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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Decoding Cultural Symbols of Cantonese Dialect Emoticons: Linguistic Features and Regional Identity Expression

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study focuses on the cultural symbolic characteristics of Cantonese dialect emoticons in emotional expression and explores the intrinsic connection between them and regional identity. Through in-depth analysis of the linguistic features of Cantonese, combined with specific usage contexts and examples, this paper finds that Cantonese has distinctive features in emotional expression, and these features not only enrich people's way of communication, but also invisibly strengthen regional identity. The results of this study not only deepen our understanding of Cantonese language and culture, but also provide valuable references for further exploring the relationship between language and regional identity.

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INTRODUCTION

In the era of information explosion, emoticons, as a non-textual communication tool, have become widely popular worldwide. They not only add fun to daily communication, but also become a unique cultural symbol. Among the many emoticons, Cantonese dialect emoticons have become an important medium for conveying the culture and identity of the Guangdong region by virtue of their unique linguistic features and deep regional cultural heritage. The purpose of this paper is to explore in depth the cultural symbols behind Cantonese dialect emoticons and how they embody the expression of linguistic features and regional identity.

I. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1.1 Digital communication has an important role in reflecting cultural and linguistic identity.

With the development of digital media, emoticons, as a new type of non-text communication tool, have penetrated into people's daily life. In the wave of the digital era, digital communication is not only a bridge for information transmission, but also an important reflection of cultural and linguistic identity. Every keystroke of the keyboard and every slide of the screen carries a unique cultural

imprint and individual language style. Through digital communication, we can not only cross geographical boundaries, but also deeply feel the charm of different cultures and the richness of multiple languages. In this globally interconnected world, digital communication is like a mirror reflecting our unique cultural and linguistic identities, allowing us to understand each other better in communication and build a more colorful and inclusive world together.

1.2 Some Gap Areas in Research on Dialectal Emojis and Digital Cultural Expressions

In terms of dialect emojis, although WeChat emojis of local dialects such as the Cantonese dialect have become more common, relatively few studies have been conducted on their deeper cultural connotations, social impacts, and their role in dialect preservation and inheritance. As a special digital cultural product, the design, dissemination and use process of dialect emoticons contain rich cultural connotations and social significance, which are worth further in-depth investigation.

In terms of digital cultural expression, although the digital economy and digital technology have widely influenced people's lives, research on the ways and characteristics of digital cultural expression and its impact on the inheritance and development of traditional culture has yet to be strengthened. In particular, in the process of integrating digital technology and traditional culture, how to better transmit and develop traditional culture with the help of digital technology is an issue that deserves in-depth exploration.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

2.1 Analyzing linguistic features and identifying Cantonese dialectal elements in Cantonese emoticons: analyzing Cantonese words, phrases and slang used in Cantonese emoticons, and identifying their expressions and frequencies in emoticons. Exploring linguistic styles and expressions: to study the linguistic styles in Cantonese emoticons, such as humor, sarcasm, and kindness, and how these styles are expressed through linguistic symbols.

2.2 Analyze the expression of regional identity in Cantonese emoticons, identify: The cultural symbols used to express regional identity in **Cantonese emoticons**, such as characteristic local architecture, food, customs, etc., and explore how Cantonese emoticons convey regional identity through cultural symbols and the role of these cultural symbols in strengthening regional identity.

2.3 Comprehensive Analysis of Cultural Symbols of Cantonese Emoticons: The association between linguistic features and regional identity: to explore the relationship between linguistic features and expressions of regional identity in Cantonese emoticons, to analyze how they interact with each other, and what impact they have on society and culture.

By setting the above research objectives, the linguistic features and expressions of regional identities in Cantonese emoticons can be comprehensively and deeply analyzed, so as to reveal the cultural symbols behind them and their significance and value in the society and culture.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Relevant studies on cultural expression in digital media

Digital media and cultural inheritance: In recent years, more and more studies have focused on the role of digital media in cultural inheritance. For example, Song Hanzhi (2024) points out in his article "Digital Media and Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritance" that digital media have effectively protected and inherited intangible cultural heritage through digital storage, dissemination and display. In addition, digital media have increased public awareness of and interest in traditional culture through features such as interactivity and participation.

Digital media and cultural innovation: the development of digital media also provides new possibilities for cultural innovation. Chen Changjing and Yang Jun (2019) in the article Cross-immersion-socialization:Innovative communication of Chinese culture in the digital media era ", it is argued that digital media has promoted the development of cultural innovation by integrating different cultural elements and creating new art forms. At the same time, digital media also provides a broader platform for artists and creators to display and communicate through social media and other channels.

