Digital Pragmatics and Meaning-Making in Online Communication: Rethinking Context, Intent, and Interpretation

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of digitally mediated communication has significantly transformed how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and interpreted. This paper argues that classical pragmatic frameworks, largely developed for face-to-face interaction, are insufficient for explaining communication in contemporary digital environments such as WhatsApp, X, and TikTok. Drawing on digital discourse studies and pragmatic theory, the paper reconceptualises context, speaker intention, and interpretation as dynamic, multimodal, and technologically mediated processes. Using illustrative examples from Nigerian and global online interactions, it demonstrates how emojis, memes, silence, and algorithmic systems function as pragmatic resources. The paper proposes an integrative model of digital pragmatics that foregrounds platform affordances, sociocultural knowledge, and distributed audiences. The study contributes to ongoing debates in pragmatics, digital linguistics, and language pedagogy by offering a framework for understanding meaning-making in digitally networked communication.

Keywords: digital pragmatics, multimodality, online discourse, implicature, Nigerian English, social media

INTRODUCTION

Pragmatics has traditionally been concerned with how meaning is inferred in context, particularly in face-to-face interaction. Foundational frameworks most notably the Cooperative Principle conceptualise communication as a rational inferential process grounded in shared assumptions and relatively stable contextual conditions (Grice, 1975; Levinson, 1983). These models assume identifiable participants, co-presence, and immediate feedback, all of which facilitate the interpretation of speaker intention. However, these assumptions are increasingly misaligned with contemporary communicative practices. The rapid expansion of digitally mediated communication has fundamentally transformed how meaning is produced, circulated, and interpreted. Platforms such as WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and online forums introduce new interactional conditions characterised by asynchronicity, multimodality, and audience multiplicity (Androutsopoulos, 2014; Tagg, 2015). Digital communication is not merely an extension of traditional interaction but represents a distinct communicative environment. It involves hybrid forms that blur the boundaries between written and spoken discourse while integrating visual and symbolic resources such as emojis, GIFs, and memes (Herring, 2013; Jones et al., 2015). These developments complicate the process of meaning-making, as interpretation increasingly depends on technological affordances and sociocultural knowledge.

In the Nigerian context, these transformations are particularly salient. Digital communication reflects a complex sociolinguistic ecology characterised by multilingualism, code-switching, and culturally embedded expressions. Online interactions frequently combine English, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous languages, producing meanings that are highly context-dependent and culturally situated (Kecskes, 2014; Varis & Blommaert, 2015). At the same time, digital environments reshape fundamental pragmatic processes. Meaning is no longer constructed solely through linguistic forms but emerges through interactions between users, platforms, and audiences. For example, a brief response such as *"Seen"* on WhatsApp may signal acknowledgement, indifference, or disapproval depending on relational dynamics and prior interaction. This illustrates that meaning is not inherent in linguistic forms but is inferred through context and interpretation (Yule, 2020).

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This paper argues that pragmatics must be reconceptualised to account for these transformations. Specifically, it advances three key claims:

- Context is dynamic, layered, and technologically mediated
- Speaker intention is multimodal and strategically constructed
- Meaning is distributed across users, audiences, and digital systems

By integrating insights from pragmatics, digital discourse studies, and sociolinguistics, this study proposes an expanded framework for understanding meaning-making in digitally mediated communication.

Theoretical Background

Classical pragmatics conceptualises context as a shared cognitive environment that enables interlocutors to interpret meaning (Levinson, 1983). However, this notion is challenged in digital environments where communication occurs across dispersed and often unknown audiences. One of the most significant developments in digital communication is the phenomenon of context collapse, in which messages intended for a specific audience become accessible to broader and unintended publics (Boyd, 2014). This destabilises the assumption of shared context and introduces interpretive variability. Digital discourse research further demonstrates that communication is increasingly multimodal, incorporating text, images, and symbolic elements as integral components of meaning-making (Herring, 2018; Georgakopoulou & Spilioti, 2016). These multimodal resources extend the scope of pragmatics beyond verbal language. In addition, studies of computer-mediated communication highlight the role of networked interaction, where meaning is co-constructed across participants, platforms, and technological systems (Androutsopoulos, 2020). This challenges traditional models that treat communication as a linear exchange between a speaker and a hearer. Furthermore, politeness and interpersonal meaning in digital contexts are shaped by new norms and expectations. Research in pragmatics shows that digital interaction involves evolving conventions that differ significantly from face-to-face communication (Kádár & Haugh, 2013; Taguchi, 2015). These developments suggest the need for a broader theoretical framework that accounts for multimodality, audience diversity, and technological mediation.

