

## The Pragmatics of Social Media Posts and Comments

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### ABSTRACT

*The relevance of the social media cuts across all areas of human endeavour, thereby, making it difficult for anyone to completely ignore the value they offer. An attempt to imagine what a day could be without a moment on any of the social media platforms for any of such reasons as: viewing comments, statuses, pictures, videos, shopping, doing bank transactions, etc. would lay to rest any doubt about the can't-do-without relevance of the social media. The current study was set out to examine English as Second Language learners' interaction on social media by looking at the sync between social media posts and comments as they relate to context. The study specifically paid attention to the method of interaction that is adopted and whether the Internet-mediated interaction can still be considered pragmatically acceptable even when certain offline cooperative principles are violated. To achieve these, the descriptive study was adopted. The data for the study were gathered randomly from 28 Facebook users of L2 speakers of English. It analyzed natural data from the online interaction of L2 speakers of English. The interaction is in the form of Facebook posts and comments for the period of one month. Selection was based on posts with only texts (without pictures and videos.) The results showed that contexts and inferences were the tools for effective communication strategies in online media communication.*

**KEYWORDS: Social Media, Internet-Mediated Communication, and Pragmatics**

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### Introduction

Life without social media is lifeless. The relevance of the social media cuts across all areas of human endeavours thereby making it difficult for anyone to completely ignore the value they offer. An attempt to imagine a day without a moment spent on any of the social media platforms for any of the following reasons: viewing comments, statuses, pictures, videos, shopping, doing bank transactions, checking/sending emails, chatting, making orders, booking hotel reservations, and using social media (Facebook, Twitter, Skype, Google) for fun, relaxation, or simply keeping in touch with friends would put any doubt to rest. The social media is a content-rich medium with several communicative affordances (Benamara, Inkpen, & Taboada, 2018).

Pragmatics is all about communication in the reality of it. Real world communication has always been a kind of communication that is sought after in a non-transient setting (a

long-lasting setting). This is what social media platforms, particularly Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp, make available to their users, among other things. Giles, Stommel, Paulus, Lester, and Reed (2015) as cited in Khasanah (2019) note that social media is not only a place where "real world" communication is replicated but also a place where, despite their mother tongue differences, users interact and communicate seamlessly. They come from different cultural backgrounds with their own systems and values that in turn create a new mesh of culture altogether, reducing the status of English as no longer the exclusive domain of native speakers (Lantz and Anderson, 2017) but a global online lingua franca.

The perception that Internet pragmatics is the same as offline pragmatics because they are governed by the same principle is not entirely correct. This is because interlocutors engage in a meaning inference and deduction process through social activity by applying strategies to interpret what is meant by the utterance following what is said and what is not; even when context, which is the hallmark of pragmatic analysis, is absent. This perception makes the analysis quite straightforward and simplistic. Khasanah (2019), however, observes that since the main scope of pragmatics is in the contextualization of text, every meaning is bound to its context, and that makes Internet-mediated communication with its diverse platforms different from its non-Internet-mediated counterpart.

Based on the already established background, this study sets out to examine English as Second Language (EL2) learners' interaction in social media by looking at the sync between social media posts and comments as they relate to context. Hence, the attention will be on method of interaction that is adopted and whether the Internet-mediated interaction can still be considered pragmatically acceptable even when certain offline cooperative principles are violated.

### **Literature Review**

The main contribution of pragmatics is, specifically, the certainty that it is impossible to analyse language outside the context in which it is produced and interpreted. Actually, human beings are rarely (if ever) truly literal when we speak; quite on the contrary, we tend to leave implicit all the information that we guess our interlocutors should be able to obtain by themselves. In other words, speakers base the interpretation that they intend to produce with the utterance (the so-called *speaker meaning*, opposed to the zero-context *sentence meaning*) on the interlocutors' ability to access the necessary information that will enable them to interpret the utterance adequately.

Cummings (2010) avers that the central subject matter of inquiry in this school includes speech acts, deixis, implicature, presupposition, reference, and conversational analysis. The latter school of thought, by contrast, presents pragmatics as a functional perspective on all core components and "hyphenated" areas of linguistics and beyond (Verschuere 1999). Thus, topics such as sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and discourse analysis fall within the purview of this school.

