A RESEARCH STUDY OF THE IMPLICATURE OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION: A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF MEANING MAKING IN SOCIAL MEDIA INTERACTION

Tehneyat Shakoor[1], Dr. Said Imran[*2],
Dr. Afia Tasneem Wasti[3]

[1]PhD Scholar in English, KUST
[*2,3]Assistant Professor of English, KUST

[1]hamzi194959@gmail.com, [*2]saidimran@kust.edu.pk,
[3]msaafia@kust.edu.pk

Abstract

The paper will focus on the use of implicature in the realm of digital communication, and how the context in which something is asserted affects the meaning of that assertion in social media communication. The research focuses on how people communicate indirectness in the digital realm using text, emojis, punctuations, and the hashtags considering the theory of conversational implicature outlined by Grice and the recent discoveries of the digital pragmatics. A collection of social media posts on Facebook and WhatsApp is analyzed to ascertain trends of implicature and considerations to be used to interpret them. The results suggest that context is an important element in the meaning of implied message in digital communication. Platform norms, the around discourse, and the nonverbal cues, such as emojis, punctuation, and text styles, are important influencing factors to gain better understanding of a message. Where these contextual factors are either missing or vague or they are perceived differently by the users, misinterpretation is likely to occur and hence the need to be sensitive to both linguistic and nonlinguistic representations in order to achieve effective communication in the online world.It is stated in the paper that the nature of the pragmatic strategies used in online communication is changing and it is important to pay attention to both linguistic and non-linguistic information to be able to communicate successfully in an online setup.

Keywords: Digital Communication, Pragmatics, Implicature, Social Media, Meaning Making, Online Interaction.

Introduction

Language is not simply a medium of passing literal information, but it is a way of passing implied meanings that are created by the context. The study of language in context is the pragmatics, and it gives us a framework with the help of which the speakers and writers communicate not only about the literal meaning of what they say. Implicature is one of the key concepts of pragmatics and proposed by Grice, which states that often the meaning is implied rather than directly expressed. In the normal day to day communication individuals depend on implicatures to express the nuanced intents, social undertones and indirect messages.As digital communication grew fast, social interaction space became the platforms of Facebook, and WhatsApp. Being dependent on the use of text, emojis, punctuations and hashtags, the digital interaction is compared to the face to face communication that is used to imply the pragmatic meaning. The problem of misunderstanding is widespread in the situation of the lack of or ambiguity of the contextual clues, which indicates the problematic nature of perception of indirect meanings on the web.

This paper discussed the nature of the implicature in online communication and the role of context in the determination of meaning in the context of the social media.

Taking the corpus of posts and messages published on Facebook, and WhatsApp, this study established some patterns of implied meaning, the way that the users use some pragmatic strategies, and the effect of the context on the meaning. Explaining such mechanisms provides understanding of the dynamic state of communication in the online context, as well as input into the larger field of discipline, known as digital pragmatics.

1.2   Research Questions:

●   How users employ text, emojis, punctuation and hashtags in expressing indirect meanings in such platforms as Facebook and WhatsApp?

●   Which forms of implicature are the most prevalent in the digital communication on these platforms?

●   What is the nature of ambiguity or misinterpretation in online interaction that is the result of the lack of contextual cues?

1.3   Research Objectives:

●   To investigate the beliefs that it is the form of text, emojis, punctuations & hashtags that are used to convey an indirect meaning in social media such as Facebook, Whatsapp etc.

● To identify and classify the types of implicatures which are used most often in digital communication.
● Bent on investigating the reasons and trends of misinterpretation in the absence where limited or ambiguous contextual cues is present.

1.4   Significance of the study:

The study is important as it enhances the knowledge on the construction and interpretation of implied meaning in digital communication settings. In the study of implicature in social media interaction, it not only extends the pragmatic theory beyond the traditional face to face background but also shows how inference can work across the text based, multimodal and algorithmically mediated contexts. The study uses the earlier models of Gricean pragmatics by demonstrating the role of cooperative principles and contextual cues in online communication where the tone, immediacy, and actual location are constrained. It also offers an empirical contribution using the examination of authentic social media data, which adds to more ecologically valid pragmatic research. In practice, the results suggest the creation of digital literacy, enhance knowledge of misinterpretation in online communication, and provide consequences to language education, intercultural communication, and the creation of intelligent systems that receive user generated text.

2.   Literature Review:

Pragmatics as a section of linguistics is concerned with the ways that users of language express more than the symbolic meaning of words. The theory of conversational implicature by Grice (1975) is the background of the development as it underlines that speakers commonly turn to common presuppositions and conversational rules, including quantity, quality, relation, and manner to convey indirect meanings. Implicature provides a way for the interlocutors to get to know the intentions , social implications lifelong hints without saying so. Studies indicate that implicature is predominant when meeting in a face-to-face communication, in which context, tone and body language are used to help in interpretation (Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996).

