

Digital Influence: Moo Deng's Role in Thai Soft Power

Philipp Albert

Shinawatra University

Win Lett Shwe Yi

Shinawatra University

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how social media contributes to the development and promotion of national soft power using the case study of Moo Deng, a baby pygmy hippopotamus born in Thailand in 2024. After being featured in short videos on platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram, Moo Deng quickly gained widespread attention and affection in Thailand and internationally. Her online fame presents a unique opportunity to analyze how digital media can transform a local animal into a global cultural symbol. Grounded in Joseph Nye's theoretical framework of soft power and supported by a survey of Thai university students, the study examines patterns of digital engagement with Moo Deng and the resulting perceptions of Thai cultural identity and international image. The findings indicate that most students were introduced to Moo Deng through TikTok, and overwhelmingly associated her with positive feelings such as cuteness, humor, and national pride. Many respondents reported that Moo Deng made them feel prouder of Thai culture and believed that her online popularity improved how foreigners perceive Thailand. The paper concludes that social media, particularly short-form video platforms, plays a powerful role in shaping cultural narratives and generating emotional connections that can strengthen a country's soft power. Moo Deng's case illustrates how viral digital content can serve as an informal but impactful form of cultural diplomacy.

Keywords: cultural identity, digital culture, Moo Deng, social media, soft power

INTRODUCTION

The American hero saving the world from bad people, often from other countries, is a familiar image to many. The U.S. film industry, particularly Hollywood, has long been at the forefront of global cinema, with its films widely distributed across the world. In recent years, film industries across the Asia-Pacific region, including Japan, Korea, China and Thailand, have seen significant growth in global reach and revenue ("Global Box Office Revenue by Region" 2022).

Asian cultural influence has been building for decades, but its contemporary form is a multi-sector phenomenon encompassing music, drama, cuisine, fashion, and games, now diffused globally through social platforms and fan networks. Audiences worldwide increasingly engage with productions from Japan, Korea, China, and Thailand. Movies, television shows, music, and traditional dishes are gaining international recognition (Kuffel 2021). One example is Thai singer Lalisa "Lisa" Manobal, whose Instagram post featuring the snack Roti Sai Mai sparked international interest ("Lisa Blackpink Puts Roti Sai Mai in Spotlight" 2022).

Muay Thai has evolved from a national martial art into a global cultural export. Thai gyms welcome international students, supported by visa programs and broadcasting deals. Its growing presence in international competitions reflects Thailand's strategic use of cultural assets to enhance its global image ("Thailand to Offer Extended Visas for Muay Thai Training" 2024). Thailand also cultivates soft power through cuisine, wellness traditions and performing arts. By 2025, its health and wellness tourism sector included over 92,800 businesses and generated THB 670 billion, driven by spa services, Thai massage, yoga and detox retreats ("Health Tourism in Thailand Surges to THB 670 Billion, Boosting Wellness & Spa Sector towards Global Recognition" 2025).

Many Asian countries utilize soft power to enhance their cultural and social standing, strengthening their economies. Thailand has been particularly successful in exporting cultural elements such as food, traditional arts, and hospitality to shape global perceptions and attract international interest. Examples include the worldwide popularity of mango sticky rice and Muay Thai ("Soft Power – the Power of Creativity to Build the Thai Economy" n.d.).

Thai culture is not just exported but transformed through transnational influences (Boonhok, 2024). As seen in Lalisa Manobal's Roti Sai Mai example, the trend can be analyzed through soft power. Soft power refers to a nation's ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than force or coercion. Unlike hard power, which relies on military or economic might, soft power is grounded in cultural appeal, values, and diplomacy. This concept was coined by Joseph Nye in 1990 and elaborated in his 2004 book (Nye 1990; 2004, 20–22). Today, social networks are an effective tool for implementing soft power, impacting political agendas, international relations and social processes (Popova et al. 2022). Digital media enhances the reach of Thai culture, connecting with global audiences beyond traditional channels. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube allow cultural narratives and products to reach global audiences instantly, solidifying Thailand's presence internationally.

One recent example is Moo Deng, a baby hippopotamus born in July 2024 at Khao Kheow Open Zoo. After her public debut, Moo Deng quickly captured millions of hearts through viral social media content. Her most popular TikTok video received over 33 million views and more than 2 million likes ("Meet Moo Deng" 2024). Moo Deng's fame has extended well beyond Thailand, with major

international media outlets covering her story. Social media amplified her presence as fans created and shared memes, comics, and digital artwork, contributing to her cultural significance (Ewe 2024).



Figure 1: Moo Deng. Source: Boyle (2024).

As a case study of soft power, Moo Deng demonstrates how social media can elevate a local figure to global recognition. Similar to other Thai cultural exports such as cuisine, Muay Thai, and tourism, Moo Deng has sparked global curiosity about the country. Her popularity underscores the growing influence of digital platforms in shaping international perceptions and solidifying Thailand's cultural impact worldwide. This paper argues that within Thailand's video-based social media ecosystem, short-form platforms, particularly TikTok, transform culturally appealing, nonpolitical content into soft power by fostering emotional, frequently shared interactions and enhancing both national cultural pride and perceived international image.