Methodological Orientation

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design that integrates conceptual analysis with systematically selected empirical data. While the primary objective is to advance a theoretical model of digital pragmatics, the study incorporates naturally occurring digital discourse to provide empirical grounding and enhance analytical credibility. This approach aligns with established practices in digital discourse research, where authentic online interactions are used to examine emerging communicative patterns (Herring, 2013, 2018; Androutsopoulos, 2014). In contrast to purely illustrative approaches, the analysis is based on a carefully constructed dataset of digital interactions, enabling the identification of recurring pragmatic patterns across platforms.

The data for this study were drawn from three widely used digital communication platforms: WhatsApp, X formerly known as Twitter, and TikTok. These platforms were selected because they represent distinct communicative environments, including private messaging, public microblogging, and multimodal content sharing, and are widely used within the Nigerian sociolinguistic context. The dataset consists of approximately one hundred and twenty interactional instances collected between January and March 2026. These include anonymised WhatsApp chat excerpts, publicly accessible posts and replies on X, and comment threads and captioned content from TikTok. The use of naturally occurring online data follows established empirical approaches in computer-mediated communication research, which emphasise the analysis of real-world discourse in context (Herring, 2018; Tagg, 2015). All data were handled in a manner that preserves user anonymity and removes identifying information.

To ensure methodological transparency and reduce subjectivity in data selection, a purposive sampling strategy was employed. Instances were included in the dataset based on clearly defined criteria. Specifically, selected

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interactions were required to exhibit at least two of the following features: the presence of multimodal elements such as emojis, images, or typographic variation; evidence of pragmatic ambiguity or inferential meaning beyond literal expression; inclusion of sociocultural or linguistic hybridity, particularly code-switching involving Nigerian Pidgin or indigenous languages; and direct relevance to one or more of the study's core analytical dimensions, namely context, intention, and interpretation. This form of criterion-based sampling is consistent with qualitative discourse analytic research, where data selection is guided by theoretical relevance rather than statistical representativeness (Androutsopoulos, 2014; Georgakopoulou & Spilioti, 2016). By applying these criteria consistently, the study establishes clear methodological boundaries for example selection and enhances the reliability of the analysis. The analytical procedure draws on principles from computer-mediated discourse analysis (Herring, 2013, 2018), complemented by thematic pragmatic analysis, which has been widely applied in the study of online interaction and meaning-making (Tagg, 2015; Georgakopoulou & Spilioti, 2016). The analysis was conducted in three stages.

Table 1: Data Selection Criteria and Analytical Coding Framework

Category	**Description**	**Operational Indicators**	**Example (Anonymised)**
Multimodal Features	Presence of non-textual or paralinguistic elements in the message	Emojis, GIFs, memes, punctuation, typography (e.g. caps, ellipses)	"You try □"
Pragmatic Ambiguity	Meaning not directly inferable from literal content	Irony, sarcasm, indirectness, multiple interpretations	"That's fine…"
Sociocultural Context	Use of culturally embedded expressions or linguistic hybridity	Nigerian Pidgin, code-switching, culturally specific references	"Omo, that thing weak"
Contextual Conditions	Features relating to communication setting and audience	Platform type, audience scope, timing, interaction history	Delayed WhatsApp reply after "Seen"
Speaker Intention Indicators	Signals of stance, tone, or communicative purpose	Emotional tone, emphasis, strategic ambiguity	"Noted." in workplace chat
Technological Affordances	Platform-specific features influencing meaning	Read receipts, likes, retweets, threading, algorithmic visibility	"Seen 2:45 PM" with no reply

Table 2: Sample Data Extracts with Coding

Excerpt	**Platform**	**Codes Applied**	**Interpretation**
"That's fine □"	WhatsApp	Multimodal, Intention	Signals dissatisfaction rather than agreement
"Omo, that thing weak □"	X	Sociocultural, Multimodal	Humorous negative evaluation
No reply after "Seen"	WhatsApp	Technological, Context	Interpreted as disengagement or resistance