On social media, anyone is able to participate, exchange messages, and interact with any number of other users (Landart, 2017). Cyberpragmatics was coined in 2001 for a cognitive pragmatics study of Internet-mediated communication (Yus 2001a, 2001b, 2010b). Its main interest is the analysis of how information is produced and interpreted within the Internet environment (Yus, 2011). It is also concerned about how users access contextual information in order to fill in the informative gaps between what users type on the keyboard and what they really intend to communicate. Yus demonstrates that the various forms of communication on the Internet have important pragmatic consequences, which have an impact on the amount and quality of information communicated and interpreted on them. Specifically, Yus (2011) discusses the following hypotheses on Internet-mediated communication which makes up the foundations of cyberpragmatics:

- 1 On the Internet, the “addresser users” have communicative intentions and devise their utterances with the expectation that these intentions will end up being relevant to the other users and that their utterances will be interpreted correctly. Since users are aware that, in principle, there are multiple ways in which their utterances can be coded, they type (or talk in voice-enabled Internet communication) with the expectation that these coded utterances will be adequate evidence to lead “addressee users” effectively towards the intended interpretation.
- 2 Internet users use inferential strategies when they interpret messages on the Net, and these do not differ from the ones used for the comprehension of utterances in oral conversations shaped by physical co-presence. We are equipped with a biologically evolved tendency to maximize the relevance of the utterances that we process, but we do not apply different inferential procedures for our interpretation of stimuli (verbal and nonverbal) in physical or virtual contexts.
- 3 Internet users expect their interlocutors to be able to access the necessary amount of contextual information that will allow them to arrive at a correct interpretation of their utterances. In the same way, their interlocutors will invariably access contextual information as a necessary stage in a relevance oriented interpretation of these utterances.
- 4 The attributes of the different cyber-media (chat rooms, e-mail, messenger, web pages, social networking sites...) influence the quality of the user’s access to contextual information, the amount of information obtained, the interpretation selected, the cognitive effects derived and the mental effort involved in obtaining these effects.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The current study adopts Sperber and Wilson’s relevance theory which was propounded in 1986. The theory analyses certain pragmatic aspects of Internet-mediated communication. According to Sperber and Wilson (1995), the Relevance theory is a cognitive theory that has made a major contribution to our understanding of how we produce and interpret

language. As its name indicates, the underlying hypothesis in this theory is that interpreting *stimuli* (verbal or nonverbal communicative acts) is subject to an inherently human search for relevance in the information that we process, an aspect that is rooted in human psychology (Yus, 2011). Below, some important tenets of the theory will be commented upon as they relate to computer-mediated communication. Some of the tenets of the theory include: (1) the code model versus the inferential model (2) Ostension and Intension (3) Manifestness, Cognitive Environment.

*The code model versus the inferential model:* for them, communication is a much more complicated task and is subject to inferential hypotheses on whose validity there is no guarantee or certainty, what Sperber & Wilson call the *inferential model*. Sperber and Wilson do not deny the existence of coding in communication (we do use words to communicate our thoughts), but they locate it only at the initial stages of interpretation, and argue that mere coding is insufficient for understanding utterances and, consequently, must be combined with inference.

The tenet according to Yus (2011) opines that any type of utterance interpretation, be it in physical settings (offline communication) or on the Internet (online communication), involves an initial stage of decoding of the words (said, typed) and a second stage of turning the schematic identification of these words into fully contextualized propositions that match the sender's intended interpretation.

*Ostension and intention:* Sperber and Wilson (1995) propose two kinds of intention, the *informative intention* (i.e. the intention to inform the interlocutor of something) and the *communicative intention* (the intention to alert the interlocutor to this informative intention). With the latter, the speaker can effectively draw the interlocutor's attention and direct it to his/her intentions. In other words, not only the intention to inform is *manifest*, but *mutually manifest* to both interlocutors (Yus, 2011). In this case, the stimulus acquires an *ostensive* quality. By this, the relevance of linguistic communication cannot be over-emphasised because whenever a one talks to us we immediately identify at least his/her communicative intention.

*Manifestness. Cognitive environments:* People construct different concepts and representations of the world, just as their personal experiences are different. They call this array of information *cognitive environments*, which are formed in the following way: the facts about the world are manifest to a person only if this person is capable of representing them mentally and accepting their representations as valid (Sperber & Wilson, 1987 as cited in Yus, 2011). The sum of all facts that are manifest to a person makes up his/her *cognitive environment*. The *total cognitive environment* of individuals consists not only of the facts that they know, but also of all the facts that they are capable of knowing at a specific time and place (Sperber & Wilson, 1987).

