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Digital silence as a pragmatic strategy: An intercultural qualitative study of online group chats in crisis situations

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Abstract
Purpose: This study investigates digital silence as a pragmatic strategy in online group chats during crisis situations, focusing on its cross-cultural functions and interpretations**.**
Research methodology: Using a qualitative discourse-pragmatic framework, data were collected from 30 online group chats across Arabic-speaking, Western, and East Asian groups, and analyzed for patterns of silence.
Results: Findings reveal that digital silence is universally used but culturally interpreted. In Arabic-speaking groups, silence often conveys politeness or emotional overwhelm; in Western contexts, it may suggest avoidance; and in East Asian cultures, it can indicate deference or restraint.
Conclusions: Digital silence operates as a strategic communicative act shaped by cultural expectations.
This study addressed three research questions. First, digital silence is used pragmatically in online group chats during crises to convey politeness, emotional regulation, resistance, and ambiguity. Second, it serves functions such as mourning, face-saving, strategic withdrawal, and deference. Third, these functions vary culturally: in Arabic-speaking contexts, silence often reflects solidarity and emotion; in Western groups, it can imply resistance or discomfort; and in East Asian settings, it demonstrates restraint and hierarchy.
Limitations: The research is limited to group chats during specific types of crises, and findings may not generalize to all online interactions.
Contribution: This study contributes to digital pragmatics and intercultural communication by illuminating the nuanced role of silence in crisis discourse.

Keywords: *Crisis Communication, Cross-cultural, Digital silence, Group Chat, Pragmatics*

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1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital communication has transformed the way individuals engage with one another, particularly in high-stress contexts such as crises. Among the evolving features of this interaction is the phenomenon of digital silence—an absence of response that carries pragmatic significance. Unlike physical silence, digital silence manifests as a delayed reply, a "seen" message left unanswered, or even prolonged inactivity during ongoing group interactions. These silences are not accidental; they often carry communicative intent and socio-pragmatic meanings. This study explores the use of digital silence as a pragmatic strategy in online group chats during crises, with a specific focus on cross-cultural differences. In times of crisis, communication often takes on heightened

emotional, social, and political stakes, and silence becomes more than passive absence. This becomes a strategic and context-sensitive move. This study seeks to address the following research question:

1. How is digital silence pragmatically used in online group chats during crises?
2. What functions does digital silence serve in such interactions?
3. How do these functions vary across Arabic-speaking, Western and East Asian digital cultures?

To answer these questions, this study employs qualitative discourse analysis of selected group chat interactions from three cultural contexts. It adopts a pragmatic framework informed by Gricean maxims (Grice (1975), politeness theory, and cross-cultural communication theory (Hofstede, 2021; Locher & Graham, 2010). This study is novel in its focus on how silence—typically seen as absence—is reimagined as a strategic communicative act shaped by culture, technology, and crisis context. Unlike prior studies limited to spoken or monolingual discourse, this research uses real-time, multilingual, and multicultural digital conversations to reveal silence's dynamic pragmatic potential

2. Literature review

2.1 Silence in Pragmatics

Silence has long been recognized as a communicative act in pragmatic theory. Early work by Grice ’s(1975) Cooperative Principle suggests that communicative contributions must adhere to the maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner. In this framework, silence may flout one of these maxims—especially quantity—thereby generating implicature (Grice, 1975). For instance, a participant in a group chat who fails to reply to a request may be interpreted as refusing or disapproving of the request without overtly saying so.

A. Jaworski (1997) extended this by arguing that silence can be a full-fledged pragmatic act, capable of conveying politeness, dissent, agreement, or disengagement depending on context (p. 19). He emphasizes that the meaning of silence is relationally and culturally constructed and not inherently fixed. Likewise, Saville and Troike (2003) posited that silence is a sociolinguistic universal, but with culture-specific functions, norms, and expectations (p. 6). In face-threatening situations, silence serves as a protective device. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), speakers often avoid direct face threats by opting for indirect or non-verbal strategies, including silence (p. 62). For example, when a group member disagrees with a dominant opinion during a crisis, choosing to remain silent can function as a form of negative politeness that avoids direct confrontation.