First, all selected instances were systematically coded using the analytical categories outlined in Table 1. These categories include multimodal features, pragmatic ambiguity, sociocultural context, contextual conditions, speaker intention indicators, and technological affordances. Each interaction was examined for the presence of these features based on clearly defined operational indicators. For example, multimodal features were identified

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through the use of emojis, memes, punctuation, and typographic variation, while sociocultural context was captured through instances of Nigerian Pidgin, code-switching, and culturally embedded expressions. Contextual conditions were analysed in relation to platform type, audience scope, and temporal dynamics such as response timing, whereas technological affordances focused on platform-specific features such as read receipts, likes, and threading structures. Speaker intention indicators were coded through observable patterns of stance, tone, and strategic ambiguity, particularly in cases where meaning diverged from literal expression.

To enhance analytical transparency, selected data extracts and their corresponding codes are presented in Table 2. This table illustrates how individual instances were categorised and interpreted within the coding framework. For instance, the utterance "That's fine □" was coded under multimodal features and speaker intention, reflecting how the emoji modifies the pragmatic force of the statement, while expressions such as "Omo, that thing weak □" were coded for sociocultural context and multimodality, demonstrating the interaction between linguistic hybridity and affective signalling. Similarly, instances of non-response following a "Seen" notification were coded under technological affordances and contextual conditions, highlighting the communicative significance of absence and timing in digital interaction.

In the second stage, the coded data were systematically examined to identify recurring patterns across the dataset. Particular attention was given to how combinations of features co-occur, especially the interaction between multimodal resources and intention, the role of sociocultural context in shaping interpretation, and the influence of technological affordances on meaning-making. This stage enabled the identification of consistent pragmatic tendencies across platforms, moving beyond isolated examples to pattern-based analysis.

The third stage involved mapping these empirically observed patterns onto the proposed framework of digital pragmatics. Specifically, multimodal features informed the dimension of multimodal meaning, contextual conditions and sociocultural factors contributed to the notion of layered context, speaker intention indicators supported the concept of distributed intention, and technological affordances aligned with the dimension of technological mediation. This iterative process reflects an established practice in qualitative research, where theoretical constructs are progressively refined through systematic engagement with empirical data (Herring, 2018; Androutsopoulos, 2020), ensuring that the conceptual model is grounded in observable communicative practices rather than purely abstract reasoning.

The analysis is guided by three interrelated principles that function as analytical lenses throughout the study:

1. Attention to multimodal meaning-making
2. Sensitivity to sociocultural context
3. Recognition of platform affordances and technological mediation

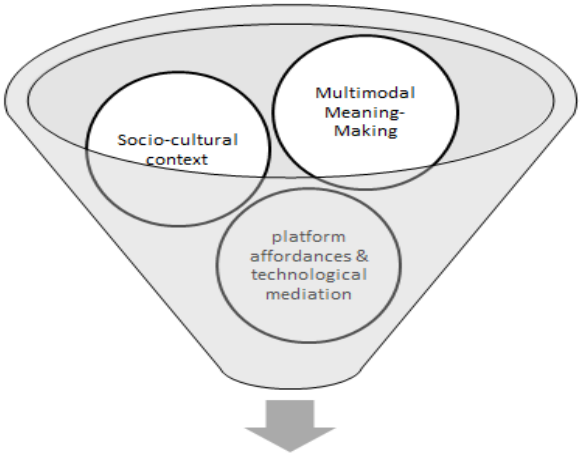

Figure 2: Study's analytical framwork

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Multimodal Meaning-Making

The first analytical principle recognises that meaning in digital communication is inherently multimodal**,** emerging through the interaction of linguistic, visual, and symbolic resources. Following computer-mediated discourse analysis, communication is examined not solely at the level of written text but also through accompanying semiotic elements such as emojis, images, punctuation, typography, and other platform-based features (Herring, 2013, 2018). Within this study, multimodal analysis involves identifying how these resources contribute to pragmatic interpretation. Rather than treating digital messages as purely textual utterances, the analysis considers how multiple semiotic modes jointly shape interpersonal stance, relational meaning, and communicative intent. This allows the study to account for the expanded meaning-making resources available in digitally mediated interaction.

