements) and how they generate empathy, negotiate misreadings, and construct value judgments, making them particularly suitable for identifying mechanisms of cross-cultural reception (Ren et al., 2024; Ye, 2024; Yan et al., 2024). Accordingly, using Douyin comments on Thai commercials as the core empirical material, this study employs grounded theory to explain how users move from initial content perception to emotional and interpretive processing, and finally to acceptance and diffusion behaviors in a cross-cultural platform context. Special attention is paid to the role of cultural translation, especially subtitles and creator narration, in reducing comprehension barriers and facilitating this conversion process.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cross-cultural reception: from cultural discount to cultural proximity

Cross-cultural communication scholarship has long examined how cultural distance constrains the circulation and reception of media content. The notion of cultural discount explains why media products may lose appeal in foreign markets due to differences in language systems, value orientations, and symbolic repertoires (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988). Conversely,

cultural proximity posits that audiences prefer content aligned with their lived experiences and familiar narrative conventions, which lowers interpretive costs and facilitates affective identification (Straubhaar, 2021). In digital short-video environments, these theories require contextual reinterpretation because algorithmic distribution amplifies exposure to foreign content while comment-based interactions externalize reception as observable interpretive practices.

2.2 UGC acceptance and interactive diffusion on social media

In social media contexts, UGC dynamics and interaction affordances shape how advertising messages are recontextualized through comments, bullet screens, reposting, and derivative creations. Information diffusion and social interaction conditions can influence perceived effectiveness beyond the original ad text (Li et al., 2023; Zeng & Mo, 2022; Ren et al., 2024). As a result, reception should be conceptualized as a socially embedded process in which users co-produce interpretive cues and affective climates through participatory expressions (Tang & Tian, 2024; Ren, 2023). This perspective supports comment-centric qualitative inquiry for uncovering micro-level meaning-making in cross-cultural viewing episodes.

2.3 Thai advertising scholarship

Prior studies on Thai commercials typically emphasize narrative creativity, emotional expression, and “phenomenal” diffusion patterns, such as culture-communication logics embedded in thematic storytelling (Li & Shang, 2023), cross-cultural strategies and implications for brand storytelling (Wang & Shen, 2022), or localized executions of Thai brands’ digital advertising in China (Feng, 2024). Text-analytic approaches further highlight the distinctive use of twists and emotional build-up (Liu & Zhou, 2024). However, an explanatory gap remains: much of the literature is strategy- or text-centered, with limited mechanism-based accounts of how users actually interpret, feel, and accept Thai commercials within platform-mediated interaction spaces.

2.4 Perceived content features

Video marketing research suggests that content features can systematically affect attention, engagement, and participation (Munaro et al., 2021). In short-video ads, users often rely on narrative cues—such as suspense, plot twists, and expectation violations—as salient evaluation heuristics (Tian, 2025; Gao & Liu, 2025). Audiovisual qualities (visual texture, music, and style) also function as peripheral cues that shape perceived quality and affective involvement (Lu, 2024; Petty & Cacioppo, 2012). Under cross-cultural conditions, cultural signals are dual: unfamiliar symbols may heighten interpretive costs (cultural discount), while recognizable elements can create proximity effects that support comprehension and identification (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988; Straubhaar, 2021).

2.5 Emotion and meaning

Emotion is central to reception because visual media can evoke multi-dimensional affective responses that influence attention allocation and attitude formation (Wang et al., 2023). From the persuasion perspective, the ELM distinguishes central versus peripheral processing routes, implying that affective and perceptual cues may dominate when users’ elaboration is limited (Petty & Cacioppo, 2012). Meanwhile, meaning comprehension is not merely “understanding the plot”; it involves value alignment and identity positioning. Social identity theory explains how individuals evaluate messages through group-based frames (Tajfel, 2010), and symbolic interaction perspectives show how digital brand communication can trigger recognition and identity construction (Yao & Yao, 2024). Treating emotion and meaning as connected psychological mechanisms enables a more precise explanation of how “being moved” translates into value-oriented acceptance.

2.6 Cultural translation as a process moderator

Cross-cultural reception is also conditioned by language barriers and translation strategies (Ye, 2024). Subtitling can reduce comprehension thresholds, yet wording choices and stylistic adaptation may reshape meanings (Wang, 2024). Creator narration operates as an interpretive guide in platform-mediated reposting and commentary chains, steering both affective involvement and meaning construction (Hu et al., 2025; Gao & Liu, 2025). Hence, positioning cultural translation (subtitles and narration) as a process moderator helps explain why highly “foreign” content may still achieve strong acceptance through facilitated interpretation.

