

Research on Internet Nicknames from the Perspective of Sociolinguistics

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the study of Internet nicknames from the perspective of sociolinguistics. However, few studies on Internet nicknames talk about sociolinguistics and seldom discuss the causes and meanings behind them. Therefore, the paper investigates and classifies Chinese Internet nicknames and compares them with English Internet nicknames. We find that netizens in different countries and regions tend to use different online social platforms. The selection of online names is influenced by social, cultural, psychological, and other factors. And Internet nicknames can also reflect the above-mentioned social factors to a certain extent. Although Internet nicknames greatly influence our life, they also bring some problems to be solved.

Keywords: Internet nicknames, sociolinguistics, form, meaning, platform

1. INTRODUCTION

With the continuous popularization of the Internet and the rapid development of network language in today's information society, people are more likely to communicate frequently on the Internet. As a necessary identity label, Internet nicknames have become an inevitable trend. However, through existing studies, we find few discussions on Internet nicknames combined with sociolinguistics and studies on the reasons for the emergence of different types of Internet nicknames.

In this paper, through the investigation, classification, and comparison of Chinese and English Internet nicknames, we find that the choice of Internet nicknames is closely related to social and cultural factors. Both China and Western countries have different tendencies in choosing Internet nicknames, and there are also differences in forming them. In addition, netizens in different countries and regions tend to use different online social platforms, and their Internet nicknames also appear in different forms. And as the importance of network security becomes increasingly prominent, the real-name system also challenges the motivation of using Internet nicknames.

2. RESEARCH ON INTERNET NICKNAMES

2.1. Classification of Internet Nicknames

According to Wikipedia, an Internet nickname is what we use to prevent using real names on social media. Unlike real names, changing Internet nicknames is quite convenient. In modern society, Internet nicknames are common in our daily life, so we wonder why we'd like to use a pseudonym online and what phenomena they have brought up. We're going to begin with the classification of Internet nicknames.

In a more open public environment, the Internet nickname, as a personal code, does not need to be as severe and rigorous as the real one. It only needs to convey the user's identity. In the more entertaining network environment, an Internet nickname also has randomness, instability, and untruthfulness at the same time [7].

2.1.1. The Forms of Internet Nicknames

The significant differences in structure and composition have created the diversity of Internet names. Nowadays, most Internet nicknames are composed of

users' mother tongue, second language, second foreign language, special symbols or emoji, and numbers. There are also many collocations of text and symbols and matching of different languages [11].

Table 1. Classification of Internet nicknames on Twitter and WeChat(Chinese is the mother tongue)

Forms	Examples
Mother tongue	瑾燊
Second language	AyzeSym
Second foreign language	酔った东京空
Special symbols or emoji	37.2°C
A mixture of two languages	Backlight。逆光。
Text and symbols	Elena (๑•̎•̎)♣

2.1.2. *The Meaning of Internet Nicknames*

The influencing factors that determine the specific composition of Internet nicknames are usually closely linked to users' lives. According to the different content of the Internet nicknames, we classify it as follows.

Personalized Internet nicknames emphasize the user's personal lives, and the content is based on the user's emotion, study, and work. Personalized content can reflect people's psychological state, values, and aesthetic level. And the aggregation of a large number of personalized Internet names can also reflect the general mentality, aesthetics, and values of society.

Social Internet nicknames emphasize more on the integration of users and society. Society can cultivate different interests for people from traditional culture, literature, art, and minority culture. Therefore, the users' Internet nicknames may contain proper nouns in various fields. Through the social Internet nicknames, the contemporary characteristics of the times and popular topics will be reflected clearly, and we can also observe more social trends in different periods.

Functional Internet nicknames users take the names according to their profession, telephone, and mailbox, or directly use the system-generated random Internet nicknames. This is for their users to log in to the official website easily and fast and show their information clearly with authority.

Table 2. Examples of Internet nicknames of different content types

Content-type	Examples
Personalized Internet nickname	奶油鸽子精
Social Internet nickname	嘉然吃什么
Functional Internet nickname	清华大学

2.1.3. *The Platforms for Internet Names*

Official and authoritative platform users will directly use official names or add some auxiliary information to form their Internet nicknames, to maintain an academic and severe environment. The targeted audience of entertainment platforms is primarily young people, so there are more social Internet nicknames. Users in such platforms may choose game roles, time characteristics, different cultures, social-focused events, and interests as a part of their Internet nicknames. And this kind of Internet nickname can only be fully understood by the same user community. These nicknames also keep changing with society. In some social applications, users' demand for Internet nicknames is more focused on highlighting their characteristics, so most Internet nicknames are pretty personalized. People can easily get to know the users' personality, mentality, and living conditions through the Internet nicknames, even if there is no intersection between them in real life.