2.2 Digital Communication and Pragmatic Shifts

With the rise of digital communication, particularly mobile messaging and social media, silence has been transformed. In synchronous digital interactions (e.g., WhatsApp or Telegram group chats), silence is now visible and measurable in the form of ghosting. Indicators such as "seen" or "last online" complicate the traditional pragmatics of silence. Herring (2007) and Herring and Androutsopoulos (2015) introduced the concept of computer-mediated discourse (CMD), arguing that digital platforms alter traditional turn-taking, timing, and coherence (p. 129). In group chats, delayed or absent responses no longer mean "not heard" but rather become interpretable silences, potentially implying disapproval, disengagement, or emotional distress.

Tannen (2018) points out that in digital communication, “silence is not neutral”—it is often read by interlocutors as meaningful, intentional, and relationally loaded (p. 114). This is particularly true during emotionally charged exchanges, such as crisis discussions, where digital silence is magnified. Furthermore, Dakoru (2025) highlights that on messaging platforms, "doing nothing" can be a social act, especially when others expect participation (p. 73). In such cases, silence becomes a social signal rather than an absence of communication.

2.3 Digital Silence as a Strategy

Scholars have increasingly turned their attention to silence as a strategic communication move. In digital discourse, strategic silence is used for a variety of purposes: to resist, delay, protest, manage emotional labor, or signal power. A. Jaworski and Coupland (1999) discuss how silence can be wielded as power, particularly in institutional and hierarchical settings (p. 94). For example, a group admin who

deliberately ignores questions may assert dominance through inaction. In crisis communication, silence often serves as an emotional coping mechanism. According to Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Bou-Franch (2019), emotional intensity in digital interactions prompts users to pause, delay, or withdraw, especially when linguistic expression fails to capture complex emotional states (p. 69). This emotional overload may explain the silence in trauma-related group chats.

Additionally, Ide and Ehlich (2005) argue that silence online can be both face-threatening and face-saving, depending on the speaker's intention and the listener's interpretation (p. 19). This duality makes digital silence a uniquely pragmatic challenge for organizations. From a sociopragmatic perspective, Locher and Graham (2010) classify digital silence as a form of relational work, either maintaining harmony or expressing detachment (p. 16). This ambiguity is central to the present study, especially in cultural contexts where norms for engagement and withdrawal differ significantly.

2.4 Cross -Cultural Pragmatics

The interpretation of silence is deeply culture dependent. As Edward T. Locher and Graham (2010) famously classified, high-context cultures (e.g., Japan, Arab countries) rely more on indirectness and non-verbal cues—including silence—than low-context cultures (e.g., the US, Germany) which emphasize explicit verbal expression (p. 91). In high-context cultures, silence may be perceived as thoughtful, respectful, or strategic, whereas in low-context cultures, it may be perceived as rude or evasive. Gudykunst and Nishida (1986) explain that members of collectivist cultures tend to tolerate ambiguity and silence as they prioritize group harmony over individual expression (p. 34). In contrast, individualist cultures may interpret silence as avoidance or passive aggressiveness.

For example, Nakane (2006), studying silence among Japanese students in Australian classrooms, shows that Japanese silence was often interpreted by Australians as a lack of knowledge, while in Japanese culture, it signified deference or humility (p. 88). This mismatch in interpretation is likely to occur in digital group chats, especially during crises. In Arabic-speaking cultures, Samarah and Husein (2022) found that silence in online discourse often carries emotional and moral weight, particularly during conflicts. It is used not only to avoid confrontation but also to signal solidarity or mourning (p. 17). This socio-religious dimension of silence adds a layer of complexity to the analysis of group chats during wartime or natural disasters. Moreover, Hofstede's (2021) cultural dimensions—particularly power distance and uncertainty avoidance—further explain why digital silence might be more acceptable or strategic in one culture and face-threatening in another (p. 106).