2.7 Integrating S–O–R for cross-cultural ad reception on platforms

To structurally connect content features, internal psychological states, and acceptance outcomes, the S–O–R framework provides an operational mapping: external stimuli (S) influence organismic states (O), which in turn drive responses (R) (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Platform research has applied S–O–R to explain how content or brand-related stimuli affect user loyalty and related behavioral outcomes (Cao et al., 2024). In cross-cultural advertising, perceived content features can be modeled as stimuli, emotion and meaning as organismic mechanisms, and acceptance-related intentions as responses—while cultural translation intervenes across stages as a process moderator.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a grounded theory design and treats user-generated comments on social media as naturally occurring empirical materials. The goal is to inductively extract concepts, categories, and relational structures from audience discourse and to construct a process model that explains cross-cultural reception mechanisms. The analysis follows a data-driven logic of constant comparison and progressive abstraction, implemented through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Throughout the analytic process, memo writing is used to document conceptual development, boundary decisions, and relational reasoning, thereby ensuring an auditable analytic chain.

The primary data source is short-video content and comment threads related to Thai commercials on Douyin. Candidate videos were collected via a data acquisition program and then screened based on topical relevance and textual availability, resulting in 764 valid videos. For each video, highly engaged and representative comments were extracted. All comment texts were then cleaned and standardized (e.g., removing duplicates, meaningless symbols, emoji-only strings, and non-semantic fragments; normalizing punctuation and spacing). The final corpus contains 15,578 valid comments (approximately 220,000 Chinese words), spanning the period from 2018 to 2025, which provides temporal coverage and thematic variation for theory building. This corpus was considered suitable for grounded theory analysis because it contained repeated discussions of narrative evaluation, emotional reaction, cultural interpretation, and sharing intentions, allowing recurrent patterns and category relationships to emerge through constant comparison.

The coding proceeded in three stages. First, open coding was conducted through line-by-line reading and annotation to identify recurring expressions and meaning units; initial concepts were generated, merged, and named, while constant comparison across videos and comment threads was used to refine conceptual boundaries. Second, axial coding aggregated concepts into major categories and specified conditional and processual links among categories, clarifying how content cues connect to psychological processing and subsequent behavioral responses. Third, selective coding identified a core category that integrates the overall phenomenon of cross-cultural reception, systematically related the major categories to this core, and consolidated them into a coherent process model rather than a variable-testing framework.

To assess theoretical saturation and strengthen explanatory robustness, the study introduced cross-platform supplementary materials after the core categories and relational structure had stabilized. Specifically, 500 relevant comments were additionally collected from Xiaohongshu and 500 from Bilibili, and the same coding rules were applied for verification. Saturation was determined when the added materials did not yield new core categories or materially alter existing category relationships and the overall mechanism trajectory. This strategy mitigates platform-specific discourse constraints and improves the portability of the mechanism explanation across comparable platform contexts.

Quality assurance is implemented in four ways: (1) explicit inclusion/exclusion rules and documented preprocessing steps to enable traceability; (2) systematic memoing to record definitions, merging rationales, and relational inferences, forming an audit trail; (3) cross-platform comparison and saturation checks to confirm category stability; and (4) structured reporting in the form of “category definitions–relational statements–mechanism integration” to avoid anecdotal, fragmented interpretations. Ethically, the study analyzes only publicly visible comments; any potentially identifying information is anonymized or removed in reporting, and only minimally necessary text excerpts are used to reduce potential privacy risks and contextual disruption.

4. Results

4.1 Core phenomenon and overall structure

The corpus shows that cross-cultural reception is not linearly determined by “cultural difference.” Instead, reception is produced through a staged chain: users first perceive salient content cues, then develop emotional experience and meaning understanding through viewing and interaction, and finally externalize reception through engagement and diffusion behaviors (liking, saving, sharing, recommending). This chain recurs across threads, indicating structural stability with varying node intensity.

4.2 Stimulus: a three-dimensional structure of content perception

To ensure consistent interpretation of the mechanism claims, seven core categories are identified and mapped onto a Stimulus–Organism–Response structure, with cultural translation treated as a processual factor. Table 1 summarizes definitions and model roles; Table 2 provides decision rules for fast categorization to support auditability.

Table 1 Core categories: definitions and model roles

Category	Brief definition	Operational cues	Model role
Narrative structure perception	Evaluation of pacing/twist/closure	“twist”, “setup”, “payoff”, “pacing”	Stimulus (S)
Audiovisual presentation perception	Evaluation of music/shots/editing/acting	“music”, “shots”, “atmosphere”, “editing”	Stimulus (S)
Cultural feature perception	Distance/novelty vs. empathy/enterability	“foreign”, “can’t understand”, “relatable”	Stimulus (S)
Emotional experience	Immediate/compound affect; amplification	“moved”, “laughed”, “overwhelmed”	Organism (O)
Meaning understanding	Value abstraction & reality mapping	“message”, “theme”, “real life”	Organism (O)
Cultural translation	Subtitles/narration intervene in comprehension	“subtitles”, “narration”, “now I get it”	Processual factor

