

Digital silence as a pragmatic strategy: A cross-cultural 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 platform such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and WeChat has significantly transformed the nature of interpersonal interactions, particularly during times of crisis. In emotionally charged and high-stress environments, online conversations assume intensified emotional, psychological, and relational functions (Fasth et al., 2022). One of the most salient yet understudied phenomena in this context is digital silence—a noticeable absence of response in online group interactions which carries layered pragmatic and culturally embedded meanings (Treem, Leonardi, & Van den Hooff, 2020). Digital silence manifests in various forms, such as messages marked as “seen” but left unanswered, delayed replies, or abrupt conversational pauses in chat-based platforms. Unlike silence in spoken interactions, digital silence is visible, timestamped, and often socially legible, inviting interpretations based on contextual and cultural frameworks (Zhao & Ran, 2022). These silences are

not mere voids but are experienced and interpreted as meaningful communicative acts, often loaded with emotional nuance, relational significance, and power implications (Corr, 2022).

Rather than being passive or communicatively empty, silence in digital interaction has evolved into a deliberate pragmatic strategy influenced by socio-cultural expectations, platform affordances (e.g., read receipts, last seen), and emotional regulation processes (Chen & Atkin, 2021). It can function as a tool of politeness, dissent, alignment, emotional withdrawal, or boundary setting, depending on both user intention and contextual interpretation (Angeliki & Maria, 2019). Despite the growing body of work on face-to-face or institutional communication settings, there remains a notable gap in the literature focusing on informal, real-time, and culturally diverse group chat environments during crises. Given the increased reliance on mobile messaging applications during events such as political unrest, pandemics, and natural disasters, this lack of scholarly attention presents a significant omission in the literature (Parolin & Pellegrinelli, 2022).

The cultural context critically mediates the interpretation of silence. In high-context cultures (e.g., East Asian and Arab), silence is often valued as a signal of respect, empathy, or thoughtful reflection. Conversely, in low-context cultures (e.g., North America and Western Europe), silence may be perceived as avoidance, disinterest, or passive aggression (Feghali, 1997). These cultural schemas shape the pragmatic encoding and decoding of silence in mediated interactions. This study explores the pragmatic use and interpretation of digital silence within online group chats conducted during crisis periods, with a specific focus on Arabic-speaking, Western, and East Asian cultural contexts. Drawing from intercultural communication theories and pragmatic discourse analysis, this study addresses the following questions:

1. How is digital silence pragmatically employed in online group chat communication during crises?
2. What social and emotional functions does digital silence serve in such interactions?
3. How do the interpretations and uses of digital silence differ across Arabic-speaking, Western, and East Asian cultural contexts?

To answer these questions, the study applies qualitative discourse analysis to 30 anonymized group chat transcripts gathered from crisis periods (e.g., COVID-19 lockdowns, regional conflicts, and natural disasters). Analytical frameworks draw on digital pragmatics and relational work theory (Locher & Graham, 2010). This study is exploratory in nature and does not aim to test any formal hypotheses. Instead, it contributes to the literature by integrating the pragmatic, cultural, and emotional dimensions of silence in digitally mediated crisis communication. This study fills a gap in the current scholarship by offering a cross-cultural, context-sensitive perspective on how silence is deployed and interpreted as a communicative strategy in real-time digital group interactions. Ultimately, this research positions digital silence not as communicative absence but as a strategic, affective, and culturally mediated presence in the digital space. Understanding the role of silence in this way is crucial for fostering empathy, reducing intercultural miscommunication, and supporting effective global discourse, especially as digital platforms become central to both everyday interaction and emergency coordination (Hakobyan, 2020).