Digital media and cross-cultural communication: In the context of globalization, digital media also promotes the development of cross-cultural communication. Li Carp (2020) in Beyond Representation: New Horizons for Intercultural Communication Research in the Digital Era ", it is pointed out that digital media promote the communication and integration between different cultures by breaking the restrictions of geography and language. At the same time, digital media also improve the efficiency and effectiveness of cross-cultural communication through diversified communication channels and methods. Early emoticons originated in the United States in the 1980s, when the first Internet emoticon ":-)" was created on an electronic bulletin board by Prof. Scott Fahlman. Since then, with the popularization of the Internet and the rise of social media, emoticons and emoticons have gradually developed into a popular form of cultural expression. They visually convey people's emotions and attitudes through simple symbols, icons or pictures. Current research on cultural expressions in digital media has achieved certain results, but there are still some limitations. Firstly, some researches pay too much attention to the application of the technical level and neglect the in-depth exploration of the cultural level. Secondly, there are relatively few interdisciplinary studies, which need to strengthen the communication and cooperation with other disciplines. In addition, there is not enough research on the differences in the application of emoticons and emoticons in different cultural contexts and the factors influencing them.

3.2 Studies related to the impact of regional dialects on identity in a digital media environment

Dialect is an important part of community identity. Speakers of dialects express their identity and demonstrate their sense of cultural belonging through dialects. For example, speakers of Baoshan dialect, as the language of a specific region, often feel a common sense of belonging and form a sense of community. This sense of community not only strengthens the internal cohesion of the community, but also conveys the uniqueness and independence of the community externally. Dialect is also an important symbol of individual identity. A person's ability to speak his or her own dialect is often related to the community or family to which he or she belongs, which becomes a part of individual identity. The use of dialect not only reflects an individual's social background and cultural traditions, but also his or her unique personality traits and aesthetic preferences. From a linguistic point of view, the relationship between dialect and identity can be explained through the identification, copying and reprocessing of linguistic symbol systems. By identifying with and using a certain set of linguistic symbol system, people obtain their specific social psychological foundation and reach their identity of special compartmentalization. Dialect, as a specific linguistic symbol system, achieves the identification and reinforcement of community and individual identity by its users through the identification and use of dialect.

 In recent years, with the rise of social media, short videos and other digital media, the way of dialect dissemination has changed significantly. Social media have provided a broader platform for the spread of dialects, enabling them to cross regional restrictions and spread rapidly across the country and even globally. Dialects, as important markers of regional culture, have had a significant impact on people's identity. For example, Liu Yang et al. (2022) in the An Exploration of Teochew Young People's Use, Attitude and Identity of Teochew Dialect found that dialects can enhance an individual's

sense of belonging to and identification with his or her hometown, which in turn facilitates the formation of identity. In addition, dialects can serve as a kind of cultural capital to help individuals demonstrate their uniqueness and strengths in social situations.Current research on the relationship between dialect and identity has achieved certain results, but there are still some limitations. Firstly, some studies have paid too much attention to the surface features of dialects such as phonology, vocabulary and grammatical structure, and lacked in-depth inquiry into the relationship between dialects and identity. Secondly, there are relatively few interdisciplinary studies, which need to strengthen communication and cooperation with other disciplines. In addition, there has been insufficient research on aspects such as the use of dialects among different social groups and the factors influencing them.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Data collection tools:

Questionnaire design: create a questionnaire that contains questions about the use of dialect emoji, such as whether users have used dialect emoji, how often they have used them, their favorite type of dialect emoji, and the scenarios in which they have used them.

Sample selection: Users of the WeChat social media platform, residents of the Guangdong area.

Target groups: young people, students, active social media users in Cantonese dialect areas. The questionnaire was completed by a total of 114 people, 93 of whom lived in Guangdong, with a 50/50 ratio of men to women. 25% of the respondents were under the age of 18, 17.31% were between the ages of 18-25, 23.08% were between the ages of 25-35, 17.31% were between the ages of 35-45, and 17.31% were over the age of 45. 17.31% for those over 45 years of age.

4.2 Data analysis:

Quantitative data analysis: descriptive statistical analysis of collected data using statistical software (e.g., SPSS, Excel, etc.), and processing and analysis of collected quantitative data.