Sociocultural Context

The second principle emphasises that meaning is deeply embedded in sociocultural context**,** including shared knowledge, linguistic practices, and community norms. Drawing on intercultural pragmatics (Kecskes, 2014) and digital discourse studies (Varis & Blommaert, 2015), the analysis considers how cultural frameworks shape interpretation. In application, this involves situating examples within their relevant sociolinguistic environments. For instance, Nigerian expressions such as *"You dey whine me?"* or *"Omo, that thing weak"* are interpreted not only linguistically but also culturally, reflecting norms of humour, evaluation, and interpersonal alignment. Similarly, instances of sarcasm or irony are analysed in relation to shared cultural assumptions that enable such interpretations. This principle ensures that meaning is not treated as universal or context-independent but as locally grounded and socially negotiated**,** even within globally networked platforms.

Technological Mediation and Platform Affordances

The third principle focuses on the role of technology and platform affordances in shaping communication. Digital platforms are not neutral channels; they actively structure interaction through features such as character limits, read receipts, typing indicators, likes, and algorithmic curation (Androutsopoulos, 2014, 2020). Analytically, this involves examining how these affordances influence meaning-making. For example, a WhatsApp "Seen" notification or delayed reply is interpreted as a pragmatic signal, while features such as threading or retweeting are understood as shaping audience reach and interpretive context. Similarly, algorithmic visibility is considered as part of the broader communicative environment that influences how messages are framed and received. By incorporating technological mediation into the analysis, this study recognises that meaning is co-constructed not only by human participants but also through platform-specific structures and constraints**.** While presented separately, these three principles operate in combination. Multimodal resources, sociocultural knowledge, and technological affordances interact to shape how meaning is produced and interpreted. For example, the interpretation of a meme may depend simultaneously on visual content (multimodality), shared cultural references (sociocultural context), and platform circulation patterns (technological mediation).This integrative perspective enables a more comprehensive understanding of digital pragmatics as a complex, multi-layered process of meaning-making**.**

Rethinking Context in Digital Communication

In digital environments, context can no longer be understood as stable, singular, or fully shared; rather, it is layered, dynamic, and continuously negotiated**.** Unlike face-to-face interaction, where participants operate within a common physical and temporal setting, digital communication unfolds across multiple temporal and spatial dimensions. Messages are often produced and interpreted asynchronously, meaning that they may be read and responded to at different times and under different circumstances. This temporal displacement introduces interpretive gaps, as the conditions under which a message is received may differ significantly from those under which it was produced. Such conditions challenge the immediacy and shared situational awareness assumed in traditional pragmatic models. A further complication arises from audience multiplicity**.** Digital messages are frequently addressed to broad, heterogeneous, or even unknown audiences. A single post may simultaneously reach intended recipients, peripheral viewers, and unintended publics, each bringing different interpretive frameworks. This phenomenon, often described as *context collapse*, increases the likelihood of divergent

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interpretations and pragmatic misalignment (boyd, 2014). For instance, a statement intended as humour within a familiar peer group may be interpreted as offensive or inappropriate by a wider audience lacking the same contextual knowledge.

In addition, platform affordances play a central role in shaping context. Features such as likes, shares, replies, and threading structures influence how messages are framed, circulated, and interpreted (Androutsopoulos, 2014). These affordances do not merely support communication; they actively structure it by highlighting certain interactions while obscuring others. In the Nigerian context, digital communication is further characterised by linguistic hybridity, where users fluidly combine English, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous languages. This blending produces meanings that rely heavily on shared cultural knowledge and local communicative norms (Varis & Blommaert, 2015). Consequently, context becomes not only technologically mediated but also culturally embedded and socially distributed**.**

Speaker Intention in Multimodal Environments

At the core of pragmatic inquiry lies the question of how speakers convey meaning beyond literal expression. Classical theory conceptualises speaker intention as something inferred through shared context and cooperative principles (Grice, 1975). In digital communication, however, this process is significantly transformed. In face-to-face interaction, intention is supported by prosodic and non-verbal cues. In digital environments, these cues are replaced or supplemented by multimodal resources, including emojis, GIFs, memes, punctuation, and formatting.