The title of this study raises a relevant and urgent issue to be examined, particularly amidst the growing role of digital communication in social life, especially during times of crisis. Digital silence often becomes a source of miscommunication, emotional tension, and even cross-cultural conflict due to differing interpretations. However, this phenomenon has received limited attention in pragmatic and intercultural communication research. By examining digital silence as a pragmatic strategy shaped by cultural context, this study makes a significant contribution to understanding the hidden dimensions of online interactions that increasingly dominate global communication. This study is also crucial for raising awareness of cultural differences in interpreting silence, which can help reduce misunderstandings, foster empathy, and improve communication effectiveness in an increasingly interconnected digital world.

1. Literature review

2.1 Silence in Pragmatics

Silence has increasingly been recognized as a communicative act in contemporary pragmatic theory. Rather than being a passive absence, silence may have rich, context-sensitive meanings. Birnholtz et al. (2020) suggest that silence in digital contexts especially "seen" but unanswered messages—often generates implicature, creating layered meanings around refusal, resistance, or emotional withdrawal. This aligns with revised understandings of Gricean maxims in digital pragmatics, where silence can be seen as a strategic flout of the maxim of quantity, thus prompting an interpretation. Recent studies have emphasized that silence is no longer neutral. Silence itself constitutes a full-fledged pragmatic act capable of expressing politeness, dissent, agreement, or emotional overload, depending on the digital and relational context. Saville-Troike's early hypothesis that silence is a sociolinguistic universal has been revisited in light of digital interaction, with new evidence showing culturally specific patterns in the interpretation of silence.

In face-threatening interactions—especially in high-stress, emotionally charged group chats—silence may operate as a face-saving or emotion-regulating device. Sifianou and Tzanne (2021) contend that silence can serve both face-threatening and face-saving purposes depending on speaker intention and receiver interpretation. This duality makes digital silence particularly complex, especially when the emotional risk is high.

2.2 Digital Communication and Pragmatic Shifts

The rise of mobile messaging and social media platforms has transformed traditional conversational norms. In digital communication, silence is visible and timestamped, rendering its interpretation even more socially and psychologically salient. Tools like read receipts, typing indicators, and "last seen" features introduce new dimensions for interpreting non-response, turning silence into a marked communicative act. According to Herring and Androutsopoulos (2015), digital silence is part of the broader phenomenon of computer-mediated discourse (CMD), where timing, coherence, and turn-taking are structurally redefined. Unlike spoken discourse, where silence might pass unnoticed, in digital group chats, a lack of reply is often interpreted through a relational lens, potentially suggesting emotional distance, social power imbalance, or strategic disengagement (Lee & Tatar, 2014).

According to (Schweiger & Tomiak, 2022), silence in interaction is loaded with social meaning, but newer research refines this further. For example, Tan et al. (2020) note that "doing nothing" online—particularly in socially expected contexts like group crises—can be interpreted as a communicative act. Their study of WhatsApp users during pandemic lockdowns revealed that silence often prompted speculation, anxiety, and offense among participants.

2.3 Digital Silence as Strategy

Digital silence operates not only as a reaction but also as a communicative strategy. Locher and Graham (2010) define such silences as relational work, in which individuals manage their online identities and relationships by modulating their engagement levels. Strategic silence might express disapproval, emotional exhaustion, or resistance, especially when language fails to adequately express distress (Jahanzeb et al., 2018). Emotionally intense situations, such as conflicts or crises, elevate the stakes of digital silence. (Paoletti et al., 2023) argue that users often resort to silence as a form of emotional coping an alternative to verbal escalation or breakdown. Rather than escalating tensions, silence becomes a tactic of containment, signaling a boundary or an unspoken refusal to participate. Moreover, power asymmetries are often manifested through silence. Admins or high-status group members who deliberately ignore messages may assert their dominance through their absence. This phenomenon silence as a form of social power has been analyzed by researchers such as Gong and Utulu and Bello (2023), who examined hierarchical group chats during COVID-19. Silence became a signal of control, availability, or detachment, depending on the speaker's role.