As online communication increases, there are researchers analyzing the functionality of pragmatics on the Internet. As Herring (2013) points out, platforms such as social media and messaging applications introduce new communicative standards and limitations such as a lack of textual space, asynchronous communication and the use of non-textual cues. Melodic, emojis, punctuations, hashtags and memes become pragmatic indicators that serve as complementary or substitution of paralinguistic clues of verbal communication (Danesi, 2017; McCulloch, 2019). Research indicates that they tend to support the expression of the emotion, or sarcasm or politeness, or as indirect requests, and as contemporary implicature tools in text-based communication (Ge and Herring, 2018).

There are also differences specific to the platforms that are conducted as research. The posts in Twitter and Instagram would like short and publicly performative words and most of the times require the reader to guess about the context, thanks to the hashtags or the mention of another user or of the previous posts (Tagg, 2015). WhatsApp and Facebook, in their turn, facilitate longer and more intimate conversation, where context can build up throughout several messages, and finer pragmatic tactics are possible (Crystal, 2006; Androutsopoulos, 2014). Lack of cues, ambiguity, or reliance on cultural factors are the most frequent sources of misinterpretations and outline the importance of context in online implicature (Vasquez, 2019).

In spite of these studies, there are still some gaps on the understanding of the work of implicature in a number of social media platforms in parallel. Little research has integrated textual, visual and paralinguistic indicators in one research as well as there is little empirical evidence on how platform norms, user approaches and context affect interpretation. This paper used these gaps with posts and messages through Facebook, and WhatsApp, patterns of implied meaning, and the way in which the context affects digital pragmatic strategies.

Other studies focus on the manifestation on multimodality in digital implicature as well. Social media posts and messages often involve some combination of text, images, emojis and other forms of graphics, which is a fairly complicated communicative act where the meaning depends on multiple channels. According to the scholars, the combination of these multimodal cues result in a better understanding of the role that implicature plays in the Internet (Herring & Dainas, 2017). Nevertheless, most of the research focuses on a single platform or a kind of a cue and there is a lack of knowledge about the functioning of implicature across multiple platforms and diverse digital situations.

Moreover, social media communication is a dynamic one and this implies that pragmatic approaches are always

changing. Platforms evolve the features and norms change so that the users invent new ways to express sarcasm, humor, or indirect request (Ge and Herring, 2018). The knowledge of such patterns requires the study of linguistic and extralinguistic signals in actual digital environments. In spite of increased research efforts, there are limited comprehensive studies that investigate several platforms in parallel, use multimodal cues and analyze the effects of contextual factors in systematic fashion.

3.   Research Methodology:

The research design Potential argument: The research design adopted in this study was qualitative research design because it focused on exploring the nature of implicature in digital communication on WhatsApp and Facebook, and how meaning was defined in both WhatsApp and Facebook based on the context. The qualitative approach was selected because it give a possibility to discuss the indirect meaning, settings and pragmatics of the interactions during natural digital interactions in detail.

3.1   Data Collection:

Only WhatsApp and Facebook were used for the data collection so that it could obtain the context of the private and public digital communication. A limited set of 20 items was created, consisting of the WhatsApp messages and Facebook posts/comments that were the ones of voluntary participants (messages N=10) and public (messages N=10). All the personal details like names and phone numbers, profile pictures were anonymized to curb the privacy.

The Facebook posts and comments were collected using the publicly available content, and the content sought was trending, relatable, and interactivity posts including status, posts that are humorous or emotive, and posts that receive the comments from a user. All the chosen posts or messages were selected since they may include some indirect messages such as sarcasm, humor, politeness, indirect requests or even social gestures.

3.2   Data Analysis:

The WhatsApp messages and Facebook posts/ comments obtained were analyzed by means of content analysis and discourse analysis so as to study implicature tendencies and context impact. All the items were closely scrutinized to trace the cases of indirect meaning such as conversational implicature, conventional implicature and the contextually-dependent interpretations.

The contextual factors that were included in the analysis included:

Emojis & punctuation, which tended to change the tone or suggest some implication of a message.

Context messages and history of messages especially in WhatsApp have several multi-messages in game with interpretation.

The platform norms, e.g. Facebook comments publicity vs. The internal WhatsApp messages Diction and style (humor, sarcasm, strategies used to be polite, etc.).

It is more likely that users would use a combination of text, emojis, punctuations, and hashtags to try to convey the meaning that was not directly conveyed. These were elements of pragmatic cues to indicate sarcasm, humour and being polite or hesitation.

Example from WhatsApp:

A: "Are you free tonight?"

B: "Not really… maybe later 😅"

Significance: Both, the ellipsis and the emoji, applied simultaneously are both related to hesitation and agreement without saying no.

