

Reconstructing the local: the writing and construction of "Cantonese-style life" memory in short videos—A qualitative study based on grounded theory

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Abstract. As a culturally distinctive local symbol, "Cantonese-style life" has undergone a process of mediatized transformation in the wave of short videos, shifting from embodied, on-site experience to online spectatorship. Employing a qualitative research approach, this study takes short videos related to "Cantonese-style life" on the Douyin platform and their accompanying comments as empirical materials. Through grounded theory analysis, four core dimensions are identified: multidimensional spatial writing, embodied sensory experience, negotiated cultural boundaries, and theatricalized emotional interaction. The findings indicate that short videos do not merely document "Cantonese-style life." Rather, through spatiotemporally folded simulacral landscapes, epistemic contestations over cultural boundaries, the visual performance of bodily habitus, and an affective theater characterized by subject-object reversals, they accomplish the digital reshaping of local memory and the dynamic construction of identity.

Keywords: Cantonese-style life, short videos, grounded theory, local memory, production of space

1. Introduction

The iterative upgrading of digital technologies and the continuous transformation of media forms have propelled society into a stage of deep mediatization. With its high penetration rate, strong interactivity, and visual orientation, short video has rapidly embedded itself in everyday life practices, reshaping the fundamental logic of cultural consumption and meaning production. According to the *China Online Audiovisual Development Research Report (2025)*, by December 2024, the number of short-video users in China had reached 1.04 billion, with a penetration rate of 93.8%, ranking first among subdivided categories of online audiovisual applications for six consecutive years [1]. Against this backdrop, the presentation of local culture is no longer confined to linear display within physical space; instead, it is re-encoded through fragmented audiovisual language, algorithmically distributed, and consumed across domains, resulting in a fundamental transformation in the mechanisms of memory construction.

As a localized microcosm of Lingnan culture, "Cantonese-style life" is marked by distinctive cultural symbols such as the ritual of morning tea, the Cantonese dialect, and arcade-style architecture (qilou). It embodies centuries of historical accumulation and lived wisdom in Guangzhou. On the Douyin platform,

hashtags such as "#Cantonese Style Life," "#Lingnan Charm," and "#Cantonese Morning Tea" have each garnered hundreds of millions of views, with "#Cantonese Morning Tea" alone exceeding three billion views, generating significant traffic aggregation and cultural resonance. Unlike the documentary mode of traditional media, short videos reconstruct memory through lens rhetoric, algorithmic recommendation, and user interaction. In doing so, they propel the transformation of the sense of place from physical presence to digital co-presence, offering a representative case for examining the reproduction of local culture in the digital age.

However, under the influence of traffic-oriented logics and algorithmic mechanisms, the visual representation of Cantonese-style life faces the risks of symbolization, fragmentation, and homogenization. Certain productions reduce it to the superficial accumulation of symbols such as morning tea and the Cantonese dialect, neglecting its deeper cultural connotations and underlying life logic. Meanwhile, how individual micro-narratives converge into a shared collective memory, and how memory construction within digital space feeds back into the city's real-world image and cultural identity, remain insufficiently explored. In light of these issues, this study applies grounded theory to analyze the generative logic and interactive mechanisms of "Cantonese-style life" within the field of short videos. The research centers on the following core questions: What is the logic of symbolic encoding through which short videos construct the memory of "Cantonese-style life"? Through what forms of interaction do users participate in the negotiation of its meanings? How do symbolic encoding and user interaction jointly drive the dynamic construction of "Cantonese-style life" memory?

2. Literature review

2.1. Media and the construction of local memory

Media have consistently played a crucial role in the shaping, transmission, and transformation of local memory. Rather than serving as a passive container of memory, media actively filter, connect, and elevate individual experiences into collectively shared cultural memory through symbolic encoding, narrative frameworks, and communicative practices, thereby sustaining and reproducing local imagery. As a symbolic system deeply embedded in collective memory and cultural tradition, local imagery has been creatively transformed into a source of artistic inspiration, permeating the entire process of conception, creation, dissemination, and reception of artistic works [2]. Media provide the key pathway for this transformation, enabling local memory to transcend the constraints of time and space and achieve preservation and circulation.

In the era of traditional media, the authority to inscribe local memory was largely concentrated in the hands of cultural elites and institutional media, resulting in a centralized and standardized pattern of representation. Mass media such as newspapers and television, by virtue of their extensive reach and agenda-setting capacity, constructed authoritative and unified versions of local memory through linear narrative structures. Such memories tended to focus on representative historical events, cultural symbols, and value systems. In recent years, the production of local-themed television dramas has often combined regional narratives with temporal storytelling, highlighting the sense of place through historical settings in order to strengthen collective local memory [3]. As a media form characterized by strong regional attributes, geo-cinema likewise plays a distinctive role in the construction of local memory. It can function as an important medium for evoking intimate experiences of place and for shaping local memory, enabling a locality to become a center of affective value [4]. This not only demonstrates media's representational function in relation to memory, but also reveals its agency in actively constructing memory through the orchestration of time and space.