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining a literature review, survey, and case study of Moo Deng's impact. The guiding question is how the Moo Deng phenomenon illustrates the relationship between digital platforms and soft power, and what it teaches about the broader impact of social media on cultural influence. The literature review provides a theoretical foundation on soft power, focusing on Nye's work, and analyzes the Thai social media ecosystem. The paper then examines Moo Deng's viral growth, explores mechanisms behind her popularity, and surveys Thai students aged 18–24 to understand perceptions of her appeal. It also considers how her popularity has been turned into cultural symbols such as merchandise, demonstrating how social media amplifies soft power. Finally, the paper analyzes Moo Deng's global reach and her impact on tourism, trade, and Thailand's international image. The conclusion summarizes the

findings and highlights how Moo Deng's social media success exemplifies the amplification of soft power. It discusses lessons for leveraging social media for cultural influence, addresses challenges such as rapidly changing trends and data biases, and proposes a framework for future research on digital platforms' role in shaping global perceptions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Soft Power Concept

To understand Moo Deng's social media popularity and its contribution to Thailand's cultural influence, it is necessary to examine the concept of soft power in detail.

Joseph S. Nye first introduced the term in his 1990 *Foreign Policy* article "Soft Power." He argued that in an increasingly interconnected, information-driven world, influence depends less on coercion and more on attraction. Nye defined soft power as the ability of a country to shape the preferences of others through appeal rather than force or payment. Instead of ordering others to comply, soft power enables a nation to make others want what it wants, largely through the attractiveness of its culture, political values, and foreign policies. He illustrated this with examples from the United States, such as the global popularity of American films and fashion (Nye 1990).

In subsequent works, Nye refined the concept to reflect changes in global politics and communication technologies. His book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004) offered a comprehensive analysis of how soft power functions in international relations and how it can be strategically cultivated. Nye identified three primary sources of soft power: culture, political values, and foreign policies. A country is more likely to achieve desired outcomes if its culture embodies universal values and its policies promote ideals that resonate broadly. Conversely, cultures that appear exclusionary or narrow-minded are less effective in generating attraction. Popular culture, in particular, plays a significant role in shaping global perceptions. Importantly, Nye emphasized that the effectiveness of soft power resources always depends on context (Nye 2004).

Nye highlighted the context-dependent nature of soft power through Argentina's shifting response to U.S. human rights advocacy. In the 1970s, Argentina's military regime rejected American pressure as intrusive, while in the 1990s, its democratic government embraced similar policies, aligning with liberal democratic norms. This contrast illustrates how admiration rather than coercion motivated Argentina's democratic leadership to adopt U.S.-inspired reforms. The tools of U.S. soft power in this case included the promotion of human rights, democratic ideals, and market liberalization, supported by institutional influence from the IMF and World Bank. These tools proved effective only when the receiving government shared compatible values (Pou 2000).

Nye also distinguished between soft and hard power in terms of control. Hard power resources, such as military strength and economic leverage, are usually under direct state control. Soft power, however, is often generated outside government institutions. In the United States, cultural products like Hollywood films are produced independently and may contradict official policy goals. Nye argued that soft power can be weakened when cultural outputs undermine diplomatic efforts. For example, while the U.S. government sought to improve relations with Islamic countries, Hollywood films often portrayed Muslims in hostile or stereotypical ways. Jack Shaheen's *Reel Bad*

Arabs documents over 1,000 films depicting Arabs and Muslims as violent or fanatical, including *True Lies* (1994). Such portrayals reinforce bias and hinder efforts to build mutual understanding (Shaheen 2009).

Nye acknowledged that soft power can be generated by non-governmental entities and institutions that may not align with state policy. In the global information age, these decentralized sources of influence are increasingly important. He concluded that governments should strengthen and complement such assets through consistent and credible policies (Nye 2004). To clarify the relationship between different forms of power, Nye introduced the concept of "smart power," defined as a strategic combination of hard and soft power. Military power involves coercion, economic power includes inducements such as trade or aid, while soft power relies on cultural appeal and values. Smart power emphasizes balance: effective foreign policy requires context-specific combinations of compelling and attractive resources (Nye 2004, 45–46). Nye also noted that soft power is more difficult to wield effectively than military or economic power, since governments cannot directly control their most important sources, such as cultural and social institutions.

Early uses of soft power can be traced to France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when it promoted its culture throughout Europe. French became the language of diplomacy and was adopted in foreign courts. In 1883, France founded the Alliance Française to promote its language and literature abroad. Other countries, including Italy and Germany, followed with similar initiatives. During the First World War, Britain and Germany sought to project positive images of their nations to the American public. With the rise of electronic broadcasting in the 1920s and 1930s, governments gained new tools to distribute messages worldwide.

The rapid development of multimedia further enhanced cultural influence abroad. Nye observed in 2004 that as access to information became cheaper and more widespread, attention itself became a scarce resource. In a crowded media landscape, credibility emerged as a crucial asset. This observation is even more relevant today: governments must adapt to changing communication technologies and support emerging sources of soft power within their own societies (Nye 2004, 108–115).