Example from Facebook:

Status: The project is finalized. Comment: "About time 😅"

Exploration: The text and emoji are an indication of gentle derision. The comment may be interpreted as insulting or dislike if the sticker is not used. Punctuation and hashtags:

The users also used the punctuation marks such as the ellipses (the dots, dots, dots) or exclamation marks to denote uncertainty or excitement or tone. Facebook could describe humour, relief or accomplishment with the help of a hash tag, such as, finally done, relieved, etc.

It was examined that there were three broad categories of implicatures, which were commonly used: Conversational implicature:

WhatsApp example:

A: Please I need your help in my homework. "B: "I'm a bit busy right now 😬""
Explanation: B refuses to help by giving indirect refusal i.e. saying no. The refusal is made in a polite way with the help of emoji. Conventional implicature:
This mean that the meaning enclosed by certain words or expressions acceptable in the society.
Facebook example:

Post: Got one new haircut finally! Comment: "Looks interesting 🙃"

Meaning: The meaning of this phrase, looks interesting is an older meaning or implied playful criticism or teasing which should be understood to the social conventions, in this situation, the emoji.
Context-dependent implicature:

It has a high level of dependency on contextual messages. WhatsApp example:
A: "Will you join the meeting?"

B: As soon as I get a chance to do this job as Its focus is on context.

Out of these, conversational and context by the contextual, most common and threaded conversations would make more context to deduce in the case for WhatsApp messages. More open Facebook had more traditional implicature in terms of humorous or teasing comments.
Absence of the emoji, punctuation or contextual messages often led to misinterpretation in which the reader was only able to guess at what was intended.
WhatsApp example:

A: "Can you come to the meeting?" B: "I'll try"
Explanation: The fact that there is no emoji or any other context implies that I will try may be seen as willingness, refusal and uncertainty. The reason for the ambiguity is the lack of cues.
Facebook example:

Status: I was able to cook dinner without burning it. Comment: "Wow!"
Elaboration: The reader would not know for sure whether the person who commented on them is impressed or teasing them without an emoji or other comment.

Reason of Misinterpretation:
Digital communication does not provide non-verbal communication such as the tone of voice or gestures. In the case of the absent emojis, the punctuations, hashtags or thread of messages, the implicature of the intended communication is vague. This shows that context has a major role in an indirect meaning with WhatsApp and Facebook.

4.   Findings and discussion:
The results indicate that conversational implicature, context dependent implicature are most common in both the platforms. Refusal, agreement, criticism, or humor are implied constantly, by the users not mentioned. The conventional implicature is not as commonplace, but exists in the Facebook commenting sphere mostly when there is an additional meaning to the socially acceptable expressions.

The other significant result is the fact that in the absence of contextual cues, misinterpretation takes place. Words like "I will try" or remarks like "wow" cannot be understood without the use of emojis or the context around. In these situations, the readers are unable to find out easily whether the message is sincere, or it is sarcastic or not willing to.On balance, the observations mean that WhatsApp can be interpreted in greater context because of message threads and oneon-one communication, while Facebook requires the using of social conventions and communication that can be seen publicly in order to use implicature.

The outcomes of this paper support the major pragmatic theories, in particular, implicature of Grice who highlights that meaning is mostly implied but not declared. Use of indirect language in WhatsApp and Facebook is also an indication that people do use common assumptions and other contextual clues to communicate effectively in cyberspace. The eminent use of emojis and punctuation validates the findings of digital pragmatics research which supports the idea that these two components serve to replace nonverbal communication in face to face communication. Emojis can explain the intention of the speaker, minimize ambiguity, and keep politeness particularly in those situations where the speaker has to refuse or criticize something which can be considered as face threatening. This tendency is especially evident in WhatsApp chats, where the relationship that exists between people is a major issue.The fact that conversational and context dependent implicature are very common illustrates that digital communication has a high dependence on the context of a situation. Facebook users tend to use cultural norms, shared jokes and interaction more to derive meaning whereas WhatsApp users are driven by the history of messages to derive meaning.

The cases of misinterpretation supports the fact, that the context is a key to successful communication. In the cases without the use of emojis, punctuation, or other surrounding messages, the meaning is lost and is open to various interpretations. This observation leads to one of the significant problems of communication through the digital world, i.e., the lack of physical and vocal communication.

To sum up, it has been concluded that implicature is one of the most important aspect of Whatsapp and Facebook Communication. The users adapt the traditional pragmatic strategies to the digital environment by taking the textual and visual indications and using them in a creative way. These results help to understand more about the negotiation of meaning during online communication and to underline the role of context in minimizing misunderstanding.

5.   Future Recommendations:

This research may be extended by future research by applying larger and more varied corpus that covers users of various age groups, occupation, and cultures. A more extensive corpus helps the researcher to observe the use of implicature for various social identities and types of communication activities. A younger user can use emojis, abbreviations and humor more frequently whereas an older user might use more direct language and this has different results in the patterns of indirect meaning.