Qualitative data analysis: the collected qualitative data were coded and categorized to extract themes and patterns. By comparing the views and opinions of different users, an in-depth understanding of the cultural meaning and social impact of dialect emojis can be developed.

Combined analysis: The results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses are combined to develop a comprehensive understanding of dialectal emojis. For example, the cultural and social reasons behind the usage characteristics and patterns revealed in the quantitative data can be explored, as well as how the themes and patterns extracted from the qualitative data are reflected in the quantitative data.

V. LINGUISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF CANTONESE EMOTICONS

Cantonese, also known as Cantonese and Guangfu, is one of the major dialects spoken in Guangdong Province, Hong Kong and Macao. Its unique phonetic, lexical and grammatical structures make Cantonese emoticons significantly different from other dialects or Mandarin emoticons in terms of expression. Cantonese dialect emojis often contain some unique slang, catchphrases and colloquialisms. Slang and colloquialisms in Cantonese are important cultural symbols in the expression of emotions. These words often have a strong regional color and folk flavor, and can vividly express the emotional attitudes and values of Cantonese people. For example, the emoticon "nothing to do" in Figure 1 expresses the meaning of "nothing to do" in Cantonese through the image of a leisurely soybean. This emoticon not only vividly demonstrates the unique expression of the Cantonese dialect, but also conveys the attitude and cultural atmosphere of the Cantonese-speaking people, who are at ease with their lives. Another example is "有冇搞錯 (有冇錯）which expresses surprise or dissatisfaction about something, and "冇眼睇 (冇睇）which expresses contempt or belittling

of someone. In Cantonese dialect, "呢" is used to ask a question or to emphasize; "啦" is used to express affirmation or emotion; "咩" is used to question or inquire. The use of these inflections and exclamations makes Cantonese more vivid and infectious when expressing emotions. Cantonese intonations and exclamations play a crucial role in expressing emotions. Although these words do not express specific meanings, they can convey the speaker's emotional attitude and tone of voice.

Figure 1: Emoticons"冇嘢做

These linguistic elements not only enrich the connotation of emoticons, but also make them closer to the life and culture of local people. For example, some unique Cantonese words and phrases are combined with images and words to form emoticons that are easy to recognize and understand. These emoticons not only convey specific emotions and messages, but also demonstrate the unique charm of the Cantonese language. For example, the emoticon "Waiting for you at 喺度" in Figure 2 conveys the meaning of "waiting for you here" in Cantonese through the image of a waiting person. This emoticon not only demonstrates the grammatical structure and expression of the Cantonese dialect, but also reflects the cultural tradition of the people of the Cantonese-speaking region, who are hospitable and emphasize interpersonal relationships.
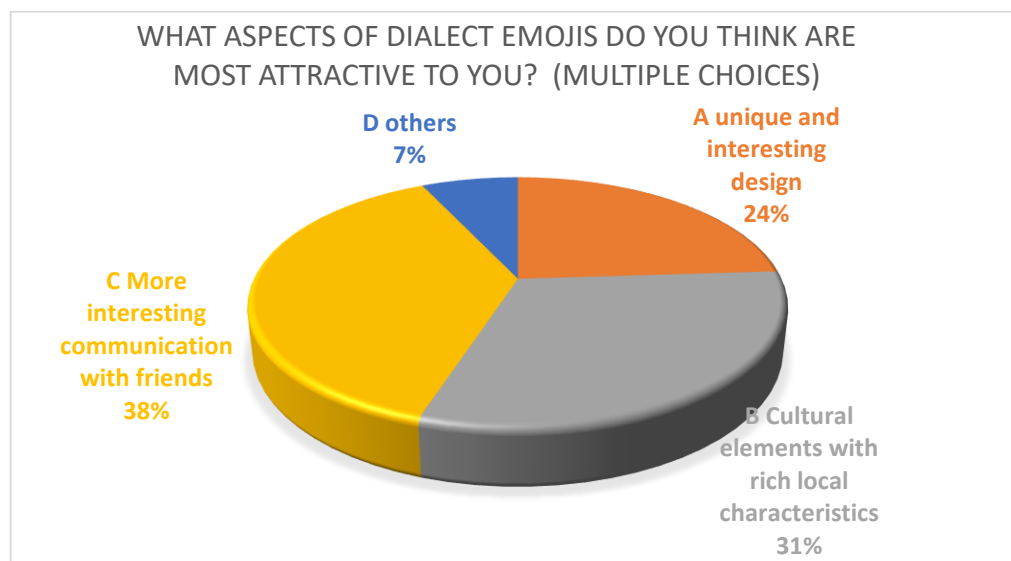

Figure 2: Emoticons"喺度等你

To summarize, the linguistic features of Cantonese dialect emoticons are mainly reflected in the following three aspects: firstly, the unique pronunciation and vocabulary of Cantonese dialect is an important source of emoticons; secondly, the grammatical structure and expression of Cantonese dialect also provide rich materials for the creation of emoticons; finally, the regional characteristics and cultural connotations of Cantonese dialect are also fully reflected in emoticons.