The development of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed both the power structure and the social foundations of local memory production. Platforms such as short video applications and social media

have disrupted the monopoly of elites over the authorship of memory, allowing ordinary users to become active producers, disseminators, and negotiators of local memory. As a highly immersive and interactive media form, short video facilitates "check-in" practices and "mediated flânerie," enabling the deterritorialization of the body and the reconstruction of a sense of place. Individuals are thus able to experience and reinterpret local meanings within digital space [5]. When content forms such as intangible cultural heritage and micro-dramas become deeply embedded in specific geographical spaces, and are jointly propelled by policy support, industrial mechanisms, and audience interaction, they may transcend their original cultural or entertainment attributes. In doing so, they evolve into symbolic carriers of collective memory that stimulate local identification and emotional resonance [6]. This development signifies that the construction of local memory has entered a new stage—one that is dynamic, open, and highly productive, involving multiple subjects, diverse media logics, and a range of social forces acting in concert.

2.2. Short videos and the production of digital sense of place

As a core concept in human geography, the theoretical connotations and dimensional divisions of sense of place have continued to evolve alongside developments in media technology. Shao deconstructs sense of place into three interrelated dimensions—place attachment, place identity, and place image—emphasizing that it is not an isolated individual perception of space, but rather a socially constructed outcome [7]. Dai proposes a three-dimensional model encompassing physical sense of place, digital sense of place, and hybrid sense of place, arguing that interactions between individuals and their environments are no longer confined to physical space; symbolic circulation and interaction within digital space can likewise generate place meanings imbued with emotional belonging [8]. Zhang et al. further note that technological mediation alone cannot fully substitute for embodied place-making; the generation of digital sense of place still requires grounding in experiences of physical space [9].

Short video reshapes the sense of place within cultural space and vividly demonstrates the diverse dimensions of localized practices in lived space [10]. In both urban and rural contexts, it exhibits a strong capacity to produce sense of place, though through differentiated modes of practice. In urban settings, the creation and dissemination of short videos centered on city landmarks constitute not only a process of shaping place imagery and constructing sense of place, but also one in which fragmented individual memories are aggregated, integrated, and rewritten into collective memory [11]. As an emerging digital medium, short video leverages technological affordances to enable individuals to "develop emotional attachment to the landscapes they inhabit" [12], thereby becoming a significant vehicle for the construction of sense of place. In rural contexts, the subjects participating in short video production display increasing diversity. The collaborative interactions of multiple actors in digital space reshape traditional perceptions of the countryside, constructing a pluralistic narrative ecology and deepening the production of digital place meaning [13].

Through multiple mechanisms and pathways, short video constructs sense of place in ways that are both distinctive and broadly replicable. Its construction of sense of place involves the experiential display of social relations centered on specific local nodes. The capacity of media to endow real spaces with meaning has become increasingly pronounced, enabling short videos about the same region to foster relatively unified spatial impressions and shared cognitive frameworks among users [14]. The habitual practice of "scrolling through videos" subtly strengthens place identity, as audiences gradually internalize the digital sense of place shaped by media through immersive engagement with the material, cultural, and everyday spaces constructed in short videos [15]. Netizens establish sense of place through textual symbols and audiovisual signs; through remote viewing, they acquire a mediated sense of presence, gain knowledge of a location's history and culture through interaction, and develop exploratory intentions toward the place stimulated by diverse modes of

expression [16]. Meanwhile, the widespread existence of place-themed media practices on short-video platforms promotes the mutual penetration of real and virtual senses of place. The convergence of the local and the online continually reactivates public attention to locality, transforming digital platforms into virtual spaces for the formation of place identity [17].

A mutually reinforcing and positively cyclical relationship has emerged between sense of place and short video dissemination. The cultivation of sense of place enables content creators to establish distinctive labels and achieve cross-community visibility, aligning closely with the traffic distribution mechanisms of short-video platforms [18]. On the one hand, by constructing a distinctive sense of place, short videos attract user attention and stimulate interactive dissemination, thereby securing greater traffic exposure. On the other hand, the amplification of place-oriented content through traffic algorithms further strengthens the influence of regional culture, enhancing a locality's visibility and appeal. This, in turn, provides richer cultural materials and communicative scenarios for short video production, forming a virtuous ecosystem of coordinated development between place and platform.