2.2. *Comparison of Chinese and English Internet Nicknames*

2.2.1. *Origin and Social Influence of Chinese Internet Nicknames*

In China, we originally considered Internet nicknames as a kind of sign to represent one's identification online. And with the development of netspeak, Internet nicknames have become increasingly complex [5].

The complexity of Internet nicknames is closely related to Chinese social background. First, Language is a social phenomenon, reflecting social changes. When society becomes more prosperous, people will also embrace a more diversified culture, causing the variety of Internet nicknames. And in turn, they also indirectly reflect users' mentality [6].

Second, the contents have Chinese characteristics, containing things in daily life like lyrics, literature, food, seasons, occupations, etc. Although with globalization, the contents and forms are manifold because of the joining of English and other languages, Chinese people are more likely to use Chinese characters in their nicknames.

Table 3. Examples of Chinese Internet nicknames from a popular Chinese platform, QQ.

Source analysis	Examples
From a Chinese novel	方鸿渐
From a Chinese idiom	辟蹊
From daily food	米饭大兔秃
From seasons	安于盛夏
English name and Chinese characters	归尘 Luna

2.2.2. Origin and Social Influence of English Internet Names

The origin of the Internet nicknames in the English-speaking region can be similar because they are language signs, after all.

First, especially in the cultural background of a melting pot, one cannot see the speakers on the Internet and have no idea about their sex, age, skin color, race, etc. Internet Nicknames are just a means of expressing people themselves. So once they use some references to imply their culture, ethnicity, and religion in the nicknames, their information can probably be inferred [2].

Second, just as in China, English Internet nicknames are also composed of things that the users like, and the difference is that they have their cultural characteristics. English is the most popular language globally, so most English-speaking people choose to use English nicknames. Only a tiny part of them name themselves by other languages they like or learn.

Table 4. Examples of English-speaking countries' nicknames from Twitter

Composition Analysis	Users' nationalities	Examples
English name and single letters	Canadian American	maxie@vacation Ariel VH
English words and Chinese	Britain American	super disco goth Ric/向日葵/
Spanish and English	American	PasiónBaske

2.2.3. Culture and Social Background of Chinese Internet Nicknames

Chinese Internet nicknames are closely related to Chinese culture and social background. In a comparative study of the fundamental differences between eastern and western cultures [10], the words used to describe the east are collectivism, interdependence, holistic view, change emphasis, multiple perspectives, the middle way, and panoramic view.

The Dutch management scientist Hofstede once proposed a Cultural Dimension theory, which divides five cultural dimensions to view the main differences between different nations. They are power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, long-term versus short-term, and indulgence versus restraint.

Some scholars believe the characteristics of Chinese Internet nicknames are more feminine under these dimensions [4]. The author further found the gender characteristics of Chinese Internet nicknames are not prominent, while most of them are "neutral." For example,

八零后 (post-80s), 星空飞叶 (flying leaves in the starry sky), 小黑鱼 (little blackfish). Chinese netizens deliberately use ambiguous words to protect themselves and hide their identities, making it difficult to determine users' gender by the Internet nicknames. Chinese implicit and indirect social culture is also exerting an influence.

Hofstede's long-term versus short-term theory suggests the long-term orientation of the Chinese. This orientation is pronounced due to the influence of Chinese classical culture. There are a number of screen names with classical cultural characteristics, such as 江上清风 (wind on the river), 花落飘琳 (the fallen flowers), 杨柳风 (the wind raised the willows), 零梅飘雪 (Plum blossoms withered in the snow). These examples reflect the obsession of some netizens with classical art, and they could not only show personal cultural literacy but also further promote the wealth of Chinese classical culture.