A simple example illustrates this shift:

- *“That’s fine.”*
- *“That’s fine □”*
- *“That’s fine □”*

Although the linguistic content remains constant, the pragmatic meaning differs substantially. The addition of emojis modifies interpretation by signalling affective stance. Emojis therefore function as paralinguistic markers, shaping how intention is perceived (Derks et al., 2008). In Nigerian digital communication, multimodality is often enriched by linguistic hybridity. Expressions such as:

- *“You try □”*
- *“Omo, that thing weak □”*

combine language, cultural expression, and visual symbols to convey nuanced meanings. These utterances illustrate that intention is not encoded in a single element but emerges through the interaction of multiple semiotic resources. Beyond emojis, memes and GIFs play a significant role in conveying intention. Rather than articulating a response verbally, users may deploy a culturally recognisable meme to express stance, humour, or criticism. The interpretation of such content depends on shared cultural knowledge, making intention both efficient and context-dependent (Shifman, 2014).

Stylistic features also function as markers of intention. Variations in punctuation and formatting can significantly alter interpretation:

- *“Okay.”* → neutral or distant
- *“Okay!”* → enthusiastic
- *“OKAY!!!”* → heightened emotion

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Similarly, ellipses (*"…"*) may indicate hesitation, ambiguity, or passive aggression depending on context. These features serve as digital substitutes for prosody.

Digital communication also foregrounds strategic ambiguity. Irony and sarcasm are widely used, often without explicit markers. For example:

"Everything is working perfectly in this country □"

In many contexts, this would be interpreted not as praise but as criticism. Such utterances rely on shared sociocultural knowledge and inferential reasoning. Importantly, intention in digital environments is shaped by audience design. Users frequently construct messages with multiple audiences in mind, balancing clarity with interpretive flexibility. This reflects a shift from speaker-centred models to distributed meaning-making processes (Androutsopoulos, 2020). A further challenge arises from the absence of immediate feedback. A response such as *"Noted."* in a workplace interaction may be interpreted in multiple ways—acknowledgement, indifference, or subtle resistance depending on relational context. This underscores the increased role of the reader in constructing meaning.

Absence, Silence, and Digital Paralinguistics

A distinctive feature of digital communication is that absence itself becomes communicatively meaningful. In contrast to face-to-face interaction—where silence is constrained by co-presence and often requires immediate interpretation—digital environments allow for extended pauses, delayed responses, and even complete non-response. These forms of absence are not neutral; rather, they function as **pragmatic signals** that participants actively interpret. For example, being left on *"read"* in a WhatsApp conversation may be perceived as disengagement, indifference, disagreement, or even subtle resistance. The meaning attributed to such non-response is highly dependent on relational context, prior interactional patterns, and social expectations. A delayed reply between close friends may be interpreted as normal or insignificant, whereas the same delay in a professional context may be read as inattentiveness or lack of urgency. In this sense, absence becomes a context-sensitive communicative resource rather than a mere lack of communication.

Beyond non-response, features such as typing indicators **("…")**, message delivery ticks, and response timing contribute to what can be described as *digital paralinguistics*. These elements provide cues about user activity and engagement, shaping expectations even before a message is fully delivered. For instance, the appearance and disappearance of a typing indicator may create anticipation or signal hesitation, thereby influencing how subsequent messages are interpreted. Importantly, these phenomena extend the scope of pragmatics beyond spoken and written utterances to include interactional behaviour and temporality (Herring, 2013). Meaning is constructed not only through what is explicitly communicated but also through patterns of responsiveness, timing, and silence. In digitally mediated environments, therefore, communicative competence involves the ability to interpret both presence and absence as meaningful components of interaction.

Algorithmic Mediation and Pragmatic Meaning

Digital communication is not shaped solely by human interaction but is increasingly mediated by algorithmic systems that influence visibility, reach, and engagement. Platforms such as X, TikTok, and Instagram rely on algorithms to curate content, prioritising certain messages while marginalising others. As a result, algorithms play a significant role in structuring communicative environments and shaping pragmatic meaning. This introduces a critical dimension of context algorithmic context which operates alongside social and cultural factors. Unlike traditional contextual elements, algorithmic processes are often opaque, yet they have tangible effects on how messages are interpreted and circulated. For instance, content that is emotionally charged, controversial, or highly engaging is more likely to be amplified. This encourages users to adopt communicative strategies that align with these dynamics, such as exaggeration, humour, or strategic ambiguity.