Almost two decades later, Nye revisited the concept in "Soft Power: The Evolution of a Concept" (2021). He reaffirmed his definition of power as the ability to get others to do what you want and emphasized that all forms of power, including military, economic and soft, must be used strategically. With regard to soft power, he stressed the importance of the target audience: appeal depends heavily on who the receiver is. Unlike hard power, soft power works through voluntary acceptance, not coercion. Nye clarified that deception and manipulation do not qualify as soft power: "If an agent deceives the targets and deprives them of choice, the structural manipulation fits the category of hard power; if the targets regard the agent's agenda setting as welcome and legitimate, the behavior fits better in the category of soft power" (Nye 2021, 202). Nye also emphasized that much of a country's soft power comes from non-governmental institutions. In the United States, universities, Hollywood, and private foundations play central roles. He concluded that successful foreign policy requires deliberate and effective combinations of hard and soft power resources (Nye 2021).

Stephanie Winkler's doctoral thesis, *Conceptual Politics in Practice: How Soft Power Changed the World* (2020), broadened the debate. While Nye is often cited as the originator of the term, Winkler emphasized that the soft power discussion involves numerous academics and policy actors beyond Nye. She examined how countries such as China and Japan have interpreted and implemented the concept. Criticism of soft power emerged soon after Nye coined the term. Winkler notes that skepticism was not limited to academics; in 1994, U.S. Department of Defense officials dismissed soft power as "sophomoric and naive" (Winkler 2020, 124). In the 2000s, criticism intensified, with scholars arguing that the concept was vague, difficult to measure, and impractical for policy-making. Some rejected it altogether, while others used criticism to refine and strengthen the idea (Winkler 2020, 132).

In response, Nye developed the concept further, presenting soft power as essential for tackling terrorism after 9/11. He argued that hard power alone could not address complex threats and urged U.S. politicians to take soft power seriously in foreign policy (Winkler 2020, 134f.). His 2004 book directly addressed many criticisms, deepened the concept with historical and political examples, and expanded its academic and public understanding (Winkler 2020, 136–141). Despite initial skepticism, soft power has evolved and remains highly relevant. Winkler notes that Nye's concept continues to be referenced in U.S. Senate debates on policy and budget issues (Winkler 2020, 148f.). She also observes that the term is frequently used not only by policymakers but also by journalists, public speakers, and even cartoonists. Soft power has thus moved beyond academic and political circles to become an internationally recognized social concept. Based on her research in the United States, Japan, and China, Winkler concludes that soft power continues to appear in media, public discourse, and government debates. Although it requires ongoing elaboration and adaptation, it remains a durable component of international relations (Winkler 2020, 273–275).

Building on these foundations, the relevance of soft power in the digital age becomes increasingly clear. Nye's concept remains vital, but social media has accelerated and personalized its operation. Platforms like TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram allow everyday users to promote cultural symbols that reach global audiences instantly. The Moo Deng phenomenon illustrates how digital platforms can amplify Thailand's soft power, shaping its image worldwide.

SOCIAL MEDIA ECOSYSTEM IN THAILAND

Social media has made the distribution of news and information easier than ever before. As mentioned earlier, soft power is not exclusively built by governmental organizations. Any cultural or social organization or even individuals can generate their own soft power and target a specific audience. Therefore, before analyzing the social media phenomenon surrounding Moo Deng, it is necessary to provide an overview of the Thai social media ecosystem, including general usage patterns and the most popular platforms.

One of the most comprehensive and up-to-date resources for such data is the Global Digital Report published by DataReportal. This report, produced in collaboration with several leading research and statistical organizations, provides detailed insights into the use of digital media in various countries. The Global Digital Report Thailand 2025 provides extensive data on the use of social media in this country (Kemp 2025).

According to the report, the total population of Thailand in January 2025 was 71.6 million people. Of these, 65.4 million people used the internet, and 51 million active social media identities were reported (Kemp 2025, 13-18). Device ownership data from the third quarter of 2024 shows that 98.9% of Thai internet users aged 16 and over owned a smartphone, while only 33.1% owned a laptop or desktop computer (Kemp 2025, 22). At least 98.4% accessed the internet via their smartphone, while 81.8% used other devices such as laptops or tablets. Social media is also widely used, with 88.3% of the population actively consuming social media content (Kemp 2025, 23). On average, Thais spent 7 hours and 54 minutes online every day, of which 5 hours were spent on mobile phones and 2 hours and 32 minutes specifically on social media platforms (Kemp 2025, 24).

When asked about the reasons for using the internet, 67% stated that they use it to search for information, 61.2% to watch videos, TV programs, or films and 48.5% to stay connected with friends and family (Kemp 2025, 34). Moreover, 98% of users accessed the internet via mobile devices (Kemp 2025, 35).

The relevance of social media becomes even clearer when looking at platform-specific data. In the third quarter of 2024, 98.5 % of users stated that they had visited social networks or messaging apps in the previous month (Kemp 2025, 43). Among the 20 most visited websites between September and November 2024, several social media platforms, including Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook and TikTok, ranked at the top (Kemp 2025, 44). The app rankings for the same period showed comparable results, with Facebook, LINE, Messenger and TikTok among the top ten most used apps (Kemp 2025, 46).