VI. CULTURAL THEMES IN CANTONESE EMOTICONS AND THEIR CONNECTION TO REGIONAL IDENTITY.
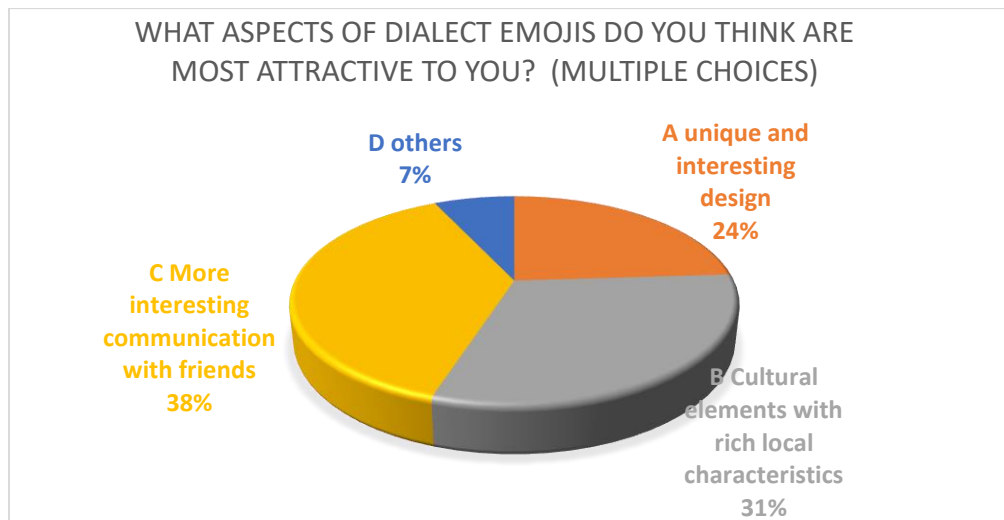
Cantonese dialect emoticons demonstrate the cultural charm of the Cantonese-speaking region through unique linguistic features. In the Internet era, the spreading speed and influence of emoticons, as a form of non-written language, should not be underestimated. As one of them,

Cantonese dialect emoticons carry the unique culture and identity of the Cantonese-speaking region. They convey the linguistic characteristics, local customs and values of the Cantonese-speaking region in the form of images, and have become an important tool for the people of the Cantonese-speaking region to express their identities and disseminate their cultures in cyberspace. The questionnaire shows that 84.62% of the 93 respondents who live in the Guangdong area come into contact with Cantonese expression packs in their daily lives, and 13.46% often use Cantonese expression packs. In a question about the reasons for usually using dialect expression packs, 57.3% of the respondents said that it is the dialect with the expression packs that they want to communicate with other people, and 31.9% of the respondents said that the use of Cantonese emoticons to express feelings better, which indicates that Cantonese dialect emoticons demonstrate the linguistic charm of the Cantonese-speaking region through unique linguistic features. These words and expressions are widely recognized and accepted in the Cantonese-speaking region, and can quickly resonate and identify with the people in the region. At the same time, these emoticons also visualize these linguistic features in the form of images, so that people in non-Cantonese speaking regions can also feel the unique charm of the Cantonese language. (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Survey results on the reasons for using cantonese dialect emojis

Cantonese dialect emoticons not only enrich the expressive power of the language, but also enhance the cultural confidence and identity of the people in the Guangdong region. Cantonese dialect emoticons also demonstrate the cultural characteristics of the Cantonese-speaking region through rich cultural connotations. These emoticons often incorporate traditional cultural elements of the Cantonese-speaking region, such as lion dance, Cantonese opera, and morning tea, etc. These elements not only have strong regional characteristics, but also carry the historical memories and cultural emotions of the people of the Cantonese-speaking region. By integrating these cultural elements into emoticons, Cantonese dialect emoticons not only become an effective tool for spreading Cantonese culture, but also enable the people of the Guangdong region to feel a sense of commonality and belonging to each other by communicating emotionally through the use of these cultural symbols with regional characteristics. This sense of belonging further promotes the inheritance and development of culture in Guangdong. In the questionnaire, 24% of the respondents liked the unique and interesting design of the dialect emoticons, 31% chose the cultural elements rich in local characteristics, and 38% of the respondents chose the use of emoticons because they can make communication with friends more interesting. See Figure 4

