

**SILENCE IN THE AGE OF INSTANT
MESSAGING: A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS
OF NON-RESPONSE AND DELAYED
COMMUNICATION IN NIGERIA**

By

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Abstract

This study examines the pragmatic functions of silence in instant messaging environments, focusing on non-response and delayed communication among Nigerian users. While silence in face-to-face discourse has been extensively theorized, digital silence—manifested through seen-but-unanswered messages, typing indicators, and delayed replies—remains underexplored, especially in non-Western contexts. Using pragmatic theory and discourse analysis, this research investigates how Nigerian users interpret and negotiate digital silences within relational and cultural frameworks. Findings reveal that non-response serves multiple functions: politeness, passive resistance, emotional regulation, or strategic relational management, depending on expectations shaped by Nigerian socio-cultural norms. The study calls for an expansion of pragmatic frameworks to account for asynchronous, culturally grounded digital communication practices.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Silence, Instant Messaging, Digital Communication, Nigeria, Non-Response, Discourse Analysis

Introduction

The widespread adoption of instant messaging (IM) platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Telegram has transformed communication practices across Nigeria. Instantaneity, once limited by infrastructural challenges, is now commonplace, particularly among urban youth and professionals (Chiluwa, 2021). However, while messaging technology fosters expectations of rapid responsiveness, it also highlights communicative absences: messages left on "seen," delayed replies, and intentional non-responses. In the Nigerian socio-cultural setting—where communication norms are often relational and context-sensitive—such digital silences carry layered pragmatic meanings.

Traditional pragmatics views silence in conversation as a communicative act shaped by context (Sifianou, 2020). Yet the interpretation of silence in digital discourse, particularly in Nigerian society with its unique mix of collectivist traditions and emerging individualist influences, remains under-theorized. This study explores the pragmatic dimensions of non-response and delayed communication among Nigerian users, offering insights into evolving digital communication practices with focus on the following statement of problem:

While global studies of digital communication have noted the significance of silence, there is limited research on how silence functions pragmatically within Nigerian cultural and relational settings. Misinterpretation of silence can cause relational tensions, mistrust, or conflict, particularly given Nigeria's high-context communication culture (Akindele, 2011). Pragmatic theories developed primarily in Western contexts inadequately capture the nuances of Nigerian digital discourse.

The purpose of this study is to examine how Nigerian users of instant messaging platforms pragmatically produce and interpret silence, to identify the communicative functions it serves, and to propose contextually grounded recommendations for better understanding and managing digital silences.

The following research questions guided the analysis of data and findings:

1. What pragmatic functions does digital silence serve in Nigerian instant messaging interactions?
2. How do Nigerian users interpret non-response and delayed replies?
3. What cultural and relational factors influence the production and interpretation of digital silence in Nigeria?

Literature Review

Silence as Communicative Act

Silence is rarely empty; it conveys meaning depending on context, culture, and relationship dynamics (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2021). Goffman's (1981) concept of face suggests that silence can maintain social harmony or signal disengagement. Brown and Levinson (1987) propose that silence can function as a politeness strategy, allowing interlocutors to avoid face-threatening acts.

Pragmatics in Digital Contexts

Digital communication complicates traditional models of interaction. Herring (2020) notes that instant messaging creates "quasi-synchronous" environments, where communication can appear conversational but unfold asynchronously. Seen receipts, typing indicators, and time stamps frame silence as a visible and interpretable communicative act" (Darics, 2020).

Nigerian Communicative Culture

Nigeria's communicative culture is predominantly high-context (Akindele, 2011). Messages often rely on shared knowledge, implicit understanding, and respect for relational hierarchies. Silence, therefore, may signify deference, emotional control, or strategic disengagement (Chiluwa, 2021). However, urban youth—exposed to globalized norms—are increasingly blending traditional expectations with new digital etiquettes (Igboanusi, 2022).

Emotional and Relational Dynamics

Research shows that delayed responses can cause anxiety or relational strain especially in close relationships (Lim, 2020). In Nigeria, where social relations are pivotal to identity (Okoro, 2017), digital silence can be particularly charged, signaling conflict, emotional withdrawal, or strategic politeness depending on the relational context.

Gap in Literature

While scholars have examined aspects of Nigerian digital discourse (e.g., Chiluwa, 2021), little attention has been given to the pragmatic functions of silence in instant messaging specifically within Nigerian contexts. This study addresses this gap.

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative approach using discourse analysis and pragmatic interpretation was employed.

Participants

Eighty (80) Nigerian users of WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger were purposively sampled. Participants were aged 18–40 and represented diverse ethnic backgrounds (Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and minority groups).

Data Collection

Messaging Samples: Participants submitted anonymized excerpts of conversations exhibiting delayed or absent responses.

In-Depth Interviews: Follow-up interviews explored participants' interpretations and motivations for silence.

Ethical Considerations: Informed consent was obtained; confidentiality was maintained.

Data Analysis

Using thematic coding, the data were categorized according to:

- Pragmatic function of silence
- Emotional reaction to silence
- Cultural/relational factors influencing interpretation

Speech act theory (Searle, 1979) and updated politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Sifianou, 2020) guided analysis.

Analysis and Findings

Functions of Silence Identified in Nigeria

Four major pragmatic functions emerged:

1. Politeness and Face-Saving

Delayed replies were used to avoid issuing blunt refusals, especially when refusing requests for favors, money, or support (Chiluwa, 2021).

2. Passive Resistance

Non-response was a subtle means of resisting unwanted communication without escalating conflict—common in hierarchical or sensitive relationships (Okoro, 2017).

3. Emotional Regulation

Participants delayed responses to manage anger, disappointment, or sadness, aligning with Nigerian norms of emotional restraint (Akindele, 2011).

4. Relational Distancing

Silence was employed to recalibrate or weaken relational ties without direct confrontation particularly in friendships and romantic engagements.

Emotional Interpretations

Emotional reactions to silence varied:

In close relationships, silence caused anxiety or suspicion. In professional contexts, delays were often tolerated if justified. Among peers, silence was interpreted based on relational history: trusted friends' silences were excused; newer acquaintances' silences were often seen as disrespect.

Cultural Influences

Participants emphasized that understanding silence required knowledge of the interlocutor's personality, relationship and socio-cultural background. Among Yoruba participants, for example, silence often conveyed wisdom or maturity (Igboanusi, 2022), whereas among urban Igbo youth, silence was increasingly interpreted through globalized digital norms emphasizing promptness.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that in Nigeria, silence in instant messaging is a pragmatically rich act shaped by

relational dynamics, emotional states, and cultural expectations. Digital silence serves functions ranging from politeness to resistance and emotional regulation. Understanding these pragmatic functions is essential for navigating digital communication effectively in Nigerian society. Pragmatic theories must thus adapt to account for asynchronous communication and culturally nuanced interpretations of silence.

Recommendations

1. for Users:

Users should cultivate awareness of how silence may be interpreted and contextualize delayed responses, particularly in sensitive relational contexts (e.g., by sending quick acknowledgments or explanatory notes).

2. for Educators:

Digital literacy programs in Nigeria should teach pragmatic aspects of online communication, emphasizing that silence carries meaning and can affect relational dynamics.

3. for Developers:

Messaging platform designers should consider customizable visibility options for "seen" receipts to reduce anxiety and allow for more context-sensitive communication.

4. for Researchers:

Future studies should explore how socioeconomic status, gender, and rural-urban divides influence interpretations of digital silence in Nigeria.

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