A closer look at users' motivations for using social media shows that 56.9% use it to stay connected with friends and family, 39% to read news, 34.4% to pass the time and 27.1% to follow influencers or celebrities (Kemp 2025, 88). In terms of preferred platforms, Facebook and LINE were the most used, with 90.7% and 90.6% of users accessing them each month, respectively. TikTok followed closely behind with 85.7%, ahead of Messenger, Instagram and X (Kemp 2025, 89). Interestingly, when asked about users' favorite platform, TikTok was in first place with 32.7%, followed by Facebook (29.5%) and LINE (13.7%) (Kemp 2025, 90).

In the previous statistics on the preferred platforms, YouTube was not available as an option for participants. However, in a data set showing the average time spent per user on Android apps in November 2024, YouTube was included. According to this data, YouTube turned out to be the most used platform. Thai Android users spent an average of 42 hours and 14 minutes per month on the app. TikTok followed closely behind with 37 hours and 40 minutes, while Facebook usage was significantly lower at 16 hours and 23 minutes (Kemp 2025, 91). When asked which accounts they follow on social media, 50.8% of users aged 16 and older stated that they follow friends, family members or acquaintances, 34.9% follow actors or artists, and 25.8% follow influencers or other experts (Kemp 2025, 94).

In summary, these statistics clearly show that smartphones are the most important devices for accessing the internet and social media in Thailand. For this research, it is particularly important to note that Facebook, TikTok and YouTube are among the most used platforms, with TikTok being the most popular, and that users spend more than an hour a day on TikTok and YouTube. These platforms certainly played a key role in the spread and global visibility of Moo Deng's story.

These statistics underscore the fertile ground for viral content in Thailand. With nearly 90% of the population actively using social media and spending over two hours daily on these platforms (Kemp 2025, 23-24), Moo Deng's rapid rise was not accidental but structurally enabled. Her story exemplifies how emotionally engaging, culturally resonant content can thrive in a mobile-first, video-centric ecosystem. This environment allows soft power to be generated organically, as users share, remix, and emotionally invest in content that reflects national identity and pride.

Fittingly, within the context of the Thai social media ecosystem, Tunyaluk Roongsangjun published an article titled *"Soft Power and the Development of Thai Society"* in 2023. In her article, she explores Thailand's use of soft power and concludes that many platforms, including TikTok, can contribute diverse content that helps effectively transmit Thai soft power. She argues that government-led soft power initiatives should not appear forced or artificial, but instead feel natural and emotionally engaging, so that people can connect with them on a personal level. This kind of approach, she notes, can help shape public opinion and national image in meaningful ways (Roongsangjun 2023).

While soft power is traditionally discussed in the context of international relations, the Moo Deng phenomenon suggests that it also plays a role in domestic cultural politics. The emotional engagement and national pride expressed by Thai users reflect how digital platforms can reinforce internal cultural cohesion and identity. In this sense, soft power is not only projected outward but also cultivated inward, strengthening public sentiment and national image within Thailand itself.

THE MOO DENG SOCIAL MEDIA PHENOMENON

Spread of Moo Deng's Story

Social media allows people to connect and share content instantly, making it an ideal platform for viral phenomena. At Khao Kheow Open Zoo in Chonburi Province, southeast of Bangkok, keeper Atthapon Nundee began sharing animal clips during the COVID-19 pandemic and continued to post engaging content, including videos of a pygmy hippo named Moo Deng after her birth in July 2024. At first, Moo Deng attracted only moderate attention, but as more and more videos and photos were shared, especially via the zoo's TikTok and Facebook accounts, her popularity soared. By September 2024, the baby hippo had become a viral sensation and appeared in the timelines of numerous users on all platforms (*"Baby Hippo Moo Deng Becomes Internet Sensation"* 2024; Ratcliffe 2024).

According to a study by Dataxet Co Ltd, using the DXT360 social listening tool, Moo Deng was mentioned online 8,678 times between 28 July and 18 September 2024. These posts generated 38,440,092 interactions, including likes, shares and comments. Facebook was the platform with the most posts (5,263), while TikTok generated the most reactions with more than 34 million interactions (Tanakorn 2024).

Considering the popularity of TikTok in Thailand, which is evident from the previous statistics, it is likely that most Thai youth were introduced to Moo Deng's content on TikTok or Instagram rather than through text-based media. Many young adults also went on to create fan art, memes and short videos inspired by Moo Deng. Her popularity even extended beyond Thailand. For example,

the U.S. Department of Labor used her image to promote hydration, while Saturday Night Live referenced Moo Deng in one of its comedy sketches. In November 2024, Thai music company GMM produced an upbeat song about Moo Deng in four languages: Thai, Chinese, Japanese and English, which quickly gained popularity on YouTube (Guzman 2024).

Following Moo Deng's success on social media, the Thai authorities recognized its potential as a symbol of national soft power. An open competition was held to design an official logo for Moo Deng, which has since been trademarked to regulate its commercial use ("Moo Deng' Phenomenon ..." 2024). This is in line with Thailand's broader soft power policy, as the government has allocated more than USD 150 million to promote national soft power initiatives ("Moo Deng Diplomacy ..." 2024).

