

Indexicality and Enregisterment in X Discourse on Dalgona Coffee

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Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic produced a range of viral cultural practices that circulated rapidly through digital platforms. One of the most visible examples was Dalgona coffee, a whipped coffee drink that became widely shared on social media during early lockdown periods. While initially emerging as a simple recipe, the beverage quickly evolved into a recognizable symbol of lockdown culture. This study examines how Dalgona coffee became enregistered as a socially meaningful sign through discourse on X during the first phase of the COVID-19 lockdown (March–May 2020). Drawing on linguistic anthropological theories of Indexicality and Enregisterment, alongside Pierre Bourdieu's concept of distinction and perspectives from mediatization theory, the study analyzes a corpus of 126 English-language posts referencing Dalgona coffee. Using a qualitative discourse-analytic approach with a two-level coding framework, the analysis identifies both recurring linguistic patterns and the indexical meanings performed through them. The findings demonstrate that Dalgona coffee functioned as a condensed cultural sign indexing several dimensions of pandemic life. Posts frequently positioned the beverage as a temporal marker of early lockdown, a symbol of participatory belonging within digital communities, and a performative practice linked to productivity expectations during quarantine. At the same time, users engaged in reflexive commentary about the trend's virality, saturation, and eventual decline. These discursive patterns illustrate how repeated references and metapragmatic commentary contributed to the rapid enregisterment of Dalgona coffee as an emblem of pandemic domestic culture. The study contributes to sociolinguistic research on digital discourse by demonstrating how crisis conditions and platform infrastructures can accelerate the formation of culturally recognizable signs in online communication.