Reception behavior	Like/save/share/recommend	“saved”, “shared”, “sent to...”	Response (R)
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Table 2 Coding decision rules for fast categorization

Coding question	“Yes” signals	Category
Evaluates twist/pacing/setup?	twist, payoff, pacing	Narrative structure
Evaluates music/shots/editing/acting?	music, atmosphere, editing	Audiovisual
Mentions foreignness/relatability?	foreign, language barrier, relatable	Cultural features
Explicit emotion labels?	moved, laughed, overwhelmed	Emotion
Interprets theme/message/allegory?	message, theme, real life	Meaning
Mentions subtitles/narration help?	subtitles, narration, now I get it	Translation
Mentions saving/sharing recipient?	saved, sent to..., recommended	Behavior

4.3 Stimulus: three-dimensional content perception and the “entry threshold”

At the stimulus stage, initial judgments cluster around narrative structure, audiovisual presentation, and cultural features. Narrative pacing and twists shape completion; audiovisual cues operate as affective entry points; cultural features produce a dynamic balance between foreignness and enterability. Together, these cues form an “entry threshold” that determines whether users finish watching and engage in discussion, while also setting the cost and novelty conditions for cross-cultural comprehension.

4.4 Organism I: two-layer emotion and interaction amplification

Emotional experience exhibits a layered progression from immediate affect (often tied to twists or audiovisual impact) to compound affect (more likely after comprehension consolidates or after rewatching). Interaction amplifies emotion through prompts and retellings, converting private feeling into a shared affective climate that supports subsequent meaning-making.

4.5 Organism II: two routes of meaning understanding

Meaning understanding develops via (a) universal-value abstraction and (b) reality mapping to local life conditions. These routes often co-exist: universal values provide a cross-cultural semantic base, while reality mapping supplies local relevance. This combination enables the conversion from “being touched” into value-based judgments that legitimize saving and sharing.

4.6 Processual factor: cultural translation as both threshold and frame

Subtitles lower comprehension costs and reallocate attention to narrative and affective cues. Creator narration supplies organized interpretive frames (plot structuring and theme highlighting), thereby strengthening meaning-making and increasing conversion efficiency from processing to diffusion.

Table 3 Decomposing cultural translation mechanisms

Translation mode	Direct function	Mechanism-level function	Stage impact
Subtitles	reduce language cost	free attention for narrative/affect	strengthens S→O
Creator narration	structure plot; highlight theme	supply interpretive frames	strengthens O & O→R (esp. meaning)

Re- editing/selection	foreground key moments	amplify affect peaks	tends to strengthen Path A
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4.7 Response: a cost ladder of behaviors and targeted sharing

Behaviors form a cost ladder from low-cost likes to mid-cost saving/rewatching and high-cost sharing/recommending. High-cost diffusion typically follows both emotional resonance and meaning confirmation and is often directed to specific recipients, indicating socially embedded sharing motives.

Table 4 Cost ladder of reception behaviors and triggers

Level	Behaviors	Typical triggers	Mechanism statement
Low-cost	like/finish/brief appraisal	affect peak; effective twist	affect suffices for low-cost response
Mid-cost	save/follow/rewatch	compound affect; partial meaning	retention value drives saving
High-cost	share/recommend/tag/seek similar	meaning confirmation + target motive	value judgment enables diffuser role

4.8 Integration: two pathways and evidence-chain summary

Two stable pathways are synthesized. Path A (emotion-driven) is triggered by twists and strong audiovisual cues and tends to yield fast engagement and rapid sharing through affect and amplification. Path B (meaning-driven) is triggered by thematic cues, cultural comparison, and plot details and tends to yield saving, recommending, and sustained diffusion via value abstraction and reality mapping. Cultural translation runs across both pathways by lowering barriers early, supplying frames midstream, and amplifying conversion from internal processing to outward diffusion. Table 5 structures the stimulus–processing–outcome correspondences; Table 6 compresses the pathway differences.

Table 5 Evidence-chain matrix: stimulus → processing → outcomes

Stimulus focus (S)	Main processing (O)	Typical outcomes (R)	Chain template
Strong twist/pacing	immediate affect + amplification	likes/comments/fast sharing	twist → affect → rapid diffusion
Audiovisual atmosphere	immersion + compound affect	finish/save/rewatch	atmosphere → immersion → saving
Salient cultural distance	higher comprehension cost	drop-off vs. persistence	distance → cost → moderated by translation
Recognizable cultural cues	proximity judgment + meaning	recommend/targeted sharing	relatability → meaning → targeted sharing
Clear thematic cues	value abstraction/reality mapping	recommend/sustained diffusion	theme → value → long-tail sharing