Moo Deng's popularity has also positively affected domestic tourism, increased local revenue, and created job opportunities, demonstrating how social media fame can translate into both economic and diplomatic soft power benefits. After Moo Deng became a viral sensation, Khao Kheow Open Zoo saw a significant increase in visitors, turning the zoo into a must-see attraction for both local and international tourists. This surge in attention also created new job opportunities, such as additional video production staff and local vendors selling merchandise related to Moo Deng ("Moo Deng' Phenomenon ..." 2024; Yang 2024).

In November 2024, the Thai Ministry of Culture officially appointed Moo Deng as a cultural ambassador as part of the 'Thai Cultural Content for Soft Power Presented by Moo Deng' project. The project was launched at Khao Kheow Open Zoo and aimed to boost the cultural industry and enhance Thailand's soft power image globally ("Adorable Moo Deng ..." 2024).

The study of the Moo Deng phenomenon on social media is essential because it offers a timely example of how digital culture can rapidly transform into a form of soft power. As the content of Moo Deng went viral, especially among Thai youth, it is important to examine how such content shapes cultural pride and influences the national image. The survey discussed in the next explores how Thai students are exposed to Moo Deng and how they perceive its cultural significance. The results will provide valuable insights into how digital media promotes soft power and inform researchers, marketers and policy makers about cultural influence in the digital age.

METHODOLOGY: SURVEY OF AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT WITH MOO DENG

This study used a quantitative descriptive research design to investigate the relationship between digital engagement with the Moo Deng phenomenon and perceptions of soft power, particularly as reflected in cultural pride and national image. A survey method with structured questionnaires was used to collect data. While primarily descriptive, the study also explores how patterns of engagement may contribute to broader cultural influence, offering insights into potential causal relationships between digital media and soft power outcomes.

The data was collected through an online survey created using Google Forms. The participants were adult Thai learners currently enrolled in a private university in Thailand. Convenience sampling was used to select participants who were willing and available during the survey period.

The survey consisted of both closed-ended multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions, allowing respondents to express their attitudes and experiences freely. To ensure clarity

and accessibility for local respondents, the questionnaire was translated into both English and Thai. The questions were designed to capture the frequency of engagement with Moo Deng content, preferred types of content, and perceptions regarding its cultural impact and influence on social media.

This descriptive approach facilitated the analysis of the potential relationship between digital engagement and soft power through descriptive statistics, including frequency counts and percentage distributions. This method provides a straightforward understanding of the proportion of respondents engaging with Moo Deng content and those who view it as contributing to cultural pride and soft power. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent implied through survey completion. No personally identifying information was collected, and all data were stored securely for academic purposes only.

FINDINGS

The survey on Thai students' engagement with Moo Deng and related content was conducted on March 11 and 12, 2025. A total of 61 responses were received. Most participants (83.3%) were between 19 and 24 years old, 96.7% were female, and 3.3% were male (Shwe Yi and Albert 2025).

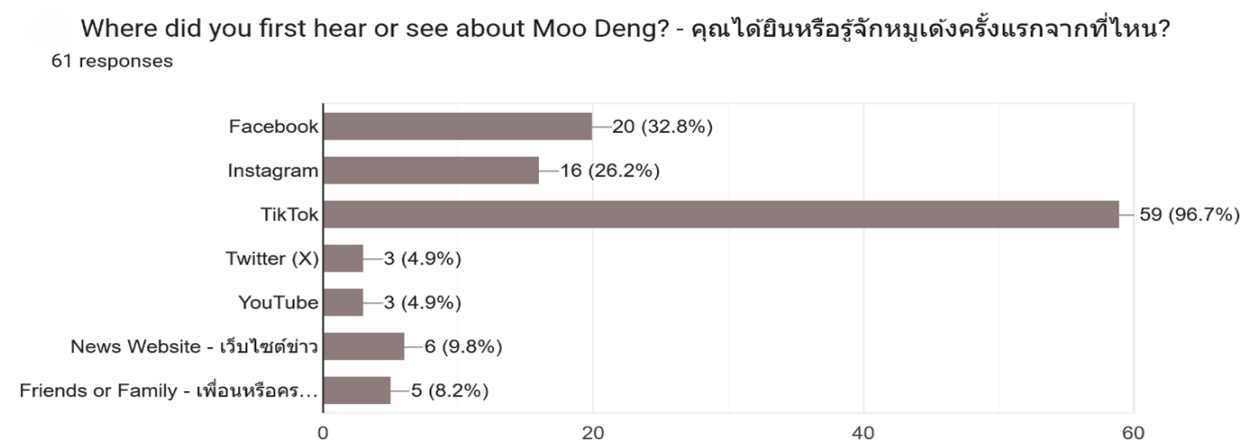


Figure 2: Platform where respondents first heard or saw Moo Deng. Source: authors.

Students were asked where they first heard about the pygmy hippopotamus Moo Deng, with the option to select more than one platform. The majority (96.7%) stated TikTok as their first contact point, followed by Facebook (32.8%) and Instagram (26.2%). Only 9.8% came across Moo Deng on news websites, and 8.2% learnt about her through friends or family (Shwe Yi and Albert 2025). These results emphasize the importance of social media, especially TikTok, in spreading the story of Moo Deng among young Thais.