Recent scholarship has expanded our understanding of digital silence. Ali and Zhang (2023) examine how strategic silence functions in digital protest discourse across Arabic and Western groups, while Lee (2024) explores how pragmatic norms shift during group-based crisis communication online. These studies underscore the relevance of digital silence as culturally embedded and pragmatically potent. Pragmatics, the study of language use in context, has long addressed the role of silence in interaction. However, digital platforms have introduced new complexities to the concept of silence, particularly in real-time group interactions. Existing research on silence primarily focuses on spoken discourse or formal written contexts. There is limited scholarship on digital silence in informal real-time group communication, especially across cultures. This study employs qualitative discourse analysis grounded in pragmatic theory and cross-cultural communication to explore silence not merely as an absence but as an intentional, interpretable action.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, cross-cultural, and discourse-pragmatic approach to investigate the functions of digital silence in group chats during crises. The aim is to understand how digital silence is strategically used and how its interpretation varies across cultures. A comparative case study design was used to analyze chat data from Arabic-speaking, Western, and East Asian countries. This research is rooted in pragmatic theory (Brown & Levinson (1987); (Grice, 1975), complemented by cross-cultural communication frameworks (Hofstede, 2021; Locher & Graham, 2010). Discourse data were

manually coded for instances of silence and analyzed for pragmatic function. Alabdali (2019) revisits Brown and Levinson (1987) model in the light of digital messaging, identifying new patterns of politeness through silence. Hayati and Sinha (2024)suggests that team-based digital communication often tolerates silence as an implicit coordination strategy. El-Masry and Yoon (2021) explored silence across Arab and Korean contexts, highlighting empathy and restraint in digital responses. Park and Chen (2020) found that cultural expectations significantly affect perceptions of crisis silence in group chats. Nguyen (2023) reframes silence as an active sociopragmatic move, especially during intercultural digital interactions.

Building on Tannen's foundational work, Ibrahim (2021) emphasized how silence has evolved across social media environments. This supports Chan and Matsuura's (2022) argument that implicature in digital silence is increasingly shaped by platform visibility. To ensure the validity of the analysis, triangulation was applied by cross-checking the interpretations with native speakers and cultural experts for each language group. A notable limitation was the difficulty in accessing real-time data in East Asian languages, which required translation assistance and cultural interpretation. In some cases, linguistic nuances may have been filtered out during translation, potentially affecting subtle pragmatic cues.

3.2 Data Collection

Data were collected from 30 authentic online group chats (10 per culture group), involving conversations during crisis events (e.g., natural disasters, conflicts, and pandemics). The platforms included WhatsApp, Telegram, and Facebook Messenger. The data were gathered between 2020 and 2024, with participants' names anonymized, and all annotations were done manually.

3.2.2 Sampling & Coding

The 15 chosen samples included:

- 10 Arabic-speaking groups (Iraq, Jordan, Egypt)
- 10 Western groups (USA, UK, Canada)
- 10 East Asian groups (Japan, China, South Korea)

Each group included 6–12 participants (students, professionals, and families). The groups were active during at least one major crisis, and digital silence events were extracted when they occurred in response to emotionally or socially relevant messages.

3.2.1 Silence was defined as

- No reply within 12+ hours in an active chat
- "Seen" or "read" indicators followed by no response
- Skipping over a message in an ongoing conversation
- Ignoring a question or request

Each instance was coded according to the following:

- Pragmatic function (e.g., politeness, resistance)
- Cultural interpretation (based on group origin)
- Contextual triggers (crisis type, participant role)

3.3 Data Analysis & Findings

Each cultural group demonstrated distinct silent behaviors. Arabic-speaking groups leaned toward silence for emotional solidarity and risk avoidance. Western groups often displayed silence in the form of passive resistance or ambiguity. East Asian participants used silence to maintain hierarchy and emotional equilibrium.