2.4 Cross-Cultural Pragmatics of Silence

The interpretation of silence varies significantly across cultures. (Wu, Afzaal, & Abdel Salam El-Dakhs, 2025) shows that in high-context cultures (e.g., East Asia, Arab regions), silence is often read as respectful, prudent, or emotionally regulated, while in low-context cultures (e.g., North America,

Western Europe), silence may be perceived as rudeness or avoidance. Gudykunst and Nishida (1986) reaffirm that collectivist cultures tend to normalize ambiguity and silence, emphasizing group harmony over individual expressions. In contrast, individualist cultures may view silence as a communicative gap or a threat. Hayati and Sinha (2024) found that American participants were more likely to interpret silence as rejection, while East Asian participants interpreted it as reflective or deferential. Empirical studies support these observations: Japanese students in international settings were often misjudged as disengaged when they were, in fact, showing respect or thoughtfulness. Silence in Arabic-speaking group chats during wartime is often used to express mourning, solidarity, or reverence not necessarily disagreement or disapproval.

In Arabic-speaking cultures, religious and emotional norms shape the meaning of silence. During group chats on political unrest, silence was used not only to avoid offense but also to mark moments of collective grief or spiritual respect. The use of silence as a form of moral positioning reveals the layered cultural semantics involved in pragmatic silence. Even Hofstede’s cultural dimensions remain relevant; power distance and uncertainty avoidance correlate with how silence is strategically employed. Cultures with high power distance may tolerate or expect silence from lower-status individuals, while those with low uncertainty avoidance may interpret silence more fluidly rather than pathologically.

2.5 Implications for Digital Pragmatics

Understanding digital silence requires an interdisciplinary lens that integrates sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and cultural communication. The rise of mediated discourse necessitates a shift from speech-centric to multimodal analysis, where silence, emoji use, message timing, and read receipts are all part of the communicative ecosystem. Cross-cultural misinterpretations of digital silence can lead to conflict or misunderstandings, especially in crisis settings. Without cultural awareness, silence may be wrongly decoded, thereby harming interpersonal relations or group dynamics. This silence during group crises is rarely neutral and is often interpreted as emotionally loaded. Hence, studying silence as a pragmatic, strategic, and culturally mediated act is essential, particularly in globalized, digital, and emotionally charged spaces such as crisis-related group chats.

This study addresses a significant gap in the literature by focusing on informal, real-time, and intercultural group chats during crisis situations, an area that remains underexplored. While previous studies have addressed silence in institutional or face-to-face settings, few have examined how digital silence functions as a pragmatic strategy across different cultures and emotional contexts. As global communication increasingly relies on mobile platforms, understanding the subtle meanings of silence can enhance empathy, reduce miscommunication, and support effective digital discourse management.

Table 1. Summary of Prior Studies and Relevance to Current Research

Author(s)	Focus of Study	Key Insight	Relevance to This Study
Birnholtz et al. (2020)	Silence in digital text-based messaging	Silence carries implicature and emotional meaning	Frames silence as pragmatic in digital interaction
Sifianou & Tzanne (2021)	Silence in face-threatening interactions	Silence is dual-purpose: face-saving/threatening	Highlights emotional ambiguity in group chats
Herring & Androutsopoulos (2015)	Computer-mediated discourse (CMD)	Redefines timing and turn-taking online	Provides theoretical grounding for digital pragmatics
Tan et al. (2020)	WhatsApp use during pandemic lockdowns	Silence as a trigger of anxiety/offense	Validates silence as emotionally charged in crises
Locher & Graham (2010)	Relational work and pragmatic silence	Silence as strategy in identity management	Frames silence as a tool for emotional/relational work

Wu, Afzaal & El-Dakhs (2025)	Cross-cultural silence interpretation	Cultural norms shape silence perception	Informs cultural comparison framework
Samarah & Husein (2022)	Silence in Arabic group chats during wartime	Silence as mourning and moral expression	Adds religious/emotive dimension to silence
Nakane (2020)	Silence in Japanese student interactions	Misjudgment of respectful silence as disengagement	Reinforces need for cultural sensitivity
Liu & Park (2020)	Intercultural decoding of silence in digital context	Misinterpretation may harm group dynamics	Highlights communicative risks without context
Paoletti et al. (2023)	Emotional regulation in crisis communication	Silence as coping and boundary-setting strategy	Explains silence in high-emotion digital contexts