When asked what type of content they first saw with Moo Deng, 95.1% responded with video content, while only 3.3% saw an image, and 1.6% read a news article. This supports the assumption that video-based platforms are the main cause of Moo Deng's viral fame. When asked directly about the role of social media in spreading Moo Deng's story, 54.1% of respondents considered it especially important, 44.3% regarded it as somewhat important, and only 1.6% said it was not especially important. Not a single respondent stated that it was not important at all (Shwe Yi and Albert 2025). These results reflect Nye's understanding of soft power as the ability to influence

through attraction and emotional resonance. Moo Deng's story, shared primarily through TikTok, exemplifies how non-coercive, culturally appealing content can shape public sentiment and national image, key components of soft power.

When you first saw Moo Deng, what type of content was it? - เมื่อคุณเห็นหมูแดงครั้งแรก
คุณเห็นมันจากที่ไหน?

61 responses

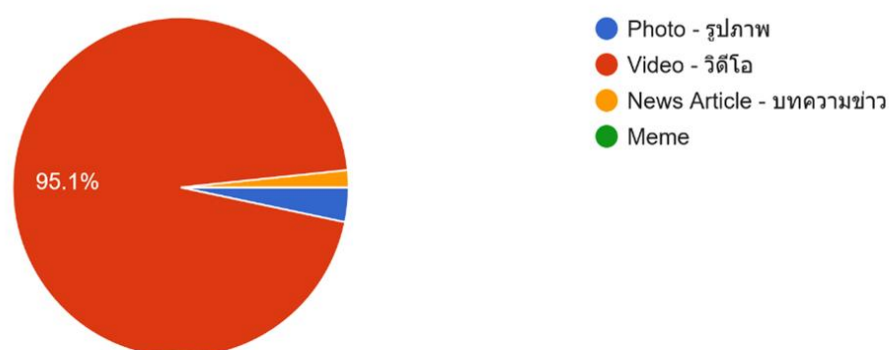


Figure 3: Type of content respondents first saw Moo Deng in. Source: authors.

One of the main reasons for Moo Deng's appeal seems to be her cuteness. A large majority (96.7%) of respondents said that their favorite thing about Moo Deng is seeing cute and funny videos or pictures. Only 4.9% enjoyed informative content, and 3.3% enjoyed news or stories about her life (Shwe Yi and Albert 2025).

These findings are consistent with the Global Digital Report statistics discussed in Chapter 2, which show that TikTok is the most popular platform among Thai users, followed by Facebook and LINE. In November 2024, Thai Android users spent more than 37 hours on TikTok, a period in which the popularity of Moo Deng also remained high (Kemp 2025, 90-91; Tarasova & Gaillot 2024). The dominance of TikTok as the initial point of contact (96.7%) highlights the importance of platform-specific dynamics in soft power dissemination. Short-form, mobile-first content appears especially effective in generating emotional engagement and viral momentum, suggesting that future soft power strategies must adapt to these digital realities.

Interestingly, the relevance of Moo Deng is still high four to five months after its initial popularity. More than half of respondents (52.5%) said they still engage with Moo Deng content a few times a week, with 19.7% engaging with it almost daily. Only 4.9% said they never engage with Moo Deng content, and 23% said they do so about once a month (Shwe Yi and Albert 2025). This continued engagement emphasizes the enduring appeal and soft power influence of Moo Deng.

Her relevance goes beyond online platforms. For example, during the Songkran celebrations in April, Suvarnabhumi Airport gave out Moo Deng plush dolls to arriving travelers ("Hippo Dolls Delight ..." 2025). Social media helped to solidify Moo Deng's status as a cultural icon, demonstrating how online content can evolve into national soft power symbols.

The survey also investigated whether students felt more pride in Thai culture as a result of Moo Deng. More than half (57.4%) said they felt very proud, 27.9% felt a little proud, and 14.8% felt

neutral. Remarkably, none of the respondents felt a shortage of pride. This emotional response suggests that soft power operates not only externally but also internally, reinforcing national identity and cultural cohesion. The pride expressed by respondents indicates that Moo Deng's image resonates with Thai values and contributes to a shared sense of belonging. When asked whether Moo Deng has influenced the way others view Thailand, 72.1% said that the hippopotamus has had a positive impact on international perceptions (Shwe Yi and Albert 2025).

The open-ended responses offered deeper insight into Moo Deng's appeal and educational impact. Many students cited her cuteness, playful behavior and social media presence as reasons for her popularity. Several noted that the phenomenon revealed the power of digital platforms and soft power, with one student reflecting that a simple story could attract global attention and reshape perceptions of a country. Others emphasized its educational value, suggesting that Moo Deng's case should be part of modern learning (Shwe Yi and Albert 2025). These qualitative responses show that soft power is not merely theoretical but a lived experience, shaped by emotionally resonant narratives that influence international perception.

The survey findings clearly show that the popularity of Moo Deng is closely linked to the use of social media among Thai students, especially video-based platforms such as TikTok. The results show not only high engagement with Moo Deng content but also a strong emotional response, including cultural pride and a positive perception of Thailand's image abroad. These findings form the basis for the following section, which summarizes the main conclusions and reflects on the wider implications for soft power, digital media and cultural diplomacy.