Yus (2011) summarises this tenet by stating that during conversations the interlocutors are exposed to a great deal of contextual information of a physical and conceptual quality. In this sense, S&W propose the term *mutual cognitive environment* for the amount of information that is manifest to both interlocutors in a specific situation. Inside this cognitive environment, the information that both interlocutors are aware that they share is

called *mutually manifest assumptions*. Therefore, communication is basically an attempt to make certain information mutually manifest to both interlocutors. This applies to any kind of communication including Internet-mediated communication.

### **Methodology**

The current study is descriptive in nature. The data for the study is gathered randomly from 28 Facebook users of L2 speakers of English. It analyzes natural data from the online interaction of L2 speakers of English. The interaction is in the form of Facebook posts and comments for the period of one month. Selection of posts are based on posts with only texts. Those with images/pictures and videos were not selected for this study. This is because the presence of image/picture or video may highly contextualise the post hence making comments explicit. The authors rather than transcribe screen-captured the data to keep the form intact since the layout and interface serve as an essential factor in the analysis. Users' consent to use the data and to display the Facebook handlers for this study is already acquired. The of data for the present study is based on the descriptive analysis method.

### **Results and Discussion**

Following the data collection, the study reveals that interlocutors' social media interaction is different from the traditional offline communication schema in term of language use, their context alignment, and their attempt at compensating for the lack of resources during the communication process.

### **A Sober Recollection of the Character of a Typical Nigerian Mother**

Safety For All LTE 21:39

 Sylvia Nweze ▶ NAIJA CRIB  
48 m · 📍

😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂

1) When you say, "Mummy, I'm Sorry!" And she replies, "Sorry for yourself!"

😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂

2) When you ask her where you should drop something and she says, "Drop it on my head."

😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂

3) When she brings food wrapped in a nylon bag from a party.

😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂

4) When you say, "Mummy, I have fever." And she replies you, "Why won't you have fever when you press phone every night".

😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂

5) When you say, "Mummy I took 2nd in my class." and she replies, "So the person that took first has two heads abi?".

😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂

6) When she takes the DSTV remote to work, just to punish you.

😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂

7) When you are watching television with her and then she slept off and still doesn't want you to change the channel.

😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂

8) When you tell her you are going to a friend's place to play and she asks, "When last did that friend come here to play with

🏠 📺 👤 👥 🔔 ≡

Sylvia's post

👍 Like    💬 Comment

👍❤️ 458

View previous comments...

 Usman Debby  
I love you mum .  
2 m Like Reply

 Riek Diech Gak  
I love you mom  
1 m Like Reply

 Mariam Raheem  
Iya niya mi.much love 2u mum,u are irreplaceable....  
1 m Like Reply