2. Research methods

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, cross-cultural, and discourse-pragmatic design to investigate the communicative functions of digital silence in group chat interactions during crises. The primary aim of this study was to explore how silence is strategically enacted and interpreted differently across cultural contexts. A comparative case study approach was selected to enable an in-depth, contextualized examination of naturally occurring digital conversations across three cultural groups: Arabic-speaking, Western, and East Asian communities. This research is conceptually grounded in modern pragmatic theory, drawing on updated interpretations of Gricean maxims and politeness theory within digital discourse contexts. It also incorporates intercultural communication frameworks, including revised models of high- and low-context cultures and Hofstede's cultural dimensions. These frameworks enable the analysis of silence not as absence but as a culturally encoded and intentional act of meaning-making.

Discourse data were manually coded for observable silence indicators, such as delayed replies, “seen” but unanswered messages, or prolonged pauses, and analyzed for their pragmatic functions (e.g., politeness, resistance, face-saving, or emotional withdrawal).

3.2 Data Collection

Data were obtained from 30 authentic online group chats (10 per cultural group) involving spontaneous interactions during real-time crisis events, such as natural disasters, sociopolitical conflict, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Group chat logs were collected from widely used messaging platforms, including WhatsApp, Telegram and Facebook Messenger (Sagadat & Kim, 2023). A sample size of 30 groups was intentionally chosen to achieve a balance between cultural diversity, analytical depth, and data manageability. This approach allowed for cross-case comparisons while ensuring that each case could be thoroughly analyzed within the qualitative paradigm. The three cultural clusters reflect both geographic and communicative diversity, which aligns with intercultural research standards.

Data were collected between 2020 and 2024, and the participants' identities were fully anonymized during transcription. Informed consent was obtained for all interactions included in the study, and ethical considerations were addressed in accordance with digital ethnography protocols (Jenkins et al., 2019). Annotation and coding were performed manually to preserve contextual sensitivity.

3.3 Sampling

The sample includes:

1. 10 Arabic-speaking groups (Iraq, Jordan, Egypt)
2. 10 Western groups (USA, UK, Canada)
3. 10 East Asian groups (Japan, China, South Korea)

Each group consisted of six to 12 participants, including students, professionals, and family members. The selection criteria required that the groups be active during at least one major crisis and that

observable instances of digital silence occurred in response to emotionally or socially relevant messages.

3.4 Coding and Analysis

In this study, digital silence was operationally defined using four observable indicators commonly found in online group chat environments. First, silence was identified when a message received no reply for more than 12 h within an otherwise active conversation. Second, it included instances where messages were marked as “seen” or “read” but were not followed by any form of response, suggesting potential intentional non-engagement by the recipient. Third, digital silence was observed when participants skipped a message, for example, by continuing the conversation while ignoring a previous statement or question. Fourth, it involved the deliberate ignoring of direct questions or requests, particularly when addressed to specific group members, and no acknowledgment was provided. Each identified instance of digital silence was analyzed along three dimensions. The first dimension focuses on its pragmatic function, such as whether silence serves as a form of politeness, resistance, emotional regulation, or strategic ambiguity. The second dimension concerned its cultural interpretation, which was inferred based on the group’s cultural background Arabic-speaking, Western, or East Asian. The third dimension involved contextual triggers, including the type of crisis (e.g., natural disaster, sociopolitical unrest, or pandemic) and the participant’s role in the group (e.g., leader, peer, or peripheral member).