Existing scholarship has laid a solid foundation for understanding the relationship between media, local memory, and sense of place, yet further refinement remains possible. For regionally embedded cultural lifestyles such as "Cantonese-style life"—rooted in everyday practice, historically layered, and highly recognizable—the processes through which they are symbolically represented on short-video platforms, negotiated by multiple actors, and accepted and reconstructed by cross-regional audiences have not been sufficiently examined. While prior discussions of digital sense of place offer valuable theoretical frameworks, empirical studies that integrate these perspectives with specific regional cultural cases and systematically analyze their micro-level production logics and identity-construction effects remain limited. Accordingly, this study takes short videos related to "Cantonese-style life" as its object of analysis, investigating the mechanisms through which they inscribe and reconstruct regional cultural memory.

3. Research design

3.1. Research method

Grounded Theory is a qualitative research methodology that constructs theory inductively from the bottom up, emphasizing the abstraction of conceptual categories from raw empirical data. Given that representations of "Cantonese-style life" in short videos are characterized by high fluidity and interactivity, making it difficult to directly apply pre-existing theoretical frameworks, this study adopts a constructivist grounded theory approach. Through systematic, multi-level coding of original textual materials, the study seeks to uncover the underlying mechanisms embedded in the data.

3.2. Sample sources

Following the principle of theoretical sampling, this study conducted keyword searches on the Douyin platform using terms such as "Cantonese-style life" and "Guangzhou cuisine." A total of 28 short videos with high numbers of likes and strong representativeness, along with their corresponding comment sections, were selected as the units of analysis. The sample encompasses diverse subject positions in an effort to capture the multidimensional process through which the memory of Cantonese-style life is constructed. The selected short videos originate from a range of sources, including local official accounts, cross-cultural bloggers, grassroots niche accounts, and public figures. Content types cover restaurant visits, cultural popularization, daily vlogs, and dialect instruction, among others. The video transcripts and associated comments were compiled into

approximately 45,000 Chinese characters of raw textual data, providing a substantive empirical foundation for a comprehensive analysis of the memory dimensions of Cantonese-style life.

4. Coding and category refinement

4.1. Open coding

Open coding involves fragmenting the raw data and assigning conceptual labels to meaningful units of analysis. Based on the collected empirical materials, this study extracted 10 categorical concepts and 28 initial categories through systematic coding (see Table 1).

Table 1. Open coding categories

Categorical Concept	Initial Category	Raw Data Excerpt
A1 Dietary Rituals	a1 Table Etiquette	At Cantonese morning tea, the bone plate is only for bones. If you put food on it, people will laugh at you for not knowing the rules.
	a2 Hygiene Practices	Cups and bowls must be rinsed with water; otherwise there is a lot of bleaching powder residue.
	a3 Taste Standards	The highest praise a Cantonese person can give a dessert: "It's delicious—not too sweet."
	a4 Ordering Sequence	No matter how the "Four Heavenly Kings" are combined, chicken feet are always the top choice.
A2 Neighborhood Services	a5 Meticulous Assistance	Even if you buy just five yuan's worth of meat for soup, the vendor will slice it for you.
	a6 Convenience Transactions	I'm lucky to be in Guangdong—when I buy just two sprigs of cilantro, the vendor is still willing to sell them to me.
	a7 Health Traditions	The elders at home say that if you have "internal heat," drink herbal tea; that's how it has been passed down for generations.
A3 Bodily Habitus	a8 Relaxed Demeanor	Short sleeves, flip-flops, and a bunch of keys in hand.
	a9 Slow-Paced Lifestyle	Early in the morning the whole family goes for tea, stays until noon, then naps in the afternoon, and in the evening discusses where to have dinner together.
	a10 Clarification of Local Terms	"Caiyuan" generally refers to the tenderest part of the vegetable.
A4 Documentation of Local Lore	a11 Anxiety over Authenticity	Morning tea nowadays has changed; it's all pre-prepared dishes.
	a12 Normative Instruction	In Cantonese you say yum cha; in Mandarin you say he cha. You cannot say "eat morning tea"—that sounds improper.