In practical terms, users often design messages with algorithmic visibility in mind. A tweet or post may be crafted not only to convey meaning to a specific audience but also to maximise likes, shares, or reposts. This dual orientation—towards both human audiences and platform systems reshapes pragmatic intention. Meaning is no

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longer negotiated exclusively between speaker and hearer but is influenced by how algorithms distribute and frame content. Furthermore, algorithmic amplification can lead to shifts in interpretation as messages move across different audiences. A statement intended for a local or culturally specific group may be recontextualised when it reaches a broader, global audience, thereby altering its pragmatic meaning. This reinforces the idea that digital communication involves circulating and evolving contexts, rather than fixed interpretive settings (Androutsopoulos, 2020). Consequently, meaning in digital environments must be understood as co-constructed across human and technological agents, with algorithms functioning as active participants in the communicative process rather than passive channels.

Towards a Model of Digital Pragmatics

Based on the analysis, this paper proposes a model comprising four key dimensions:

1. **Multimodal Meaning** – integration of text, visuals, and symbols
2. **Layered Context** – dynamic and distributed communicative environments
3. **Distributed Intention** – co-construction of meaning across participants
4. **Technological Mediation** – influence of platform affordances and algorithms

This model extends classical pragmatics by incorporating social, cultural, and technological dimensions of communication. It illustrates how contextual dynamics, multimodal intention, and distributed meaning interact to produce pragmatic interpretation in digitally mediated communication.

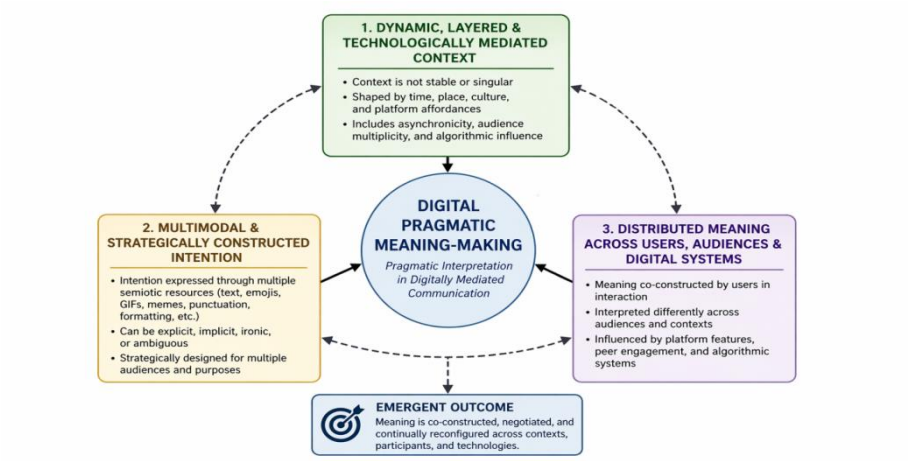

Figure 1: An Expanded Model of Digital Pragmatic Meaning-Making

Multimodal Meaning: The first dimension, multimodal meaning**,** recognises that communication in digital environments extends beyond linguistic expression to include visual, symbolic, and stylistic resources. Emojis, memes, GIFs, and typographic features do not merely supplement text; they function as integral components of meaning-making, shaping affective stance and interpersonal alignment. Meaning, therefore, is produced through the orchestration of multiple semiotic modes rather than through language alone.

Layered Context : The second dimension, layered context**,** reflects the fluid and distributed nature of context in digital communication. Unlike traditional models that assume a shared and stable background, digital interactions occur across overlapping temporal, spatial, and sociocultural contexts. Messages may be interpreted differently as they circulate across audiences, giving rise to shifting meanings and potential misalignment. Context is thus not fixed but continuously reconstructed through interaction.

Distributed Intention: The third dimension, distributed intention, challenges the assumption that meaning is solely determined by speaker intention. In digitally mediated environments, intention is often negotiated across participants, audiences, and interpretive communities. Users design messages with multiple audiences in mind,

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while recipients actively infer and sometimes transform meaning. As a result, intention becomes a collective and emergent phenomenon**,** rather than a fixed property of the speaker.

Technological Mediation : The fourth dimension, technological mediation**,** foregrounds the role of platform affordances and algorithmic systems in shaping communication. Features such as read receipts, likes, and algorithmic curation influence not only how messages are transmitted but also how they are interpreted and valued. Technology thus acts as an active participant in meaning-making, structuring visibility, interaction, and engagement.