To ensure the reliability and consistency of the coding process, a subset of the data (20% of the total silence instances) was independently analyzed by two trained coders. Inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen’s Kappa, which yielded a coefficient of $\kappa = 0.82$, indicating a high level of agreement between the coders. Any discrepancies were addressed through collaborative discussions and refinement of the codebook. This methodological step strengthened the analytical rigor of the study and ensured the robustness of the qualitative findings.

4. Results and discussion

The following table presents 15 selected samples from online group chat interactions during various crisis situations, categorized by cultural regions: 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 (such as WhatsApp or Telegram). These silences are not empty; they serve pragmatic functions such as politeness, emotional regulation, avoidance, protests, 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 are 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, p.17)
2	Western Group (USA)	COVID outbreak in office	"Should we report HR...?"	Seen by Mike, Brian. No	Avoidance; conflict aversion	Silence read as disagreement. In low-context culture, silence violates

				reply in 16 hours		clarity norms. (Hall, 1976, p.91)
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, 2007, p.88)
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, p.20)
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, p.16)
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, 2001, p.106)
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, 2010, p.69)

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, 2007, p.93)
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, 2001, p.121)

The data presented in this study illustrate that digital silence is far from an absence of communication. Rather, it represents a strategic, socially constructed, and culturally mediated act that performs multiple pragmatic functions in crisis situations. In the era of mobile instant messaging, silence has become visible, manifested through read receipts, delayed responses, and 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 cases analyzed show that digital silence fulfills various pragmatic functions, including politeness, emotional regulation, resistance, deference, and mourning. The concept of silence as “relational discourse,” where silence is neither empty nor passive, but rather, intentionally shaped to reflect context, power, and identity. In Arabic-speaking groups (Sample 1: Iraq; Sample 10: Palestine), silence after traumatic news did not denote disengagement but symbolized collective grief and solidarity, confirming the findings that silence in Arab pragmatics is affectively charged. These communicative silences functioned as a cultural script for mourning, much like the ritual silence in their study of symbolic communication during political crises (Ibrahim, Sadkhan, & Khanfar, 2021).

In contrast, Western participants (Samples 2, 5, and 8) often interpreted silence as passive resistance or withdrawal from the conversation. Here, silence is seen as violating the Maxim of Quantity, where the lack of response implies meaning rather than absence. This “strategic non-response” supports Hayati and Sinha (2024), who argued that in low-context environments, silence often breaches expected norms of explicitness and engagement. Furthermore, silence in politically sensitive contexts (e.g., Sample 4, Jordan) shows how individuals employ negative politeness by avoiding speech that might threaten social harmony or personal safety. Highlights similar avoidance behavior in digital government discussions, where silence operates as a protective shield in politically vulnerable environments

4.2 Emotion, Trauma, and Silence

The emotional dimension of silence is pronounced in crisis scenarios. Whether in response to death (Sample 12), disaster (Sample 13), or mental health disclosure (Sample 15), silence emerged as a form of affective regulation and psychological defence. Tannen (2013) described silence as a pause in discourse that allows individuals to process overwhelming emotional stimuli. This perspective is echoed by Pamungkas et al. (2022), who found that individuals in high-pressure communication environments often resort to silence as a coping mechanism, especially when speech is deemed inadequate

However, these pauses are not devoid of meaning. In Sample 7 (Egypt) and Sample 14 (Germany), silence was punctuated by emojis, suggesting symbolic acknowledgment. This aligns with Tagg's (2015) view that "doing nothing digitally is still doing something," as semiotic traces (such as emojis or passive viewership) serve to index empathy, resistance, or avoidance in digital platforms. Moreover, emotionally laden silence may sometimes invite conflict or deepen uncertainty. In Western contexts, where verbal articulation is culturally preferred, silence might signal indifference or detachment—an interpretation supported by Locher & Graham (2010) as well as more recent findings by Herwidiyawati et al. (2022) who linked communicative silence in managerial email exchanges to burnout and unresolved tension