Table 1. Continued

	a13 Lexical Distinction	A strainer? How can you call it that? It should be called a "scooping ladle"!
A5 Dialect Boundaries	a14 Pronunciation Scrutiny	If you mispronounce "har gow," Cantonese people will cover their mouths and laugh.
	a15 Code-Mixing	Young people nowadays mix Mandarin into their Cantonese.
	a16 Pan-Lingnan Circle	In Malaysia we also speak Guangpu (Cantonese-inflected Mandarin) and say "key (suoshi in Cantonese)" the same way.
A6 Geographical Connections	a17 Bay Area Interaction	If the Shenzhen–Zhongshan corridor opens, I'll definitely rush over and pay the bill for you.
	a18 Cross-Regional Identification	I've lived in Guangdong for 20 years and already consider myself Cantonese. I love morning tea mainly because of the original taste of the ingredients.
	a19 Class Contrast	This is the lifestyle of landlords; for office workers, it's not something we dare to afford.
A7 Spatial Landscape	a20 Juxtaposition of Past and Present	Ride the ding-ding tram through the arcade streets of a century-old port city... then head to the Zhilian Automobile Town to experience cyber charm.
	a21 Dreamlike Spectacle	It's snowing in Guangzhou—while it's still summer! South China Normal University has welcomed the blooming of kapok trees, creating a summer "snowfall."
	a22 Safety Metaphor	The coolest contrast! Police officers transform in style... the police are always with you!
A8 Urban Narrative	a23 Official Discourse	Produced jointly by Guangzhou Public Security and China Guangzhou's "Flower City+."
	a24 Check-In Consumption	Xiaobu takes you to check in at Tianhe's trending food spots!
	a25 Celebrity Effect	Zhu Xiaotian really understands food; his analysis of every dish is very reasonable.
A9 Interaction with the Other	a26 Sino-Foreign Contrast	A foreigner giving a Cantonese local a Mandarin lesson? My Chinese bestie can't even speak Mandarin well—good thing she has me to teach her!
A10 Virtual Hospitality	a27 Cloud Invitation	Sister Dan, come to Dongguan for roast goose—I'll treat you.
	a28 Guide Consciousness	You should contact me; I can take you to try authentic, non-prepared morning tea.

4.2. Axial coding

Axial coding seeks to establish logical linkages among categories. Through clustering analysis of the open codes, four principal categories were distilled (see Table 2), corresponding respectively to the dimensions of space, body, culture, and emotion. Together, they form a multidimensional framework for understanding the construction of "Cantonese-style life" memory.

Table 2. Axial coding process and category connotations

Principal Category	Subcategories	Connotation
B1 Multidimensional Spatial Writing	A7 Spatial Landscape A8 Urban Narrative	By juxtaposing diverse urban spatial forms and integrating official and grassroots narratives, urban space is transformed into a safe and consumable cultural symbol, presenting the city's multidimensional image.
B2 Embodied Sensory Experience	A1 Dietary Rituals A2 Neighborhood Services A3 Bodily Habitus	Cantonese dietary norms and life rhythms are inscribed into the body as cultural memory, condensing deep-seated understandings of taste, etiquette, and health preservation.
B3 Negotiated Cultural Boundaries	A4 Documentation of Local Lore A5 Dialect Boundaries A6 Geographical Connections	Through cultural verification and discursive practices, local communities maintain epistemic authority over insider knowledge, continually delineating and reinforcing cultural circles and boundaries.
B4 Theatricalized Emotional Interaction	A9 Interaction with the Other A10 Virtual Hospitality	Through validation from external perspectives and affective practices in online space, the appeal of Cantonese-style life is strengthened, transforming digital public space into a warm, relational community.

4.3. Selective coding and theoretical saturation test

Selective coding aims to identify a core category capable of integrating all principal categories and to construct a coherent theoretical explanatory framework. Through in-depth analysis of the logical relationships among the principal categories, this study identifies the core category as "the dynamic construction of 'Cantonese-style life' memory within the digital field." Around this core, the four principal categories perform distinct analytical functions: foundational logic, regulatory reinforcement, driving force, and catalytic sublimation (see Table 3). To test theoretical saturation, three additional short videos and their comment sections—excluded from the original sample—were analyzed. The results confirmed that the internal properties of each category were sufficiently developed, and no new significant categories or relationships emerged. The theory was therefore deemed to have reached saturation.

Table 3. Relational structure of principal categories

Functional Path	Relational Structure	Path Connotation
Multidimensional Spatial Writing → Memory Production	Foundational Relationship	Through visual narration, physical space is reconstructed into a symbolic landscape, forming urban memory images imbued with aesthetic and symbolic significance.
Embodied Sensory Experience → Memory Reinforcement	Regulatory Relationship	Bodily practices and sensory norms transform abstract culture into embodied memory, strengthening cultural cognition and emotional attachment.
Negotiated Cultural Boundaries → Memory Drive	Motivational Relationship	Continuous negotiation of cultural boundaries—such as dialect and cuisine—reinforces group identity and promotes the formation of both exclusivity and consensus in memory construction.
Theatricalized Emotional Interaction → Memory Sublimation	Catalytic Relationship	Emotional performances, virtual hospitality, and the gaze of the Other constitute a digital theater that fosters the ongoing reproduction and deepening of memory.