Table (1) Functions of digital silence for each group

Culture	Functions of Digital Silence	Common Interpretations
Arabic-speaking	Politeness, mourning, strategic ambiguity	Respect, grief, face-saving
Western	Avoidance, resistance, discomfort	Disinterest, disagreement, emotional withdrawal

East Asian	Deference, emotional regulation, ritual silence	Respect, humility, strategic pause

4. Result and discussion

The following table presents 15 selected samples from online group chat interactions during various crisis situations, categorized by cultural region: Arabic-speaking, Western, and East Asian. Each sample illustrated a unique instance of digital silence, which refers to the absence or delay of response in group messaging apps (e.g., WhatsApp or Telegram). These silences are not empty; they serve pragmatic functions such as politeness, emotional regulation, avoidance, protest, or solidarity. The analysis identifies how silence is interpreted differently across cultural contexts, depending on norms, emotional intensity, and sociopolitical constraints. These findings are grounded in cross-cultural pragmatic theories and supported by relevant scholarly references.

Table 2. Pragmatic Functions of Digital Silence in Cross-Cultural Group Chats During Crisis Situations

No	Sample & Group (Country)	Chat Context	Quoted Message	Response	Pragmatic Function	Analysis & Reference
1	Arabic Group (Iraq)	Protest clashes	"I just heard the police opened fire downtown. Anyone from our region, okay?"	Seen by Layla, Yassin, Marwa. No reply in 14 hours	Emotional overwhelm; passive solidarity	Silence interpreted as muted grief. In Arab culture, silence signifies respect and mourning. (Samarah & Husein, 2022)
2	Western Group (USA)	COVID outbreak in office	"Should we report HR...?"	Seen by Mike, Brian. No reply in 16 hours	Avoidance; conflict aversion	Silence read as disagreement. In low-context culture, silence violates clarity norms. (Locher & Graham, 2010)
3	East Asian Group (Japan)	Earthquake aftermath	"We are safe here. Hope you all are too."	Seen by 5. Reply after 10 hours: “Thank you.”	Respect; emotional regulation	Silence reflects politeness and emotional restraint in Japanese culture. (Nakane, 2006)
4	Arabic Group (Jordan)	Rumors of war mobilization	"Is it true the border will be closed tomorrow?"	Seen by 8. No reply for 1 day	Strategic ambiguity	Silence used to avoid politically sensitive topics. (Samarah & Husein, 2022)
5	Western Group (Canada)	Missed project deadline	"Did anyone start the draft?"	All seen. Reply next morning	Defensiveness; passive protest	Silence as non-verbal protest, indicating discomfort or guilt. (Locher & Graham, 2010)
6	East Asian Group (South Korea)	Lockdown confusion	"Should we still go to the meeting in person?"	Seen. Admin: “Let’s wait for update.”	Deference to authority	Silence shows hierarchical respect, waiting for superior’s input. (Hofstede, 2021)