2.2.4. Culture and Social Background of English Internet Nicknames

English Internet nicknames also relate to western social and cultural backgrounds. Language is a social phenomenon, for language and society are changing together. The change of language reflects the shift in society, and the change in society will inevitably be reflected in language. Contemporary western countries are prosperous, and information developed. They also have many intensive competitions, and the pace of society is accelerating. On the western Internet, nicknames also directly present the characteristics of diversification.

In Swanbrow's study of the fundamental differences between Eastern and Western cultures, the west is described in terms: individualism, independence, focus on objects, categories, rules, logic, explain and prediction.

Li. C takes Hofstede's five dimensions and believes western Internet nicknames are more masculine than Chinese Internet nicknames. This is because of the differences in language structure in western countries and because western culture is more direct and open than Chinese culture. The statistics of western Internet nicknames by Bechar-Israeli [2] show many Internet nicknames about sex and provocation, such as hot chick. And some bold, creative Internet nicknames, for example, Snjeguljica combines Snow White with guzica (ass). In addition, some western Internet nicknames relate to some foreign popular TV series and movies, such as Coldplay (one of the British rock bands) carl-spiderman (the movie series); these Internet nicknames reflect the influence of foreign film and television culture. The cultural differences also make some western netizens have a weaker concealment mentality than Chinese netizens. For instance, Jenny, Simon0404, Lisa. It is not because they ignore protecting their privacy, but because they tend to

use their real names as their online names for habits, so it is easier to know the gender of each other.

Table 5. The Basic Differences between Eastern and Western Cultures

Eastern Countries	Western Countries
Collectivism	Individualism
Interdependence	Independence
Holistic view	Focus on object
Change emphasis	Categorises
Multiple perspectives	Rules and logic
The middle way	Explain and predict
Panoramic view	Focus

3. THOUGHTS AND PROBLEMS THAT EXIST

3.1. Users' Attitudes and Aesthetic Orientation

By analyzing different facets of Internet nicknames above, it can be found that they are highly personal. They can be seen as a form of self-presentation to show users' own identity and emotional performance. Meanwhile, the Internet requires these nicknames containing linguistics representations to present users' preferences. From the past reviews, users' attitudes towards nicknames come down to five main kinds: (1) it is not wholly similar to their true self; (2) they want to have intimate relations with some people or things; (3) they reveal something they fail to own in real life; (4) they attempt to pursue or resist fixed things; and (5) they have it just for self-disguise.

According to Heider's Balance theory, people's search for coherence between attitudes and relations with others makes the balance neutral. Accordingly, individuals choose nicknames in line with the online communities and specific social environments they belong to. This gregariousness reflects the needs of online community users to integrate into the online social environment when constructing their own virtual identities [8]. They can have social interactions with other users or receive social feedback from platforms. Ren et al. [9] found that focal users increased their mutual understanding through social interactions with other members and perceived each other's similarities, thus generating group identification.

As Luhtanen and Crocker [3] put the concept of self-esteem into social settings and group contexts, it indicates that users' choices of Internet nicknames are highly connected to the influence of Collective self-esteem (CSE). CSE prompts users to have a sense of belonging and collective respect, value, and goodness. These collective identities are more likely to make users feel satisfaction and happiness. Group identification plays a

major role in people's sense of who they are and how they think about themselves [1]. Accordingly, users choose appropriate Internet nicknames to promote their group identification and participate in various online activities.

3.2. The Reflected Problems

With the rapid development of society, some facets of Internet nicknames are still uncertain and unexplored. As many researchers refer to the influence of generating group identification, whether users' uniqueness and difference implied in their nicknames will be weakened by this. Whether most of the nicknames' features will reach unanimity and become unrecognized. Secondly, many types of research are limited to the scope of platforms. People in China prefer to use WeChat, QQ, and Weibo, while users in other countries may choose Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. This may reduce the accuracy of research. Finally, many platforms request users to register with their real names. This will make the Internet nicknames lose their privacy protection feature and reduce users' motivation for social interaction.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper introduced some related research on Internet nicknames, including the classification, forms, contents, and platforms of Internet nicknames. Then, we made some cross-culture comparisons between Chinese and English Internet nicknames from the sociolinguistics perspective and then found the social, cultural, psychological contributing factors and the orientation of users' attitudes and aesthetic orientation. All factors can have different degrees of influence on the Internet nicknames. But we also found some problems, such as generating group identification, the scope of platforms, and the privacy consciousness will bring some uncertainties.

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