5. Theoretical construction and mechanism elaboration

This study develops a dynamic model of memory construction of "Cantonese-style life" in short videos (see Figure 1), comprising four principal categories. Multidimensional spatial writing lays the symbolic foundation for memory representation; embodied sensory experience reinforces the internalization of memory through bodily practice; negotiated cultural boundaries regulate group belonging through discursive interaction; and theatricalized emotional interaction catalyzes the sublimation of memory through affective performance. These four dimensions operate interactively, jointly driving the continuous reproduction and circulation of meaning surrounding "Cantonese-style life" memory within the digital field.

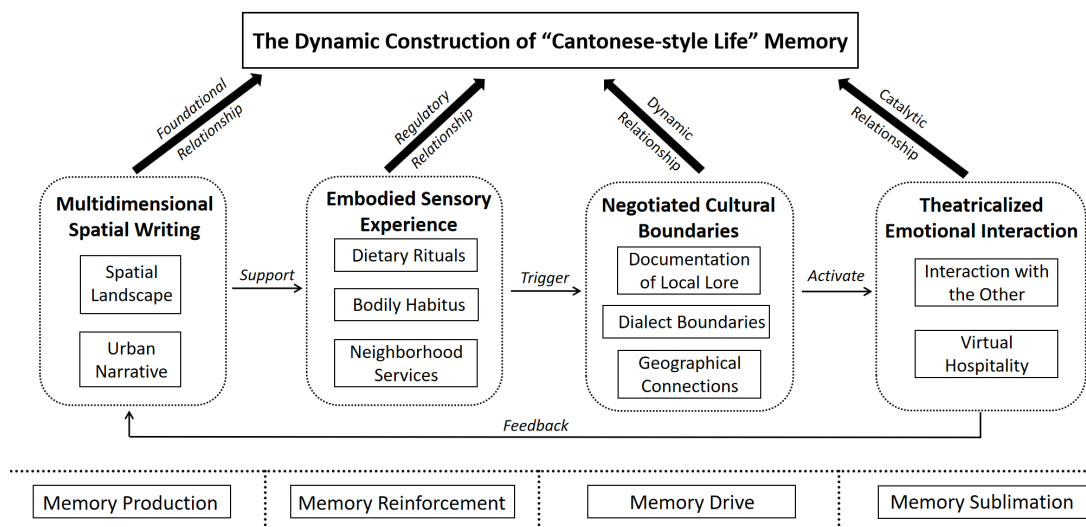


Figure 1. The theoretical model of "Cantonese-style life" memory construction

5.1. Memory production through multidimensional spatial writing

Multidimensional spatial writing constitutes the foundational mechanism through which short videos reconstruct the memory of "Cantonese-style life." Through distinctive lens language, montage techniques, and algorithmic logics, short videos fragment, reorganize, and project the physical space of Guangzhou onto digital interfaces, thereby constructing a multidimensional, folded, and temporally intersecting simulacral landscape. This mode of writing no longer serves as an objective record of geographic environment; rather, it represents an active production of space. It liberates the city from linear historical narratives and flattened promotional imagery, elevating it into a composite image that integrates historical depth, contemporary vitality, and future imagination. In so doing, it enriches both the layers and the depth of "Cantonese-style life" memory.

A central strategy of spatial writing lies in breaking single-dimensional representation and juxtaposing heterogeneous spatial forms. The streaming characteristics of short video enable fragments of the city—representing different historical periods, social strata, and functional attributes—to be assembled within the same visual sequence. Within these frames, traditional arcade streets (qilou) coexist with intelligent automobile towns; high-end CBD districts contrast with the everyday vibrancy of urban villages; historical quarry sites stand adjacent to trendy internet-famous scenic spots. Such juxtapositions synthesize the city's pragmatic and inclusive character into an organic whole, allowing diverse groups to locate emotional resonance within spatial narratives and thereby extending the reach of "Cantonese-style life" memory across broader constituencies. For instance, in a short video posted by "@Eating, Drinking and Having Fun in the Greater Bay Area," which links cultural and tourism resources in Panyu, the narrative logic shifts directly from Shawan Ancient Town and the Lianhua Mountain quarry site to the Zhilian Automobile Town, accompanied by the description "experiencing the charm of cyber aesthetics," thereby producing a cross-temporal touristic experience.

