

Digital Pragmatics in Medan City: An Analysis of Meaning in Social Media, Emojis, Memes, and Multimodal Communication

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ABSTRACT

The transformation of communication in the era of social media has significantly reshaped the ways individuals construct, negotiate, and interpret meaning through the integration of text, emojis, and memes as increasingly dominant multimodal practices in everyday interaction. This phenomenon is socially and culturally relevant as it influences patterns of social relations, identity expression, and politeness strategies within digital spaces that transcend hierarchical boundaries and community divisions. This study aims to explore how pragmatic meaning is constructed and negotiated in digital communication through the use of emojis and memes. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research involved fifteen active social media users with backgrounds as university students and young professionals. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations of digital interactions, and documentation analysis of social media conversations, and were analyzed using thematic analysis within the frameworks of cyberpragmatics and multimodal discourse analysis. The findings reveal three dominant patterns: emojis as regulators and shifters of illocutionary force, emojis as digital politeness strategies within hierarchical relationships, and memes as media for the production of collective implicatures grounded in irony and shared social experience. These findings demonstrate that meaning in digital communication is inferential, relational, and multimodally distributed. Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of digital pragmatics by reconstructing the concept of illocution within technology-mediated communication, while also offering practical implications for digital literacy and language education in understanding meaning-making dynamics in contemporary online spaces

INTRODUCTION

Developments in digital communication over the past five years indicate a fundamental shift in how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and understood within virtual public spaces. Social media no longer functions merely as a channel for verbal message transmission, but rather as a multimodal arena integrating text, emojis, memes, images, and various visual formats as interacting sources of meaning. In this context, meaning is no longer solely dependent on linguistic structure but emerges from the simultaneous interaction of multiple semiotic modes.

Recent studies demonstrate that visual symbols in digital communication perform significant pragmatic functions. Riordan (2021) emphasizes that emojis serve as tools for emotion work, enabling users to manage interpersonal affiliation and align emotional expression in text-based communication. Similarly, Lupton (2021) argues that memes in digital spaces function as mechanisms for the production of collective humor that fosters social solidarity through shared experiences. These findings suggest that digital communication cannot be adequately understood through linguistic analysis alone but requires a pragmatic approach that incorporates visual and social dimensions.

Furthermore, Huang (2022) explains that online communication extends the principle of relevance in pragmatics, as interpretation heavily relies on multimodal inference within environments characterized by limited nonverbal cues. Within the cyberpragmatics framework, Yus (2022) argues that emojis are not merely emotional expressions but pragmatic devices capable of modifying the illocutionary force of utterances. Flores-Salgado and Witten (2023) demonstrate that emoji use within WhatsApp communities fulfills clear illocutionary functions in managing social relations and interpersonal positioning. Likewise, Ge and Gretzel (2023) assert that emojis constitute a form of relational work through which users negotiate intimacy, solidarity, and social distance in online communication.

On the other hand, research on memes and digital discourse indicates that meaning in social media is inherently intertextual and sociopragmatic. Dynel (2021) shows that memes contain multiple multimodal voices operating simultaneously to construct irony and social critique. Memes not only combine text and visuals but also rely on shared knowledge and collective experience that enable the emergence of communal implicatures. From a multimodal discourse analysis perspective, meaning arises from the orchestration of verbal and visual signs that complement one another (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Zhang & Cassany, 2022).

Despite the growing body of international research on the pragmatic functions of emojis and memes, most studies still conceptualize visual symbols as affective markers or emotional supplements rather than as structural components in the formation of illocutionary force. Moreover, empirical studies in the Indonesian context, particularly in Medan City, remain limited. As a multicultural metropolitan city, Medan exhibits distinctive digital communication dynamics, including mixed-language usage, localized humor,

and the strategic deployment of visual symbols in the online interactions of urban youth.