 Nwaneri Sunday Chimechetam  
I love u sooo much mummy.  
1 m Like Reply

 Harrison Gerard  
Rip mum  
1 m Like Reply

 Stella Ibeawuchi

📷 Write a comment... 🗨️ 📺 😊

🏠 📺 👤 👥 🔔 ≡

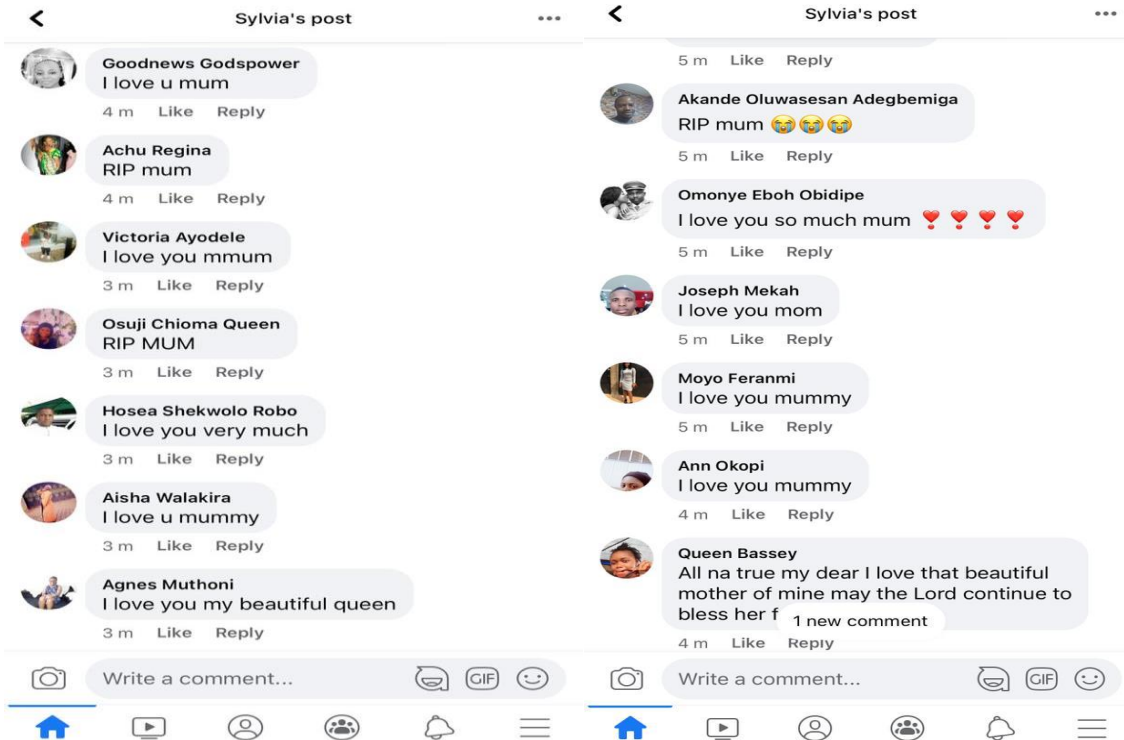


Figure 1

The above posts show comments that have utterances which are not produced sequentially in a temporal manner in which the current sequence demonstrates interlocutor's understanding of the prior one. The interlocutors seem not to pay attention to previous comments made by others. There is a deviation from the model of offline communication as it pertains to verbal communication, especially spoken genre. Ordinarily, despite the language resemblance to a spoken genre, the interaction order does not seem to agree with model of offline communication with its adjacency pair as the primary building block of conversation (Meredith 2017). Khasanah (2019) had observed that in a prototypical model, utterances are produced sequentially one after another in a temporal manner in which the current sequence demonstrates interlocutor's understanding of the prior one. That is not all. The post is a reflection of a typical Nigerian way of scolding their children whereby they make certain statements with implicature and expect the child to figure out what is implied. But the following comments on the surface don't seem to cohere. For example, (2) when you ask your mummy where you should drop something and she says "drop it on my head". Order than providing a direct response such as "that's true" as is done by one of the interlocutors who says "all na true my dear I love that beautiful mother of mine..." the interlocutors are seen making such comments as "I love you mum", "RIP mum", "I love you my beautiful queen", etc. the above comments appear to lagging in coherence on the surface but when pragmatically considered, one would agree that such comments though don't follow adjacency pairs affirm to the statements of the posts.

**a. Communicative Intention of the Post**

Of course, the ostension and intention model as proposed by Sperber and Wilson suggesting two kinds of intention (the informative and the communicative intentions), is considered in the current study. From the above table, the post can be said to clearly have communicative intention. The statements of the post explicitly draws their attention to some adjacency pairs that characterize mother-child interactions in a proper Nigerian setting. This he/she does not just succeed in achieving but also gets them to share in his/her line of thinking having been directed by the poster. In others words, the intentions are mutually manifest. The poster and the commenters obviously have singularity of view. For example, statement 1: *when you say, mummy I'm sorry! And she says 'sorry for yourself'*. In the post above, there are clear evidences of interactions between the mother and the child, which are rudiments of communication. As seen in figure 1 above, the decoding as expressed following the response of the mother is inferred or supposed to be inferred. Corroborating Sperber and Wilson's view, the commenters on the above posts confirm and agree completely with the poster on the statements of the post. Going by the position of Sperber and Wilson, communicative intention of a speaker's/poster's statement largely depends on the reaction of the hearer/commenter to what is being stated. Needless to say, communication is a much more complicated task and is subject to inferential hypotheses on whose validity there is no guarantee or certainty, what Sperber and Wilson call the *inferential model* rather than the traditional view which saw communication as an almost automatic coding-decoding activity, wherein the so-called *code model* in which the words uttered by the speaker are interpreted in a machine-like way by the interlocutor.