Figure 4: Survey results on the attractiveness of cantonese dialect emojis

Cantonese dialect emoticons are not only a communication tool, but also a cultural symbol and identity. They convey region-specific cultural messages and values through specific language and image elements. On social media and online platforms, people use Cantonese dialect emoticons to express their identity and sense of belonging. For example, Guangdong's unique food, attractions, and folklore have become the emotional link between Cantonese people and their hometown. By using these unique cultural symbols for emotional communication, Cantonese people are able to more accurately convey their emotional attitudes and values, thus enhancing their understanding and identification with each other. This uniqueness of emotional expression not only strengthens the self-confidence and pride of the Guangdong people, but also further reinforces the regional identity of the Guangdong region.

Reach a verdict

As a cultural symbol, Cantonese dialect emoticons have a high cultural communication value. They not only provide a new way of expression for young people in the Guangdong area, but also spread Guangdong culture across the country and even globally through social media and other channels. This cross-regional and cross-cultural communication not only promotes communication and integration between different regions and cultures, but also enriches people's cultural life and spiritual world.

As a unique cultural symbol and language usage, Cantonese dialect emoticons have become an important part of regional culture. They not only embody the linguistic characteristics of Cantonese, but also carry the identity and cultural characteristics of the Guangdong region, and convey region-specific cultural messages and values. They are widely disseminated through social media and other channels, injecting new vitality into the inheritance and development of Guangdong culture. At the same time, Cantonese dialect emoticons have become an important tool for people to express their identity and sense of belonging. In future research, we should pay more attention to the cultural value of Cantonese dialect emoticons, and make this cultural symbol more colorful and deeper into people's hearts through innovation and development. At the same time, we can further explore the use and change of meaning of Cantonese dialect emoticons in different social groups and cultural backgrounds, and actively promote exchanges and integration between different regions and cultures, so as to jointly promote the prosperity and development of human culture.

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Appendix I:

Questionnaire on Dialect Emoji Usage Habits and Preferences

Question 1: Have you ever used dialect emoticons? A Yes   B No (If "No", please skip to question 9)

Question 2: On which platform or application do you usually use dialect emoticons? (Multiple choice) A WeChat   B Weibo   CQQ   D Jittery E Racer   F Other

Question 3: How often do you use dialect emoticons? A Hardly ever B Occasionally   C Often   D Always

Question 4: What do you usually use dialect emoticons for? (Multiple choices) A Express emotions B Entertainment   C Communicate with others D Show local culture   E Other

Question 5: What is your favorite type of dialect emoji? (Multiple choice) A Funny humor   B Cute cartoon   C Live action   D Anime style   E Other

Question 6: Please rate your satisfaction with the Dialect Emoji Pack. A Very dissatisfied   B Dissatisfied   C Fair   D Satisfied   E Very satisfied

Question 7: In what aspects do you think dialect emojis attract you the most? (Multiple choices)

A Unique and interesting design   B Cultural elements rich in local characteristics C More interesting communication with friends   D Other

Question 8: Would you like to recommend Dialect Emoji Pack to your friends or family? A Yes   B No (If you choose "Yes", please skip to Question 10; if you choose "No", please skip to Question 9)

Question 9: What are the reasons why you do not use dialect emoticons? (Multiple choice) A Don't understand dialect emoticons   B Don't think dialect emoticons are practical C Worry that others don't understand   D Other   :

Question 10: In what ways would you like dialect emoticon packs to be improved or added? (Open answer)[Please answer in this area]

Question 11: What is your gender? A Male   B Female

Question 12: What is your age range? A Under 18 years old   B 18-24 years old   C 25-34 years old D 35-44 years old   E 45 years old and over

Question 13: Which region do you currently live in? (Please fill in the province/municipality/autonomous region) [Please answer in this area]

Question 14: Your contact information (not mandatory, but you may have the opportunity to participate in the follow-up study if you fill in)[Please answer in this area]

Thank you for your participation in this survey! Your answers will help us better understand the usage habits and preferences of dialect emoticons in order to provide more targeted services & products.