Addressing this research gap, the present study focuses on the digital communication practices of social media users residing in Medan City to analyze how emojis and memes function in shaping, shifting, and negotiating pragmatic meaning. By situating the analysis within an urban digital community in Medan, this study aims to provide empirical contributions to the development of digital pragmatics while reconstructing the concept of illocution as a multimodal and distributed phenomenon within technology-mediated communication ecologies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Pragmatics as the Basis for Meaning Analysis

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that examines meaning in relation to the context of language use and the inferential processes involving speakers and hearers. In recent developments, pragmatics is no longer understood merely as the study of implied meaning in spoken communication, but as an analytical framework explaining how meaning is constructed across various media, including digital environments (Huang, 2022; Yus, 2022). Huang (2022) emphasizes that meaning interpretation heavily depends on relevance-based inferential processes and shared cognitive environments, while Yus (2022) demonstrates that digital contexts expand how illocutionary force and implicature are produced through the integration of verbal and nonverbal signs.

In digital communication, pragmatic principles have expanded through the presence of visual symbols such as emojis and memes. Flores-Salgado and Witten (2023) show that emojis can function as illocutionary markers influencing the interpretation of communicative acts, whereas Ge and Gretzel (2023) emphasize that visual symbols play a role in negotiating social relations and interpersonal positioning in online conversations. Thus, contemporary pragmatics not only focuses on linguistic structures but also on the multimodal orchestration that shapes communicative intentions and social attitudes in text- and image-based interactions.

Cyberpragmatics and Digital Context

The development of communication technology has led to the emergence of cyberpragmatics, a concept developed by Francisco Yus. Cyberpragmatics extends pragmatic studies into the domain of internet-based communication by emphasizing inferential processes in digital environments where nonverbal cues are limited. In this context, social media users rely on graphic signs such as emojis, stickers, GIFs, or memes to substitute facial expressions and voice intonation.

Meaning is produced through shared cognitive environments that allow participants to understand intertextual references and digital humor. Cyberpragmatics highlights that online communication is highly contextual and depends on users' digital literacy. This approach is relevant for explaining how research participants interpret particular visual symbols based on collective experiences within online communities. For example, the use of emojis 😊 or 🙄

does not merely signal emotion but can also convey irony or sarcasm that may only be understood within certain communities.

Emoji as Pragmatic Signs and Markers of Attitude

Recent international studies show that emojis are not merely decorative elements but possess significant pragmatic functions. Flores-Salgado and Witten (2023), in the *Journal of Pragmatics*, demonstrate that emojis can manage interpersonal relationships and clarify illocutionary force in digital conversations. Caspi (2025), in an international communication journal, finds that emojis can even significantly alter the interpretation of written messages.

From a pragmatic perspective, emojis can function as:

- Stance markers
- Politeness strategies
- Illocutionary intensifiers or mitigators
- Markers of irony or humor

These functions indicate that meaning in digital communication is dynamic and depends on users' contextual interpretation.

Memes as Digital Discourse Practices

Memes represent a form of digital discourse that is intertextual and sociocultural. From a discourse analysis perspective, memes not only convey messages but also represent ideology, group identity, and power relations. Studies in *New Media & Society* indicate that memes function as tools of participatory digital culture, in which users actively create and modify meaning.

From a pragmatic perspective, memes often rely on implicature and irony that can only be understood through specific social contexts. Therefore, meme analysis requires the integration of pragmatics, social semiotics, and digital culture studies.

Digital Communication as Social Practice

Digital communication can no longer be understood merely as a process of message exchange but rather as a social practice that shapes identity, interpersonal relationships, and power dynamics in online spaces. In contemporary scholarship, digital communication is viewed as a field of meaning production tied to community norms and participatory practices.

Tagg, Seargeant, and Brown (2021) argue that communication practices in social media constitute forms of social action, where users actively construct identities and group affiliations through language choices and semiotic resources. Similarly, Georgakopoulou (2021) shows that digital interaction is narrative and reflexive, allowing users to construct digital personas through repeated and contextual discursive practices.

From a multimodal perspective, Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) argue that visual signs in digital media are semiotic resources with representational and interactional potential. Emojis and memes not only reinforce verbal messages but also function as tools to negotiate solidarity, humor, and social distance. Furthermore, Zhang and Cassany (2022) demonstrate that meaning production in social media is collaborative and multimodal, where text, visuals, and platform features work orchestratively to shape social relations.