#### **b. Informative Intentions of the Posts**

On the other hand, the post is not lagging in informative intentions. The statements basically carry informative tendencies which bring to the remembrance of the interlocutors certain old memories about their mothers. For example, in post 4 and 5 we have such statements as: *mummy, I have fever...; mummy I took 2<sup>nd</sup> in my class...* etc. The above carry some historic information which immediately reintroduce to the commenters old memories.

Little wonder their comments were basically implicatures. Agreeing with Sperber and Wilson's model, the intension is mutually manifest to both the poster and the commenters. Also striking here is that the comments of the commenters show that both the poster and the commenters share the same context. That is to say, the interactants share the similar cognitive environment. This is usually common in offline communication, Khasanah (2019) had noted that in offline communication, interactants usually share the same context which makes the occasional disjunction in their speech act as no hindrance to achieving the intended implicature. In online communication, however, context is not available unless it is being stated explicitly using multimodal. And even with the absence of image/video which should aid the contextualisation of the above post, the commenters are still able to contextualise the content.



## Pun and Humour

Safety For All LTE 21:38

**Allwell Nma lyke**  
10 h · 🧑🏾  
#Health\_challenge 🏆

Did you know that Boiled egg is more nutritional than cooked egg?

Did you know that Boiled egg taste like fowl while cooked egg taste like hen?

Did you know that Boiled egg is oval in shape while cooked egg is like egg in shape?

Lemm... See more

👍👍 2 6 comments 2 shares

Like Comment Send

**Nonye Offor**  
You are not serious  
Like Reply

**Allwell Nma lyke**  
**Nonye Offor** Is it because I did not ask you to pay me? No problem  
Like Reply

Write a comment...

**Jennifer Chinanu**  
5 h · 🧑🏾

Home Video Profile Group Bell Menu

< Allwell's post ...

Allwell's post

👍👍 2


2 shares

**King Emeka Anointed Enechukwu**  
**Allwell Nma lyke** mind ya sef oooo  
9 h Like Reply

**Allwell Nma lyke**  
**King Emeka Anointed Enechukwu** What I do?  
9 h Like Reply

Write a reply...

**Timinieri Ikpaikpai**  
i absolutely refuse to be confuse with this your post


  
9 h Like Reply

**Allwell Nma lyke**  
**Timinieri Ikpaikpai** Why naa?

Write a comment...

Home Video Profile Group Bell Menu

**Timinieri Ikpaikpai**  
i absolutely refuse to be confuse with this your post

  
9 h Like Reply

**Allwell Nma lyke**  
**Timinieri Ikpaikpai** Why naa?  
3 h Like Reply

Write a reply...

**Nonye Offor**  
You are not serious  
5 h Like Reply

**Allwell Nma lyke**  
**Nonye Offor** Is it because I did not ask you to pay me? No problem  
3 h Like Reply

Write a reply...

Write a comment...