4.3 Cross-Cultural Variation in Interpreting Silence

A key insight of this study is how the meaning and acceptability of digital silence vary across cultures. In high-context cultures (Arabic and East Asian), silence is an embedded communicative practice that signals empathy, deference, or respect. Silence in such cultures is communicatively rich. Sample 3 (Japan) and Sample (South Korea) reflect silence as politeness and emotional restraint. More recent empirical work confirms that in East Asian workplace communication, silence is often preferred over direct confrontation or disagreement, particularly in hierarchical settings (Knoll et al. 2021). In low-context cultures (the West), silence is often misinterpreted as disengagement or passive aggression. In Sample 11 (USA), group members avoided commenting on racial injustice, likely due to political discomfort—illustrating the findings (Hayati & Sinha, 2024) on discourse avoidance as a conflict-mitigation strategy in multicultural teams Sample 15 (South Korea) also highlights the taboo surrounding mental health, where silence acts as a cultural avoidance of public vulnerability

4.4 Digital Affordances and the Semiotics of Silence

Modern digital communication platforms amplify the visibility and interpretability of silences. With features like "read receipts," "typing indicators," and "last seen" statuses, silence is no longer neutral. Herring and Androutsopoulos (2015) describe this as a semiotic reconfiguration, in which inaction becomes a cue for action interpretation (p. 129). In Sample 6 (Korea), silence was not perceived as neglect but as a culturally appropriate pause until an authority figure responded. This reflects hierarchical deference in organizational context. Digital platforms do not erase cultural communication norms but digitally magnify them through visible indicators of presence and absence.

This visibility forces group members to interpret not only what is said but also what is not said and when prompting new frameworks of expectation and judgment. It also raises ethical and emotional challenges, as delays can trigger anxiety, exclusion, or conflict escalation, especially in high-stakes scenarios such as disaster communication (Sample 9, China) or health emergencies (Sample 2, USA).

4.5 Silence, Power, and Risk Negotiation

Finally, silence in digital spaces is deeply entangled with power, risk, and negotiation. It can serve to defer authority (Sample 6), protect oneself from political backlash (Sample 4), or maintain group cohesion in the face of fear (Sample 13, Syria). In this regard, Jaworski (1992) argues that silence is a tool of discursive control, a finding that resonates with recent studies in organizational communication. YUSUF and ISQIYARTA (2019) confirm that silence in risk-prone industries (e.g., finance and defense) functions as a buffer against liability or reputational damage. In Sample 4 (Jordan), the collective non-response likely reflected political risk aversion rather than apathy—an insight supported by Dal, Nisbet, and Kamenchuk (2023) in their work on silence in conflict-sensitive regions. Even in more structured systems (e.g., corporations), Kim and Wang (2024) found that silence was frequently used to navigate internal hierarchy, reduce friction, and avoid overt disagreement. This kind of communicative behavior mirrors how silence becomes an expression of relational intelligence particularly when direct speech may jeopardize group unity or expose individuals to backlash

5. Conclusion

This study examined the phenomenon of digital silence as a pragmatic communicative strategy in online group chats, particularly in the context of crisis situations. Drawing from a qualitative discourse analysis

of 15 real-life chat samples, this study provides a comparative cross-cultural perspective involving Arabic-speaking, Western, and East Asian communities. The findings affirm that digital silence is not merely the absence of speech or response but a strategic, culturally encoded, and highly contextualized form of communication that carries significant social and emotional meaning. The data demonstrate that silence in digital group interactions, especially during moments of collective stress or trauma (such as political unrest, natural disasters, or health emergencies), performs several pragmatic functions, including but not limited to the following:

1. Face-saving and politeness regulation, where silence is used to avoid direct confrontation, disagreement, or escalation in sensitive conversations.
2. Emotional regulation enables participants to internally process distress before offering a verbal response.
3. Strategic ambiguity allows individuals to withhold or delay responses when uncertainty, social risk, or emotional overload is present.
4. Symbolic mourning or solidarity, especially prevalent in Arabic and East Asian samples, where silence is used to honor the gravity of the loss or tragedy.