Social Semiotics and the Construction of Visual Identity

Within contemporary social semiotic approaches, signs are understood as social resources used strategically to represent meaning within specific cultural contexts. In social media environments, emojis and memes function as semiotic resources for self-representation and the negotiation of social positions.

Zhang and Cassany (2022) demonstrate that meaning production in digital communication is multimodal and participatory, where visual signs are used to construct solidarity, irony, and group affiliation. Furthermore, Dynel (2021) explains that digital memes often represent collective experiences through multimodal constructions rich in social and cultural context.

In the multicultural context of Medan City, the production and interpretation of visual meaning are influenced by mixed languages, local norms, and the dynamics of urban digital communities. Therefore, a social semiotic approach enables a deeper understanding of how visual signs shape identity, social positioning, and interpersonal relations in online communication.

Conversational Implicature and Multimodal Meaning Production

The concept of implicature in contemporary pragmatics emphasizes that meaning is not always expressed explicitly but is constructed through inferential processes dependent on context and shared assumptions. Huang (2022) explains that implicit meaning arises when there is a difference between literal meaning and communicative intention that can be recognized through contextual cues.

In digital communication, Yus (2022) adds that inferential processes become more complex due to the absence of physical context, prompting participants to rely on additional pragmatic markers to guide interpretation. In digital communication practices, particularly through memes and emojis, implicature is formed multimodally. Dynel (2021) shows that the tension between text and visual elements often generates irony or humor that encourages readers to construct implied meanings.

Thus, implicature in digital communication is contextual and multimodal, depending on the interaction between text, images, and the norms of online communities.

Relevance Theory and the Optimization of Digital Inference

Within contemporary cognitive pragmatics, communication is understood as an inferential activity oriented toward achieving optimal relevance. Huang (2022) explains that every utterance is produced with the assumption that the hearer will obtain sufficient cognitive effects relative to the processing effort required.

In digital communication environments, the absence of prosodic cues, intonation, and physical gestures increases interpretive complexity because context is not directly present. This condition requires participants to rely on additional markers that can narrow interpretive possibilities and guide inferential processes more efficiently.

Yus (2022) explains that visual symbols in online interaction function as contextualization cues that help readers identify the speaker's attitude, emotion, or evaluative stance. For instance, the presence of a laughing emoji may signal that a statement is intended as humor or irony, thereby reducing the potential for

misunderstanding. In heterogeneous urban societies such as Medan City, with diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, the presence of such relevance markers becomes crucial for maintaining interpretive coherence. Therefore, Relevance Theory provides a strong cognitive foundation for explaining how visual symbols function to manage ambiguity and shape meaning in digital communication.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach using a case study design. The case study approach was selected because the research focuses on an in-depth exploration of emoji use, memes, and multimodal communication forms within specific social media contexts as representations of digital pragmatic practices. This design enables the researcher to understand meaning construction in a contextual, holistic, and socially situated manner, aligning with the study's objective of analyzing illocutionary functions, implicatures, politeness strategies, and multimodal dynamics in digital communication.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on the criterion that informants must have active experience using social media and producing or interpreting multimodal content (emojis, memes, text-visual combinations). The inclusion criteria were as follows:

1. Active social media users for a minimum of two years;
2. Aged between 18 and 35 years, representing the dominant demographic in digital content production and consumption;
3. Regular use of emojis or active engagement in sharing and commenting on memes in online interactions.

The study involved 15–20 participants, a number deemed sufficient to achieve data saturation in qualitative research. Where necessary, snowball sampling was employed to recruit additional participants based on recommendations from initial informants.

Research Context

The study was conducted within digital environments, specifically on social media platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok. The social context encompassed online interactions within virtual communities, including group chats, comment sections, and public meme postings. Although conducted online, participants shared relatively homogeneous social backgrounds as university students and young professionals in urban settings, allowing for focused analysis of pragmatic dynamics within an urban digital community.

Data Collection Techniques

In-depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' perceptions of emoji use, memes, and multimodal communication strategies. Interview questions focused on intended meanings, interpretations of visual symbols, and contextual considerations guiding their use. Interviews were conducted online via Zoom or Google Meet and were audio-recorded with participants' consent.