Importantly, these dimensions do not operate in isolation. Meaning in digital communication emerges from their dynamic interaction. For instance, the interpretation of a multimodal message may depend simultaneously on cultural context, audience expectations, and platform-specific affordances. By integrating these dimensions, the proposed model extends classical pragmatics beyond its focus on face-to-face interaction, offering a more comprehensive framework for understanding meaning-making in digitally mediated environments.

Implications

Theoretical Implications

This study makes a significant contribution to pragmatic theory by demonstrating that existing models, which were primarily developed to explain face-to-face interaction, are insufficient for accounting for meaning-making in digitally mediated environments. Classical pragmatics has traditionally focused on spoken discourse, shared physical context, and cooperative inference between identifiable interlocutors (Grice, 1975; Levinson, 1983). However, the findings of this study suggest that these assumptions no longer fully capture the complexity of contemporary communication.

Theoretically, this study calls for an expansion of pragmatics to include multimodal semiotic resources, such as emojis, memes, GIFs, punctuation, and visual formatting, which now play a central role in shaping meaning. It also foregrounds the importance of technological mediation, highlighting how platform affordances and algorithmic systems actively influence communicative processes rather than merely serving as neutral channels. In this sense, pragmatics must shift from a speaker–hearer model of meaning to a distributed and networked model, where meaning emerges through interaction among users, texts, and technologies. Furthermore, the study contributes to ongoing debates in digital discourse analysis by proposing that pragmatic meaning is no longer stable or locally contained but circulates across platforms and audiences, undergoing reinterpretation in different contexts. This challenges traditional assumptions of fixed utterance meaning and supports more dynamic, ecologically grounded approaches to language use.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings also have important implications for language education, particularly in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts such as Nigeria. Traditional language teaching has often prioritised grammatical accuracy and lexical knowledge, while giving limited attention to pragmatic competence. However, this study shows that effective communication in the digital age requires learners to develop digital pragmatic competence, which includes the ability to interpret and produce meaning across multimodal and technologically mediated environments. Learners must be able to understand how emojis, memes, tone shifts, and stylistic variations influence meaning, as well as how silence, timing, and platform-specific features such as “read receipts” contribute to interpretation. Without this competence, learners may misinterpret messages or fail to communicate effectively in real-world digital contexts.

Incorporating digital pragmatics into ESL pedagogy can therefore enhance communicative competence by bridging the gap between classroom language instruction and real-world communicative practices. As Taguchi (2015) argues, pragmatic instruction is most effective when it reflects authentic communicative environments. In the Nigerian context, where digital communication is central to education, business, and social interaction, integrating these competencies is particularly urgent.

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Societal Implications

Beyond education and theory, this study also has broader societal implications. Digital communication now plays a central role in shaping public discourse, political engagement, and interpersonal relationships. However, the complexity of pragmatic interpretation in online environments means that misunderstandings are increasingly common, particularly in contexts involving irony, ambiguity, and multimodal expression. Understanding digital pragmatics is therefore essential for navigating issues such as misinformation, persuasion, and online conflict. For example, the misinterpretation of sarcastic or ironic statements can escalate tensions in online debates, while the strategic use of multimodal cues can influence public opinion in subtle but powerful ways. In this sense, pragmatic awareness becomes a form of critical digital literacy, enabling users to interpret not only what is said but how it is meant and how it is framed. In societies like Nigeria, where digital platforms are widely used for political discourse, education, and social mobilisation, strengthening pragmatic awareness can contribute to more informed, responsible, and reflective online engagement.

CONCLUSION

Digital communication has fundamentally reshaped the nature of meaning-making in human interaction. Unlike traditional communicative settings, where meaning is largely stabilised through shared physical context and immediate feedback, digital environments are characterised by multimodality, contextual fragmentation, and technological mediation. As this study has demonstrated, these conditions significantly alter how pragmatic meaning is constructed, interpreted, and circulated. The analysis has shown that meaning in digital communication is no longer solely dependent on linguistic form or speaker intention. Instead, it emerges through the interaction of multiple factors, including visual symbols, cultural knowledge, platform affordances, and algorithmic systems. This requires a reconceptualisation of pragmatics as a field that accounts for distributed, networked, and multimodal meaning-making processes. By integrating insights from pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and digital discourse studies, this paper has proposed an expanded framework of digital pragmatics that better reflects contemporary communicative realities. This framework highlights the need to move beyond static models of communication toward more dynamic, ecologically grounded approaches that recognise the complexity of meaning in digitally mediated environments.

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