The inclusion of subjects of different professions may also help to demonstrate the impact of the institutional and workplace norms on the shaping of implicature.

Politeness, indirectness, and formality are more likely to prevail in professional communication than other contexts, for example, more playful or ambiguous implicatures can be employed in cases of casual communication, or peer-to-peer communication. Such differences can be analysed to determine the impact of social roles over digital communication pragmatic choices.

The other issue that is important in the explanation of implicature is the cultural background. There are the cultural rules that govern the use of politeness, sarcasm, criticism and humor, and how it is understood. A smile or other emoji may be a different meaning in a different country. Investigation of cross-cultural data will give future researches a chance to understand potential points of misunderstanding between international digital communication and show that knowledge of common cultural values leads to successful communication.

In general, the increased and more diversified corpus could represent a better picture of the way in which implicature is differentiated by social and cultural factors and enhance the generalizability of results and bring to a more representative picture of digital pragmatics.

6.   Conclusion:

This paper looked at the use of implicature in the field of online communication, and this was used to have an impact on the meaning achieved within the context of WhatsApp and Facebook communication. The results

revealed the users tend to communicate non-verbally using textual decision, emojis, punctuation, and contextual clues as opposed to direct communication. These very practical measures helped to be polite, hesitant, entertaining, and slightly critical and still be socially in tune during the digital communication.

The discussion revealed that conversational and context dependent implicatures were the most common ones in both platforms. Communication via WhatsApp offered some extra contextual interpretation in terms of the sequencing of the message and ability to communicate in private when compared to Facebook communication as Facebook employs social norms and discourse to bring about implied meaning to a greater extent. The features of platforms therefore became essential in the development of pragmatic behavior.

It was also pointed out in the study that the absence or lack of contextual cues led to the misinterpretations which emphasized the role of context in ensuring that meaning negotiation in digital communication was successful. On the whole, the results also served to support the idea that classical pragmatic theories and, especially, the concept of implicature developed by Grice, are still applicable to modern online setting. This study has made contributions toward digital pragmatics through describing how users customized the conventional pragmatic strategies to the new communication mediums and uncovered the importance of being more aware of contextual messages as a means of avoiding misunderstandings in the online communication environment.

7. References:

Tagg, C. (2015). Exploring digital communication: Language in action. Routledge.

Thurlow, C., Lengel, L., & Tomic, A. (2004). Computer mediated communication Social interaction and the Internet. Sage.

Kamsinah, K., Natsir, N., & Aliah, N. (2024). Pragmatic analysis in digital communication: A case study of language use on social media. International Journal of Economics, Commerce, and Management, 1(4), 375–383. https://doi.org/10.62951/ijecm.v1i4.259

Putra, A. S., Dianti, H. R., & Putri, I. C. (2025). The impact of social media on pragmatic understanding among students. Reflection Journal, 4(1), Article 2010. https://doi.org/10.36312/rj.v4i1.2010

AlMamoory, S. M. A., & Al-Khazaali, T. W. (2024). Linguistic strategy in online digital communication: A pragmatic study. Journal of Media, Culture and Communication, 4(03), 10–21. https://doi.org/10.55529/jmcc.43.10.21

Thomas, J. (1995). Meaning in interaction: An introduction to pragmatics. Longman.

Herring, S. C., & Dainas, A. R. (2017). "Nice picture comment!" Graphicons in Facebook comment threads. Proceedings of the 50th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, 2185–2194. https://doi.org/10.24251/HICSS.2017.264

Riordan, M. A. (2017). Emojis as tools for emotion work in texting. Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 36(5), 549–567. https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X17704238

Bou Franch, P., & Garcés Conejos Blitvich, P. (2019). Analyzing digital discourse: New insights and future directions. Palgrave Macmillan.

Noor, A., Waheed, A., Gull, N., Khattak, A., & Rehman, S. U. (2025). Communication: A pragmatic analysis of social media—Speech acts and politeness strategies in online interaction. Journal of Applied Linguistics and TESOL (JALT), 8(1).

Mahmood, R., Ghani, M. U., & Shah, A. H. (2020). Pragmatic competence and implicature: Learning process of Pakistani graduates in English. Asian EFL Journal, 27(51).

Sarwar, M., Ramzan, R. M., Memon, R., & Rehman, Z. (2025). The linguistic impact of social media: A thematic analysis of language change in the digital age. Journal of Applied Linguistics and TESOL (JALT), 8(4). https://doi.org/10.63878/jalt1427

Eragamreddy, N. (2025). Implicature in digital communication: A content analysis of online text-based interactions. International Journal of Social Science Humanity & Management Research, 4(06), 1066–1076. https://doi.org/10.58806/ijsshmr.2025.v4i6n08.