Non-participant Digital Observation

With participants’ permission, the researcher observed social media interactions, including comments, posts, and the use of emojis and memes in conversations. Observations focused on usage patterns, situational contexts, and interactional responses.

Document and Digital Artifact Analysis

Screenshots of conversations, meme postings, and social media comments were collected as research documents. These visual data constituted the primary corpus for pragmatic and multimodal analysis. All data were transcribed verbatim prior to analysis.

Trustworthiness of Data

To ensure research rigor, the following criteria were applied:

1. Credibility: Method triangulation (interviews, observation, documentation) and member checking were conducted to validate interpretations.
2. Transferability: Detailed contextual descriptions were provided to enable readers to assess applicability in other contexts.
3. Dependability: An audit trail documenting all research procedures was maintained.
4. Confirmability: Researcher reflexivity and systematic field notes were used to minimize bias.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical principles in qualitative research. All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection, receiving clear explanations of the study’s objectives, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Participant identities were anonymized using pseudonyms or codes to ensure confidentiality. Digital data were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Emojis as Illocutionary Regulators and Ambiguity Markers

Empirical Data

Table 1. Shifts in Illocutionary Force Triggered by Emoji Use

Code	Verbal Text	Emoji	Relational Context	Literal Meaning	Actual Interpretation
E1	“Yes, that’s really great”	🙄	Peer interaction	Compliment	Sarcasm
E2	“It’s okay, relax”	😏	Close friends	Reassurance	Irony (latent anxiety)
E3	“You did an amazing job”	😂	Friendship group	Praise	Hyperbolic humor
E4	“Alright then.”	😐	Semi-formal	Neutral	Mild passive-aggression

The data demonstrate that emojis function as pragmatic markers capable of altering the interpretive orientation of an utterance. In example E1, the verbal expression “Yes, that’s really great” semantically constitutes an expressive speech act of praise. However, the addition of the 😏 emoji triggers a non-literal interpretation, namely sarcasm. Within speech act theory (Searle), this represents a shift in illocutionary force from praise to ironic criticism. Importantly, this shift does not occur at the syntactic or lexical level, but rather at the level of pragmatic interpretation.

From a cyberpragmatic perspective (Yus), the emoji operates as a contextualization cue that guides the reader’s inferential process based on a shared cognitive environment. The 😏 emoji has undergone conventionalization within digital communities as an indicator of irony or misalignment between textual content and communicative intention.

Similar patterns are observed in E2 and E3, where the 😊 and 😂 emojis do not merely signal emotional states, but actively frame the utterances as jokes, exaggerations, or ironic statements. Consequently, emojis function as mechanisms for managing ambiguity in text-based digital communication.

These findings confirm that in digital interaction:

- Illocutionary force is not determined solely by linguistic form;
- Emojis possess semiotic capacity to shift pragmatic meaning;
- Ambiguity is strategically regulated through visual symbols.

Emojis as Digital Politeness Strategies

Empirical Data

Table 2. Emojis as Mitigation Devices and Hierarchical Markers

Code	Message Text	Emoji	Social Relation	Pragmatic Function
P1	“May I ask for permission?”	🙏	Student-Lecturer	Mitigation
P2	“Sorry for disturbing your time”	😊	Employee-Supervisor	Softening
P3	“Thank you very much”	🙏😊	Formal	Politeness reinforcement
P4	“May I send the revision?”	😊	Semi-formal	Pressure reduction

Analysis

The data indicate that specific emojis particularly 🙏 and 😊 function as politeness strategies in hierarchical digital communication. Within Brown and Levinson’s framework, these uses correspond to negative politeness strategies, aimed at minimizing threats to the addressee’s negative face.

In face-to-face interaction, politeness is commonly expressed through prosody, facial expression, and bodily gesture. In digital environments, however, such nonverbal cues are absent. Emojis therefore operate as semiotic substitutes for gestures of deference and respect.