The construction of simulacral landscapes endows space with symbolic allure and enhances the communicative appeal of memory. Through rhetorical reconstruction and visual amplification, short videos transform natural and cultural settings into urban spectacles that transcend everyday experience. In a video posted by "@DITTO Visual," the southern blooming of kapok trees is imbued with the romantic metaphor of "summer snowfall." Similarly, a video by "@Flower City Vision" features Christmas snowmen paired with short sleeves and flip-flops, producing a localized reinterpretation of seasonal imagery. Such simulacral writing not only generates traffic hotspots but also renders space an affective carrier of regional identity, thereby intensifying the expressive force of "Cantonese-style life" memory.

The collaborative narration of official and grassroots accounts further constructs a sense of secure and tangible spatial cognition, consolidating the consensual foundation of memory. Official narratives emphasize themes such as police protection and urban infrastructure development, embedding metaphors of safety and confidence in progress. Grassroots content, by contrast, foregrounds culinary exploration and tourist "check-ins," reinforcing the consumptive and experiential value of urban space. Together, these narrative strands shape the city into an idealized image of being "safe, livable, visitable, and business-friendly." Under the dual reinforcement of security and attractiveness, "Cantonese-style life" memory acquires a more stable collective consensus. For example, "@China Guangzhou Release" posted a short video featuring police officers in stylish transformations, presenting their everyday presence as guardians of the public at all times.

5.2. Memory reinforcement through embodied sensory experience

Embodied sensory experience functions as the regulatory mechanism in the construction of "Cantonese-style life" memory. This experience is not an abstract cultural imagination; rather, it translates dietary norms, life

rhythms, and service philosophies into cultural memory through specific bodily practices and sensory discipline. The visual presentation of short videos, combined with interactive discussions in comment sections, renders this memory explicit. Previously implicit bodily habits are transformed into observable, imitable, and evaluable cultural credentials. This process does not merely transmit information; it activates users' preliminary cultural cognition and emotional attachment to "Cantonese-style life."

Dietary ritual serves as the core carrier of sensory experience, with its concrete etiquette norms constituting identifiable content of local culture. Table manners, hygiene practices, taste standards, and ordering sequences collectively shape the distinctive order of Cantonese cuisine. These rules are not merely practical skills of daily life but implicit thresholds that demarcate cultural belonging. Through collective discipline in short-video comment sections, such norms are reinforced, elevating eating behavior beyond physiological necessity. It becomes a performance of cultural identity and a procedure for confirming one's symbolic presence within the community. The acquisition—or correction—of dining etiquette is, in essence, a process through which the body is reshaped by local culture. As one commenter noted: "Brother, use the bowl to eat—don't put food on the plate. The plate is for bones. It's driving my OCD crazy; all I can focus on is the plate." (@Miss Deng from Deng Sheng Deng Tai)

Neighborhood services further highlight meticulous assistance and convenience, demonstrating a warm emotional linkage between bodies and the urban environment. Services such as slicing meat, deboning, and preparing ingredients—frequently depicted in short videos and comment sections—are constructed as elements of an informal, quasi-acquaintance-based service system. These practices transcend purely transactional commercial logic, transforming market exchange into embodied interaction infused with affective care. Neighborhood services thus communicate a people-centered urban ethos while establishing the "human warmth" of "Cantonese-style life" as its core competitiveness, and even building it into a localized cultural capital. Through symbolic circulation in short-video platforms, this service philosophy becomes a distinguishing marker vis-à-vis other cities. As one user contrasted: "Try that in the North—ask them to slice the meat. The boss would say: 'If you're not buying, get lost. Don't cause trouble.'" (@Beidouxing)

Finally, the relaxed bodily posture and slow-paced rhythm advocated in "Cantonese-style life" constitute attractive visual symbols and performances of habitus. Iconic dress styles, enduring health-preserving traditions, and an unhurried tempo collectively form a cultural stance resisting modern urban anxiety. This aestheticized and symbolized sense of relaxation represents both a cultural counter-narrative to high-speed metropolitan life and a poetic imagination of everyday existence. It becomes a focal point of self-performance for locals and of gaze and aspiration for outsiders, thereby consolidating a distinctive identity marker of "Cantonese-style life" at the sensory level. As one commenter expressed: "Yum cha, yum cha—tea washes away all the greasy food. Cantonese people love soup. Whether it's the light soups we usually make or the slow-simmered old-fire soups, they're all light in flavor." (@YOHE)

5.3. Memory drive through negotiated cultural boundaries

Negotiated cultural boundaries function as the driving force in the construction of "Cantonese-style life" memory within short-video platforms. In this open digital field, the cultural meanings of "Cantonese-style life" are not presented as fixed or static entities; rather, they are continuously delineated, defended, and reconstructed through discursive practices, knowledge contestation, and meaning negotiation among multiple actors. Through this process, cultural memory moves beyond a unidirectional model of transmission and reception. Instead, it is dynamically reinforced through interaction, strengthening in-group identification while simultaneously shaping both the exclusivity and consensual dimensions of memory.