Table 6 Two pathways and differentiated outcomes

Pathway	Triggers (S)	Core processing (O)	Main outcomes (R)	Diffusion pattern
Path A: Emotion-driven	twist; strong audiovisual cues	immediate affect → amplification	like/comment/fast share	bursty/short-cycle
Path B: Meaning-driven	thematic cues; cultural comparison	value abstraction/reality mapping	save/recommend/sustained share	stable/long-tail

5. Conclusion

This study shows that the cross-cultural reception of Thai commercials on Chinese short-video platforms is not determined by cultural difference alone. Instead, it develops through a recurring mechanism in which users first notice narrative, audiovisual, and cultural cues, then generate emotional reactions and meaning understanding, and finally externalize reception through behaviors such as liking, saving, sharing, and recommending.

The findings further suggest that two relatively stable pathways operate in this process. The first is an emotion-driven pathway, which is associated with immediate engagement and rapid diffusion. The second is a meaning-driven pathway, which is more closely related to saving, recommending, and sustained circulation. Across both pathways, cultural translation, especially subtitles and creator narration, plays an important facilitating role by lowering comprehension barriers and providing interpretive guidance.

Overall, the study contributes a mechanism-based explanation for how foreign advertising content becomes understandable, emotionally resonant, and shareable in platform-mediated communication.

6. Discussion

This study builds a mechanism chain from Douyin comments—content cues (S) → emotion/meaning processing (O) → acceptance and diffusion (R)—and treats subtitles and creator narration as process conditions. This aligns with the platform argument in the earlier section: under algorithmic recommendation and interaction affordances, advertising becomes a socially distributed event, and comment spaces operate as key sites where meanings and emotions are articulated and negotiated (Cheng & Wang, 2024; Cao et al., 2024).

The findings also provide a platform-oriented refinement to cultural discount and cultural proximity: cultural differences can increase interpretive costs, but on short-video platforms, unfamiliarity does not necessarily reduce acceptance because narrative pull, interactive prompting, and secondary interpretation can convert foreignness into enterability and empathy (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988; Straubhaar, 2021).

In addition, the dual-pathway pattern explains the cost-tiered diffusion outcomes: emotion tends to elicit low-cost responses (likes/brief appraisals/fast sharing), whereas meaning supports saving, recommending, and sustained circulation. This is consistent with the ELM distinction between peripheral/affective cue reliance and deeper elaboration that yields more stable judgments and higher-cost behaviors (Petty & Cacioppo, 2012).

Finally, cultural translation should be treated as a “threshold + framing” mechanism: subtitles reduce language barriers, while narration/recontextualization supplies interpretive frames that stabilize value extraction and amplify conversion from internal processing to outward diffusion, echoing earlier discussions on translation strategies in intercultural communication (Ye, 2024).

7. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be noted, which also point to promising directions for future research. First, the reliance on Douyin comment discourse constrains generalizability. Comments represent “visible expression” and may under-represent silent viewers and situationally constrained audiences. Future studies can remain qualitative while incorporating in-depth interviews, viewing diaries, or digital ethnography to capture latent cognition and emotion beyond comment visibility.

Second, platform and sampling boundary conditions require further testing. Douyin’s algorithmic distribution, interaction norms, and community ecology may shape affective amplification, meaning negotiation, and the observed cost ladder of diffusion. Future work can conduct cross-platform comparisons (Douyin vs. Kuaishou/Bilibili/Xiaohongshu) or within-platform community contrasts to identify which mechanism components are stable and which are platform-contingent.

Third, heterogeneity within “translation-mediated texts” has not been fully unpacked. While subtitles and creator narration were treated as key process conditions, future research should differentiate subtitling styles, narration stances, and re-editing formats (selection, remix, reaction) and examine how specific configurations differentially shape the emotion pathway versus the meaning pathway. This can be advanced via comparative qualitative designs and finer-grained coding schemes.

Fourth, behavioral outcomes are inferred mainly from discourse. Statements such as “I saved/shared/recommended” reflect self-reported intention or claims rather than verified behavior. Where feasible, future studies can triangulate comment discourse with observable platform indicators (saves/shares, retention time) or creator-side analytics to strengthen inferences about conversion from internal processing to outward diffusion.

Fifth, the temporal dimension and lifecycle dynamics remain underexplored. The current study foregrounds structural mechanisms within a time window, yet diffusion may follow distinct “burst–decay–long-tail” patterns. Future research can adopt longitudinal qualitative tracking to examine how comment themes and processing routes shift across diffusion stages.

Overall, future research can advance the model through: (1) method triangulation (comments plus interviews/ethnography), (2) boundary testing via cross-platform and cross-case comparisons, and (3) mechanism refinement by unpacking translation and interaction configurations. These steps can help transform the proposed mechanism model from an explanatory framework into a more transferable and testable theoretical tool.

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