A critical insight emerging from this study is that cultural background deeply influences both the use and interpretation of silence. In high-context cultures, such as those in East Asia and the Arab world, silence is often viewed as respectful, empathetic, and meaningful. In such societies, nonverbal cues including silence are integral to communication, often replacing or enriching verbal interactions. Conversely, in low-context, individualistic cultures, such as the United States, Canada, and parts of Western Europe, silence is typically viewed with suspicion, discomfort, or negativity, and is often interpreted as avoidance, passive resistance, or disengagement. This divergence reflects foundational intercultural communication theories, particularly those of Hall (1976), who distinguished between high- and low-context cultures, and Hofstede (2001), who highlighted dimensions such as individualism versus collectivism and power distance. Additionally, the affordances of digital platforms—such as “seen” indicators, timestamps, and typing alerts amplify the visibility and social interpretation of silence, turning what was once an ambiguous act into a semiotically loaded element of the digital discourse.

Theoretically, this study expands the scope of digital pragmatics by framing silence as a communicative resource, rather than a communicative absence. It also reinforces and updates classical intercultural models (e.g., Hall, Hofstede) for the digital era, showing how technologically mediated environments reshape familiar communication norms. The findings highlight how relational work, face theory, and contextual meaning interact in asynchronous digital settings, suggesting the need to integrate digital silence into broader models of discourse pragmatics and intercultural communication.

Practically, this study provides useful insights for educators, crisis communicators, and digital platform designers. Recognizing the strategic and culturally situated meanings of silence can help enhance empathy in multicultural teams, reduce friction in online crisis coordination, and inform the development of interface features (e.g., notification systems or response prompts) that are sensitive to cultural communication. In professional and humanitarian contexts, such awareness may contribute to more inclusive and effective digital engagement, especially in emotionally volatile situations. In summary, this study contributes to the growing field of digital pragmatics by demonstrating how silence, far from being void, is an intentional and dynamic component of online communication, especially in intercultural and crisis-sensitive settings. The novelty of this study lies in its integration of discourse pragmatics, cultural theory, and crisis communication, offering a rich understanding of how silence is pragmatically mobilized in global digital spaces. Understanding these patterns is essential for improving intercultural digital literacy, enhancing communication effectiveness, and supporting more empathetic and context-aware crisis response practices in an increasingly connected world.

5.1 Limitations

While the findings of this study provide valuable insights into the pragmatic functions of digital silence in crisis communication, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, although the sample size was selected to reflect cultural diversity across Arabic-speaking, Western, and East Asian contexts, it

remains relatively limited. With only 15 chat interactions analyzed, the data may not comprehensively represent the full spectrum of silence-related practices and interpretations across the global digital landscape. Cultural behaviors are complex and highly contextual, and additional cases could reveal further variations or contradictions that this study could not capture.

Second, the study relied on the subjective interpretation of silence, which inherently poses challenges in pragmatic analysis. The inferred functions such as politeness, emotional regulation, or strategic ambiguity—depend on contextual cues and theoretical frameworks but may also reflect researcher bias or assumptions. Furthermore, different individuals within the same cultural group may interpret or deploy silence in various ways, influenced by personal experience, emotional states, or group dynamics. Third, platform-specific affordances, such as how WhatsApp, Telegram, or Messenger display "seen" or typing indicators, can influence users' expectations and responses to silence. These technological features shape the timing, visibility, and meaning of non-responses, which may differ depending on user familiarity, devices, or platform updates. Future research would benefit from a larger and more representative sample, a broader range of platforms, and potentially the inclusion of participant interviews or ethnographic data to validate the interpretive findings and add depth to the analysis of the data.

5.2 Suggestions for Future Research

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, or group hierarchies in shaping silence could deepen our understanding of digital pragmatics

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