The micro-operation of knowledge-power constitutes the foundational form of boundary construction, particularly in discussions centered on the textual research of local customs and material culture. Local netizens or cultural insiders frequently exercise authority through tracing the origins of named objects, differentiating traditional craftsmanship, or critiquing perceived commercial dilution. In doing so, they perform acts of cultural authentication and normative regulation, erecting a defensive epistemic barrier within digital space. This insistence on authenticity—often accompanied by anxiety—represents an effort to resist the simplification and homogenization of cultural symbols under platform-driven traffic logic. Users commonly express this guardianship of authenticity by nostalgically invoking the past or pointing out deviations in the present, as well as by correcting specific terminologies to assert interpretive authority at the level of detail. As one commenter reflected: "It used to be bustling—pushcarts moving around, you just took what you wanted and they marked it down. It had such an atmosphere. That flavor is gone now." (@Zhuang Sheng)

Dialect, as a core marker of cultural identity, plays a dual role of exclusion and connection in boundary negotiation. Issues such as pronunciation standards, lexical usage, and code-mixing in Cantonese frequently emerge in comment sections as sites of negotiation. When content creators or outsiders mispronounce Cantonese, they often encounter well-intentioned corrections or playful teasing, forming a flexible corrective mechanism. At the same time, "Cantonese-inflected Mandarin" (Guangpu)—a hybrid linguistic form—enjoys a considerable degree of tolerance on short-video platforms. The younger generation's natural insertion of Mandarin vocabulary into Cantonese discourse provokes concern among some conservative users, yet is regarded by many others as a natural process of linguistic evolution. As one user noted: "I like this localized Mandarin. And local languages should be preserved and passed down." (@Hidden Tenderness) More importantly, short videos facilitate a transformation of Cantonese culture from oral transmission to entertaining and visualized dissemination. Dialect-teaching content—presented through situational dialogues or slang interpretation—attracts active participation from cross-regional learners. While retaining its boundary-marking function, dialect thus expands its cultural reach and influence.

The interactive affordances of digital media further propel cultural boundaries from geographically bounded definitions toward fluid, identity-based expansion. Short-video platforms dissolve physical spatial constraints, enabling cultural connection grounded in shared lifestyle values and affective identification. Users need not be local residents nor physically situated in Lingnan to achieve a sense of symbolic belonging through alignment with the ethos of "Cantonese-style life." As one commenter expressed: "Morning tea is Guangdong people's culture! I'm from the Northeast and have lived here for 24 years! I love yum cha!" (@Hope) Through networks of identification woven from geography, language, taste, and emotional expectation, the cultural boundaries of "Cantonese-style life" are continuously redrawn and extended within digital space.

5.4. Memory sublimation through theatricalized emotional interaction

Theatricalized emotional interaction constitutes the key mechanism driving the continual sublimation and evolution of "Cantonese-style life" memory in short-video platforms. The digital field constructed by these platforms no longer functions merely as a channel for information dissemination and feedback; rather, it operates as an expansive front-stage space in which diverse actors—locals, migrants, influencers, and celebrities—participate in affective performance. Through value confirmation under the gaze of the Other, relational bonding via virtual hospitality, and the reproduction of memory through emotional resonance, interaction transcends the singular function of information exchange. The online public sphere is thereby transformed into a warm arena of co-created meaning, continually injecting vitality into the memory of "Cantonese-style life."

The academic notion of the "gaze," introduced by Jean-Paul Sartre, posits that the position of the gaze determines the division between subject and object [19]. In the sampled short videos and comment texts, value affirmation and symbolic feedback under the gaze of the Other constitute a pivotal link in the affective theater. The "Other," defined in relation to the self, refers to all persons and entities external to the self [20]. Experiential narratives by foreign vloggers, celebrities, and other non-local actors form a distinctive mirror through which "Cantonese-style life" is refracted and re-evaluated. Their curiosity about and appreciation for morning tea, Cantonese dialect, and neighborhood services trigger collective pride among local netizens. Through likes, comments, and supplementary explanations, cultural value is reciprocally affirmed. For instance, the foreign vlogger "@David in China" humorously portrayed his irresistible attraction to Chinese night-market cuisine, while "@Addy" documented her experience of teaching Mandarin to Cantonese locals as a foreigner. Such content generated extensive discussion, reflecting heightened attention to local culinary and linguistic cultures and reinforcing cultural confidence through external recognition.