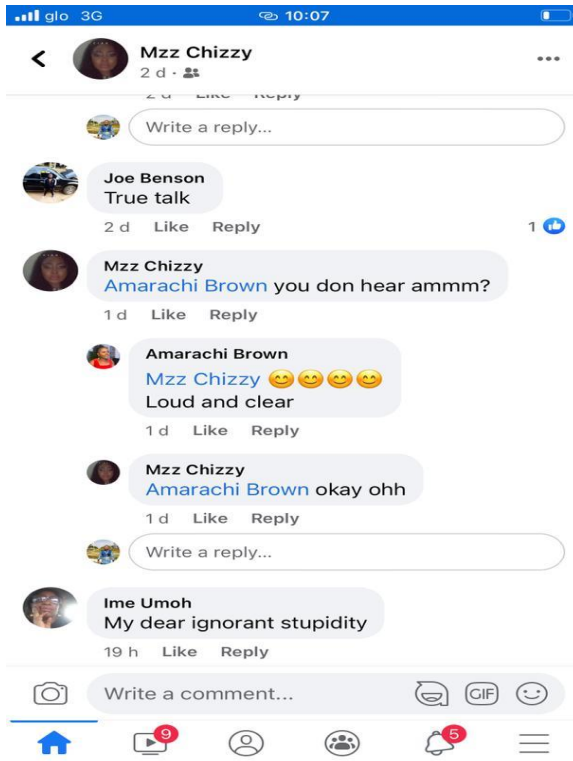
Home Video Profile Group Bell Menu

*Figure 2*

Following the above post and comments, the poster comically attempts to establish some differences between the same item. The poster uses a figurative language to initiate thought provoking pieces of information. This suddenly gets the commenters to hastily ponder over the truth value of those information. The comments of the commenters show that the intention of the poster is to get them confused isn't successful achieved as the non-informative content of the post generates uninformative comments. The comments so far reveal that attention is shifted from the post to the poster. Rather than contribute to the post the commenters are of the perception that the poster saying that boiled egg is more nutritional than cooked egg is a joke meant to confuse those who do not pay close attention. The poster plays on 'cooked' and 'boiled' which translate the same process of preparing egg. Also, one other striking thing that makes the poster not succeed in the attempt to confuse the interactants is the singularity of context. Perhaps 'boiled' and 'cooked' may have meant different things in some other context but in the present context as contextualized by the poster both functioning as pre-modifiers; they mean only one thing. Just as Joshua (2020) notes, puns and other related forms of verbal play are good illustrations of the type of incongruity that operates in the narrower linguistic context. It may suffice to say that although the poster may have succeeded in playing on those words as discussed above it is not clear whether similar success is achieved in the attempt to arouse some sense of humour.

Going by the Gricean cooperative principle, which opines that meaningful communication is achieved when interlocutors provide not only orderly and true but also informative and relevant contributions through language use. One can boldly say that following the lack of truth value of the post and the incoherent comments associated with it, rather than join Grice to say that meaningful communication is not achieved; it will suffice to say that the other interactants tends to disagree with the meaning he/she presents to them. Connectedly, as posited by Sperber and Wilson, we can state that the above post is not manifest to the commenters as the facts about egg which the post carry are not manifest to them. Hence, they are not able to represent them mentally neither do they accept their representations as valid.

### A Humorous Satire on a Social Misnomer



### *Figure 3*

The above post presents the various descriptions or expressions for the premarital affairs that girls involve in. These descriptions are basically intended to justify the unacceptable way of getting married within the African culture and worldview. Satire is intended to correct certain behaviour or perception by ridiculing them. That is what we see in the social media post above. The poster practically reveals the different expressions the singles who are into sexual relationship use to cover their shame. The poster does this by quoting their several ways off expressing how far the relationship has gone and what should be inferred from them. For example, “we just got engaged” also known as “single”; “I call his mother and she calls me” also known as “stupid single”; “he posts my pictures on social media and uses my pictures as he dp” also known as “first class idiotic single”, etc. The language use here depicts some level of assurances that they are more or less married if he (the boyfriend) can do all of those. The implicature here is for instance, if the boyfriend’s mother calls her and she also calls her (the boyfriend’s mother), then she has accepted and taken her for a daughter-in-law. Strikingly, the poster clearly heals their ignorance by summarily providing them with the other name for such expressions in brackets see figure 3 above.

The sense of humour as also intended by the poster is achieved to a high extent going by the first comment “if I fall off from this table break leg, hope u go happy”. This comment shows that the commenter finds the posts so humorous that she is scared of falling from the table and breaking legs in the process of laughing over it. As humorous as they appear, the commenters including the first admit that they are true. Unlike figure 2, the comments in figure 3 above show some adjacency pairs and comments following the model of offline communication as it pertains to verbal communication, especially spoken genre. The comments such as “yes ohh”, “true talk”, “loud and clear” etc. affirm the position of the poster. Here, the comments are explicit leaving no room for doubt as to what their take is on the post. That is to say, they are in agreement with the argument the poster raises in the post.

### **Conclusion**

In the current study, having observed the form and structure of social media interaction among users with the form and structure of physical co-present interactions, we see the dynamics of communication and language use. The study has shown occasions where interactional sequencing is undermined and not strict adherence to the adjacency pair rule yet, effective communication is achieved. Two techniques are adopted here; context and inference where certain post leaves only the option to infer the context within which they are allowed in online communication. Intentions are broken where they apply communicative strategies and inferential steps similar to when they are engaged in face-to-face communication offline. The study has elaborated on some other factors to consider as they pertain to online communication in terms of their nature, their context (or absence of it) and meaning construction, and the use of text while purposefully undermining multimodality. Implicature is highly useful in this context as one of the limited tools that are available to online interlocutors for communication. The study strongly supports the

pragmatics of social media communication, reaffirming its inconsistencies with offline or online communication models.

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