Notably, participants demonstrated clear awareness of contextual appropriateness in emoji selection. Hyperbolic emojis such as 😏 or 🤔 were absent from hierarchical interactions, indicating pragmatic sensitivity and digital literacy in managing formality and social distance.

Thus, emojis function not only as meaning modifiers, but also as regulators of social relations within online interaction.

Memes as Vehicles for Implicature Production and Social Critique
Empirical Data

Table 3. Memes as Multimodal Discourse Units

Code	Visual Description	Meme Text	Usage Context	Implicature
M1	Character with exhausted expression	“Working hard just to enjoy two days of healing”	Instagram Story	Critique of work culture
M2	Crying character	“Another deadline?”	Work group chat	Collective pressure
M3	Smirking character	“They said it would be easy”	Friend chat	Situational sarcasm

Analysis

Unlike emojis, which typically accompany text, memes constitute autonomous multimodal discourse units. In example M1, the seemingly lighthearted text conveys an implicature criticizing exploitative labor practices. Within Gricean pragmatics, this implicature arises through implicit violations of the maxims of relevance and quality, relying on shared experiential knowledge for interpretation.

From the perspective of multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen), meme meaning emerges from the orchestration of:

- Visual expression (fatigue, cynicism),
- Verbal narration (casual tone),
- Sociocultural context (urban work culture).

Meaning, therefore, is not embedded in text alone, but distributed across semiotic modes. In this study, memes function as:

1. Media of generational solidarity;
2. Indirect forms of social critique;
3. Representations of shared collective experience.

Synthesis

This study departs from the recognition that classical pragmatic research has largely focused on verbal utterances in face-to-face interaction, whereas contemporary communication practices are increasingly mediated by multimodal digital technologies. While existing studies in cyberpragmatics and computer-mediated communication have addressed emojis and memes, visual symbols are often treated as affective supplements rather than as structural components of illocutionary force.

The present findings challenge this assumption by demonstrating that emojis and memes are not merely emotional markers, but semiotic resources that actively construct, shift, and negotiate pragmatic meaning. Meaning in digital communication is therefore distributed across modes, spanning verbal language and visual symbols.

Reconstructing Illocution in Digital Space

In classical speech act theory (Austin; Searle), illocutionary force is understood as inherent in linguistic conventions and situational context. However, the data reveal that in digital communication, illocutionary force is no longer stabilized within verbal structure. Emojis operate as illocutionary force modifiers capable of:

- Strengthening illocutionary intent (e.g., politeness reinforcement),
- Shifting illocutionary orientation (praise → sarcasm),
- Producing controlled ambiguity (neutral → passive-aggressive).

Illocution in digital interaction is therefore multimodal and semiotically co-constructed rather than linguistically encoded.

Digital Politeness as Semiotic Adaptation

The findings extend politeness theory by illustrating that emojis function as gestural substitutes in environments lacking nonverbal cues. Digital politeness is not a degradation of courtesy, but an adaptive practice within a new semiotic ecology, where visual symbols manage face, hierarchy, and relational alignment.

Memes and Collective Implicature

Memes operate as multimodal discourse practices that generate implicatures through intertextuality and shared social knowledge. Meaning emerges communally rather than individually, reinforcing the notion that digital implicature is often collective and generational.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study demonstrates that meaning in digital communication is fundamentally multimodal and cannot be reduced to linguistic structure alone. Emojis and memes function as pragmatic devices that actively shape, shift, and negotiate illocutionary force. Emojis can transform literal meaning into sarcasm, mitigate face-threatening acts, or introduce controlled ambiguity, while memes produce collective implicatures grounded in shared experience and sociocultural context.

Theoretically, these findings underscore the necessity of integrating speech act theory, cyberpragmatics, and multimodal discourse analysis to account for contemporary communicative practices. Digital pragmatics thus emerges not merely as an extension of classical pragmatics, but as a reconstructed field that redefines illocution, politeness, and meaning-making within technology-mediated interaction.

FURTHER STUDY

This research still has limitations, so it is necessary to conduct further research related to the topic of Digital Pragmatics in Medan City: An Analysis of Meaning in Social-media, Emojis, Memes, and Multimodal Communication in order to perfect this research and increase insight for readers.

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