CONCLUSION

The case of Moo Deng illustrates how social media can elevate local cultural figures into symbols of national identity. Platforms such as TikTok, Facebook and Instagram played a vital role in amplifying her appeal, particularly through short-form video content. This reflects the mechanics of digital virality, where emotional engagement and algorithmic visibility can rapidly transform everyday stories into cultural phenomena. Moo Deng's popularity translated into real-world outcomes, including tourism campaigns and international media coverage, reinforcing her role as a soft power asset. Her appeal, rooted in cuteness, relatability, and entertainment, was embraced by young Thai users and later recognized by institutions. This trajectory demonstrates how grassroots popularity can be strategically integrated into national branding efforts.

The findings suggest a meaningful relationship between Moo Deng's online visibility and expressions of cultural pride. User-generated content, including memes and fan edits, played a crucial role in amplifying her image and fostering emotional connection. This participatory engagement reflects how digital culture contributes to the production and circulation of soft power. Social media functions as a powerful amplifier of soft power, enabling cultural symbols like Moo Deng to gain visibility and influence across borders. Strategic responses, such as multilingual theme songs, public campaigns and merchandise, demonstrate how institutions can harness viral momentum to promote national identity. The dominance of short-form video platforms such as TikTok and Instagram highlights the importance of tailoring soft power strategies to younger audiences.

That being said, the study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample consisted of 61 respondents, mostly young women aged 19–24, which may not fully represent the broader Thai population. Since the survey was conducted over a brief period, some bias may be present. Moreover, while Moo Deng's popularity remains strong at the time of study, its long-term cultural significance is still developing. However, rather than compromising the overall findings, these elements offer helpful context and a targeted look at how young Thais interact with social media-driven soft power phenomena.

Future research could expand the demographic scope and explore long-term cultural impact. Studies might examine how different age groups and genders engage with cultural icons or conduct cross-national comparisons to assess the global reach of Thailand's soft power strategies. Investigating the economic impact of viral phenomena, including tourism, merchandise and brand partnerships, would also deepen understanding of digital cultural diplomacy.

Ultimately, Moo Deng's story exemplifies how emotionally resonant content, amplified through social media, can transform local narratives into global symbols of national identity. Her rise reflects the evolving nature of soft power, where digital platforms and participatory culture play a vital role in shaping public sentiment and cultural diplomacy.

REFERENCES

- "Adorable Moo Deng to Lead Thailand's Soft Power Push on Global Stage." 2024. Nation Thailand. November 1, 2024. <https://www.nationthailand.com/news/general/40042892>
- Ambrosino, Brandon. 2014. "Here's Why Millions of Americans Are Binge-Watching Korean Dramas." Vox. December 22, 2014. <https://www.vox.com/2014/9/24/6832951/heres-why-millions-of-americans-are-binge-watching-korean-dramas>
- "Baby Hippo Moo Deng Becomes Internet Sensation." 2024. Voice of America. September 19, 2024. <https://www.voanews.com/a/baby-hippo-moo-deng-becomes-internet-sensation/7790233.html>
- Boyle, Gary. 2024. "Zoo Asks 'Moo Deng' Fans to Behave." Bangkok Post. September 13, 2024. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/learning/easy/2864888/zoo-asks-moo-deng-fans-to-behave#>
- Ewe, Koh. 2024. "She's an Icon, She's a Legend, and She Is the Moment. Meet Viral Baby Hippo Moo Deng." Time. September 12, 2024. <https://time.com/7021047/moo-deng-baby-pygmy-hippo-thailand-viral-cute-safety-concerns/>
- "Global Box Office Revenue by Region." 2022. Statista. March 2022. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/264429/global-box-office-revenue-by-region/>
- Guzman, Chad de. 2024. "Why 2024 Was the Year of the Viral Animal." Time. December 27, 2024. <https://time.com/7200721/2024-moo-deng-viral-pygmy-hippo-animals-psychology/>
- "Health Tourism in Thailand Surges to THB 670 Billion, Boosting Wellness & Spa Sector towards Global Recognition." 2025. Nation Thailand. October 3, 2025. <https://www.nationthailand.com/news/tourism/40056290>
- "Hippo Dolls Delight Songkran Travellers at Suvarnabhumi Airport." 2025. Nation Thailand. April 13, 2025. <https://www.nationthailand.com/life/art-culture/40048750>