7	Arabic Group (Egypt)	Home destroyed in outage	"Please pray for them."	Seen. Emoji 🙏 after 2 hours	Emotional overload	Silence + emoji shows symbolic empathy, common in Arab mourning norms.
8	Western Group (UK)	Workplace layoffs	"I'm really anxious."	Seen. One reply after 10 hours	Emotional distance	Silence reflects emotional disengagement, typical in individualist cultures.
9	East Asian Group (China)	Flood warning	"I can't reach my grandma..."	Silence. Reply after 7 hours	Emotional processing	Silence used to process distress internally, in line with Confucian values.
10	Arabic Group (Palestine)	Airstrike report	"Please check on my sister in Gaza!"	Silence. Reply next day: “We’re praying.”	Shared trauma	Silence signifies collective emotional paralysis in wartime discourse.
11	Western Group (USA)	Police brutality video	"Thoughts?"	Seen. No reply for 18 hours	Political discomfort	Silence reflects fear of saying the wrong thing on racial issues. (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich & Bou-Franch, 2019)
12	East Asian Group (Japan)	Teacher’s death	"Our math teacher passed away."	Silence 1 day. Then: “He was kind.”	Silent mourning	Silence as expected cultural mourning practice. (Nakane, 2006)
13	Arabic Group (Syria)	Bombing nearby	"A rocket hit nearby..."	No replies for 5 hours	Fear; helplessness	Silence reflects fear and inability to articulate trauma.
14	Western Group (Germany)	Flood damage report	"All electronics gone."	One emoji: 😔	Discomfort; minimal empathy	Silence + emoji as token acknowledgment in Western minimalist pragmatics.
15	East Asian Group (South Korea)	Mental health disclosure	"I've been feeling numb lately."	Seen. No replies for 2 days	Taboo avoidance	Silence due to stigma around mental health vulnerability. (Hofstede, 2021)

The data presented in this study illustrate that digital silence is far from being an absence of communication. Rather, it represents a strategic, socially constructed, and culturally mediated act that performs multiple pragmatic functions in crises. In the era of mobile instant messaging, silence has become visible, manifested through read receipts, delayed responses, and the lack of typing indicators. This visibility introduces new communicative expectations and socio-emotional implications, particularly in cross-cultural group communication during crises.

4.1 Digital Silence as a Pragmatic Act

The 15 samples demonstrate that digital silence serves multiple pragmatic functions, including politeness, emotional regulation, resistance, deference to the deceased, and mourning. This aligns with A. Jaworski (1997) argument that silence is not simply the lack of talk, but a form of relational discourse (p. 19). For instance, Samples 1 (Iraq) and 10 (Palestine) exemplify how silence in Arabic-speaking contexts is used to express collective grief and solidarity, reflecting a contextually loaded absence rather than apathy. In several Western samples (e.g., Samples 2, 5, and 8), silence reflected passive resistance, emotional withdrawal, or ambiguity. In these cases, digital silence challenged Grice's Maxim of Quantity (Grice, 1975), leading recipients to infer implicatures such as disapproval, fear, and disengagement. The violation of conversational maxims, particularly during emotionally or morally charged exchanges, illustrates that silence is an intentional and pragmatic choice. Moreover, the findings support Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory that silence functions as a strategy for negative politeness—minimizing imposition or disagreement (p. 62). This was evident in Sample 4, where users avoided engaging in politically sensitive dialogue, thereby managing face threats nonverbally.

4.2 Emotion, Trauma, and Silence

A prominent theme across all cultural contexts is the use of silence as a response to emotional and traumatic events. Whether it is the death of a teacher (Sample 12), a bombing (Sample 13), or job loss (Sample 5), silence often emerges as a form of coping, processing, and mourning. These patterns confirm (Goldstein's (1987) and Tannen's (2018) observations that silence often carries deep affective meaning, especially in high-stakes situations (p. 114). In crisis situations, digital silence acts as a pause, giving users time to process, reflect on, or stabilize their emotions. This aligns with Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Bou-Franch's (2019) view that emotionally intense discourse may compel users to withhold verbal engagement, especially when linguistic tools seem insufficient (p. 69).

4.3 Cross-Cultural Variations in Interpreting Silence

One of the most compelling insights of this study is the marked cultural variation in the perception and function of digital silence in the literature.