More distinctively native to digital culture is the affective reproduction enabled by "virtual hospitality," whose discursive practices reconstruct interpersonal bonds within online space. Comment sections frequently feature invitations to treat others to meals or to guide them on culinary explorations—ritualized gestures that symbolically transplant the Cantonese tradition of hospitality and relational warmth into the digital realm. These "cloud-based invitations" dissolve the distance between strangers and transform online interaction into quasi-kinship sociality, rendering the human warmth of "Cantonese-style life" tangible in digital form. Such affective ties not only consolidate local identity but also cultivate emotional aspiration among outsiders, thereby expanding the communicative boundaries of memory. For example, beneath morning-tea videos posted by "@Ouyang Xiadan" and "@Zhu Xiaotian," numerous users left invitational comments. Through these linguistic practices, an imagined relational network is constructed—one anchored in "Cantonese-style life" yet transcending geographic separation.

Ultimately, this theatricalized interaction catalyzes a sense of digital communal belonging grounded in emotional resonance. By sharing personal experiences, childhood memories, and regional customs in comment sections, users generate affective synchrony. Whether reminiscing about dim sum, discussing Mid-Autumn dietary traditions, or expressing nostalgia for everyday street life, these individual narratives continuously enrich the semantic layers of "Cantonese-style life" memory. Memory thus shifts from unilateral authorial inscription to collective co-construction. Through this emotion-based reproduction, "Cantonese-style life" memory remains dynamic and resilient, sustained simultaneously within digital space and lived reality.

6. Conclusion and reflections

The "Cantonese-style life" depicted in the short-video era is not a mere replication of traditional lifestyles; rather, it constitutes a dynamic process of memory rewriting and identity reconstruction collaboratively shaped by multiple actors. This study finds that the construction of memory exhibits a complex, interwoven logic of practice. Multidimensional spatial writing, through cinematic narrative and symbolic reconstruction, transforms urban space into memory landscapes imbued with aesthetic and emotional appeal, carrying and disseminating local imagery. Embodied sensory experience translates local culture into tangible bodily practices through dietary rituals, bodily habits, and neighborhood services, forming the micro-foundation for identity recognition. Negotiated cultural boundaries leverage dialect use, documentation of local lore, and geographical connections to continuously delineate group affiliation within the tension between openness and exclusivity, thereby expanding the cultural-identity space in the digital age. Theatricalized emotional interaction, grounded in the gaze of the Other and virtual hospitality, constructs affective communities on

digital platforms, promoting the continuous reproduction and sublimation of memory through interaction. These four mechanisms are not isolated; they permeate and reinforce one another, jointly shaping the complex form and dynamic trajectory of "Cantonese-style life" memory within short-video contexts.

The digital sense of place constructed around "Cantonese-style life" exhibits intertwined characteristics of fluidity, interactivity, and innovation. Local meaning transcends geographic and social boundaries, and memory emerges not as a unidirectional transmission but as the product of negotiation and interaction between creators and users. Traditional cultural elements undergo creative transformation through modern media logic, maintaining their cultural roots while enhancing their vitality. Therefore, digital media does not simply amplify or weaken the sense of place; it reconstructs human–place interaction, generating a novel form of digital sense of place that combines traditional heritage with contemporary characteristics.

Despite the unprecedented exposure brought by short videos, potential risks warrant attention. Overconsumption of cultural symbols such as flip-flops or morning tea may obscure the complex realities of Guangzhou's working communities; the scenic framing of everyday life could weaken its role as a space for community social interaction. In content creation, balancing traditional cores with contemporary expression is essential, deeply exploring the cultural connotations of core symbols and avoiding their reduction to superficial visual spectacles. In interaction design, multi-stakeholder digital spaces should be fostered to encourage diverse participation in co-constructing and dialoguing about urban memory. In dissemination strategy, leveraging the Greater Bay Area's coordinated development plan can help shape "Cantonese-style life" as a shared regional cultural symbol, promoting cross-regional communication and layered penetration.

This study has several limitations. First, samples were drawn exclusively from the Douyin platform, omitting other platforms such as Kuaishou and Bilibili, which may introduce platform-specific biases. Second, the sample size is limited; while it reveals core construction mechanisms, it cannot comprehensively cover cultural symbols such as Cantonese opera or Lingnan architectural craft. Third, the qualitative approach lacks quantitative data, leaving the intensity of different groups' identification with digital memories of "Cantonese-style life" unmeasured, as well as its influencing factors. Future research could expand sample coverage across multiple platforms and content types, comparing memory-construction logic across different digital ecosystems. It could also explore the feedback effects of digital memory on real-world cultural practices—such as the economic impact on morning tea or tourism surrounding historical arcade buildings—deepening the understanding of the interplay between digital memory and lived culture.

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