- Kemp, Simon. 2025. "Digital 2025: Thailand." DataReportal. March 3, 2025.
<https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-thailand>
- Kuffel, Veronica. 2021. "The Soft Power of Asian Influence on American Culture." The Badger Herald. January 27, 2021. <https://badgerherald.com/artsetc/2021/01/27/the-soft-power-of-asian-influence-on-american-culture/>
- "Lisa Blackpink Puts Roti Sai Mai in Spotlight." 2022. Bangkok Post. July 16, 2022.
<https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2347468/lisa-blackpink-puts-roti-sai-mai-in-spotlight>
- "Meet Moo Deng: The Adorable Pygmy Hippo Who's Taking the World by Storm." 2024. Discovery Thailand. 2024. <https://www.discoverythailand.com/travel-tips/meet-moo-deng-the-adorable-pygmy-hippo-who-s-taking-the-world-by-storm>
- "Moo Deng Diplomacy: Thailand's Unexpected Soft Power?" 2024. Tae Art Man. September 22, 2024. <https://taeartman.com/moo-deng-diplomacy/?lang=en>
- "'Moo Deng' Phenomenon Sparks Business Growth, Secures Trademark." 2024. Khaosod English. October 17, 2024. <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/news/business/2024/10/17/moo-deng-phenomenon-sparks-business-growth-secures-trademark/>
- Muzaffar, Maroosha. 2024. "From Moo Deng Live Stream, Memes to Time Limits: Why Is Internet Obsessed with Viral Baby Pygmy Hippo?" The Independent. September 29, 2024.
<https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/southeast-asia/moo-deng-livestream-baby-pygmy-hippo-viral-memes-b2620832.html>
- Nye, Joseph S. 1990. "Soft Power." *Foreign Policy* 80: 153–171. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580>
- Nye, Joseph S. 2004. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs.
- Nye, Joseph S. 2021. "Soft Power: The Evolution of a Concept." *Journal of Political Power* 14, no. 1: 196–208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2021.1879572>
- Popova, Alla L., Mikhail V. Kanavtcev, Egor Y. Lukyanchikov, and Valentina F. Averianova. 2022. "The Role of Social Media in Implementing the Concept of 'Soft Power'." *Proceedings of the International Scientific and Practical Conference Strategy of Development of Regional Ecosystems "Education-Science-Industry"*. Advances in Economics, Business and Management Research. <https://doi.org/10.2991/aebmr.k.220208.054>
- Pou, Pedro. 2000. "Argentina's Structural Reforms of the 1990s." *Finance & Development* 37, no. 1. International Monetary Fund.
<https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2000/03/pou.htm>
- Ratcliffe, Rebecca. 2024. "'I Set a Goal to Make Her Famous:' The Baby Pygmy Hippo Who Became a Giant Online." *The Guardian*. September 13, 2024.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/sep/13/moo-deng-hippo-tiktok-khao-kheow-open-zoo-thailand-viral>
- Roongsangjun, Tunyaluk. 2023. "Soft Power and the Development of Thai Society." *Journal of Social Work and Social Administration* 31, no. 1: 89–117. <https://so04.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/swjournal/article/view/261046>
- Shaheen, Jack G. 2009. *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. Northampton, Mass.: Olive Branch Press.

- "Soft Power – the Power of Creativity to Build the Thai Economy." n.d. Thailand Convention & Exhibition Bureau (TCEB). Accessed November 10, 2025.
<https://www.businesseventsthailand.com/en/press-media/news-press-release/detail/1461-soft-power-the-power-of-creativity-to-build-the-thai-economy>
- Tanakorn, Aim. 2024. "Moo Deng: How to Bounce into the Spotlight through Social Media Marketing." The Pattaya News. September 27, 2024.
<https://thepattayanews.com/2024/09/27/moo-deng-how-to-bounce-into-the-spotlight-through-social-media-marketing/>
- Tarasova, Elena, and Ann-Derrick Gaillot. 2024. "Is the Moo Deng Trend Over?" Meltwater. November 12, 2024. <https://www.meltwater.com/en/blog/moo-deng-trend>
- "Thailand to Offer Extended Visas for Muay Thai Training." 2024. Khaosod English. January 14, 2024. <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/news/2024/01/14/thailand-to-offer-extended-visas-for-muay-thai-training/>
- Winkler, Stephanie Christine. 2020. "Conceptual Politics in Practice: How Soft Power Changed the World." DiVA. Department of Economic History and International Relations, Stockholm University. <https://su.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1484025&dswid=6581>
- Shwe Yi, Win L., and Philipp Albert. 2025. Survey on Thai Students' Engagement with Moo Deng. Unpublished survey, March 11–12, 2025.
- Yang, Stephanie. 2024. "Moo Deng Is a Global Phenomenon. How Long Can This Love Affair Last?" Los Angeles Times. November 25, 2024. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2024-11-25/moo-deng-baby-pygmy-hippo-thailand-social-media-celebrity>

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

PHILIPP ALBERT earned his bachelor's degree in Japanese Studies and History in 2019 from Martin Luther University in Halle, Germany. After gaining initial work experience in Germany, he relocated to Thailand to pursue a Master of Arts in Cultural Management at Chulalongkorn University, which he completed in 2022. Following relevant teaching experience at a private educational institution, he joined Shinawatra University as a lecturer in 2024, where this research was conducted. He currently teaches at Nakhon Sawan School.

E-Mail: philipp.a@siu.ac.th

WIN LETT SHWE YI is a lecturer at Shinawatra University, currently teaching in the Language and General Education Centre. She holds a bachelor's degree in English Studies from the University of Foreign Languages, Yangon, and a master's degree in Cultural Management from Chulalongkorn University. Previously serving as a diplomat, her academic interests include cultural studies, cross-cultural communication, education, and event management. Shwe Yi currently teaches English to international students, particularly Chinese learners in Thailand, and is passionate about supporting their language and communication development.

E-Mail: win.l@siu.ac.th