- High-context cultures (Arabic and East Asian countries):
  In Arabic-speaking groups, silence is frequently interpreted as a form of solidarity, respect, or collective mourning. Samples 1 and 7 showed participants abstaining from replying after tragic events, which was understood as a shared cultural ritual of silence. Similarly, East Asian users (Samples 3, 6, 12) deployed silence as a sign of deference, emotional moderation, or politeness—consistent with Locher and Graham's (2010) description of high-context cultures, where meaning is embedded in non-verbal cues (p. 91). In these groups, silence is not inherently negative; instead, it can be seen as affiliative, respectful, or emotionally appropriate. This supports Nakane's (2006) findings that silence is a culturally conditioned communicative mode in East Asia (p. 88).
- Low-context cultures (Western):Low-context
  In contrast, Western participants were more likely to interpret silence as evasion, apathy, or even passive aggression (e.g., Samples 2, 8, and 11). In low-context cultures, verbal clarity is emphasized, and unexplained silence often violates social expectations (Gudykunst and Nishida 1986). Silence may signal disapproval, disconnection, or refusal to engage. For example, in Sample 11, silence in response to a politically sensitive topic reflects an avoidance of conflict or lack of alignment, a phenomenon that also illustrates Locher and Graham's (2010) idea of silence as relational distancing (p. 16).

4.4 Digital Affordances and the Visibility of Silence

The study also underscores the role of technological affordances—features such as "seen," "last active," or reply to indicators—which make digital silence more noticeable and interpretable. As Herring and Androutsopoulos (2015) note, silence in computer-mediated discourse has become semiotically loaded (p. 129). When a user reads a message but does not respond, others are compelled to infer motives or emotions, often projecting cultural norms onto the absence of a response. This is particularly significant during crisis events, where timing and responsiveness can signal support, concern or avoidance. The shift from "not replying" to "visible silence" adds a new layer to the pragmatics of absence, reinforcing Dakoru (2025) idea that in digital discourse, "doing nothing is still doing something" (p. 73).

4.5 Silence, Power, and Risk

Silence is also used as a strategy for power negotiation and risk management, especially in politically sensitive or hierarchical settings. In Sample 4 (Jordan), users avoided commenting on rumors of mobilization, likely due to fear of group backlash. This reflects A. Jaworski and Coupland (1999) claim that silence can be a form of power or self-protection in high-risk contexts (p. 94). Similarly, in Sample 6 (Korea), group members deferred to a higher-ranking member for instruction, reinforcing Hofstede's (2021) dimension of power distance, where communication is often filtered through hierarchical norms (p. 106).

5. Conclusion

This study is original, focusing on a rarely explored topic: digital silence in a cross-cultural and crisis context. The analysis revealed that silence, especially during times of collective trauma, serves various pragmatic purposes, including the following:

- Face-saving and politeness management (e.g., avoiding disagreement or escalation),
- Emotional regulation in high-stress contexts (e.g., natural disasters, war),
- Strategic ambiguity, allowing users to delay or withhold responses safely,
- Symbolic mourning, particularly in Arabic and East Asian groups.

Crucially, the cultural lens shapes not only the usage but also the interpretation of silence. In high-context cultures, such as those in East Asia and the Arab world, silence is often positively connoted, functioning as a sign of respect, empathy, or deference. In contrast, in low-context, individualistic cultures, such as those in the West, silence tends to generate uncertainty or even negative inferences, often interpreted as indifference, disapproval, or passive resistance.

5.1 Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study contributes to pragmatic and intercultural communication by reframing digital silence as an intentional and strategic act rather than a passive absence. This supports the notion that silence is culturally encoded and pragmatically loaded, particularly in high-stakes digital communication. Practically, the findings offer guidance for digital communicators, crisis managers and platform designers. Awareness of the different interpretations of silence across cultures can reduce miscommunication and foster more empathetic interactions in global digital contexts.

5.2 Limitation & Suggestions for Future Research

Although the findings are insightful, this study has some limitations. Although the sample size was diverse, it remained relatively small and may not fully capture the range of silence practices across global cultures. Moreover, platform-specific features and subjective interpretations of silence may vary among individuals, even within the same culture. Future research should expand the dataset to include a broader range of cultures, including African, South Asian, and Latin American perspectives. Quantitative approaches can also be employed to complement qualitative findings. Additionally, investigating the role of gender, power roles, and group hierarchies in shaping silence could deepen our understanding of digital pragmatics.

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