

Digital Silence: The New Frontier of Influence in Social Media Analytics

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Abstract

This conceptual article investigates the underexplored phenomenon of digital silence in social media, drawing inspiration from Benedict XVI's 2012 message, "Silence and Word: Path of Evangelization". It addresses a significant gap in communication and analytics literature, which overwhelmingly emphasizes visible activity while neglecting the communicative power of intentional silence. Building on interdisciplinary perspectives—including communication theory, theology, and illustrative cases from brands, influencers, and African protest movements—the article offers operational definitions for "digital silence" and "silence metrics", and demonstrates how absence itself can influence anticipation, sentiment, and engagement online. By treating silence as a creative force and proposing practical approaches for its measurement, this article establishes a conceptual framework that invites communicators and scholars to advance new strategies and analytical models for the digital age.

Keywords

Digital Silence, Silence Metrics, Social Media, Analytics, Strategic Communication

1. Introduction

This conceptual article addresses a significant gap in social media analytics: the communicative power and influence of digital silence. While the majority of digital communication scholarship and practice focuses on visible activity—such as posts, comments, and replies—the potential value of intentional or strategic silence remains largely unexamined. The research presented here responds to this gap by proposing that periods of absence, when understood as "digital silence", can be meaningful communicative acts and even tools of influence.

The article defines and operationalizes key constructs, drawing on interdisci-

plinary literature in communication theory, digital analytics, and theology—most notably Benedict XVI’s “Silence and Word: Path of Evangelization”. Case examples have been selected for their relevance to intentional, imposed, and collective silence in digital environments, with a focus on recent, well-documented cases from brands, influencers, and African protest contexts. The aim is to develop a conceptual framework for understanding and measuring digital silence, rather than to report new empirical findings.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1. Silence in Communication Theory

Communication scholars have long recognized that silence is not merely the absence of speech, but a communicative act with its own syntax, semantics, and pragmatics (Jaworski, 1993). In interpersonal contexts, silence can signal attentiveness, respect, discomfort, or resistance (Pirjol & Ionesc, 2019). In group settings, collective silence can build tension, foster unity, or mark moments of shared emotion.

The concept of “communicative silence” is especially salient in high-context cultures, where meaning is often conveyed through what is unsaid (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). Even in low-context, information-rich societies, strategic silence—such as a deliberate pause before a critical announcement or a respectful hush after a tragedy—can carry important meaning.

Digital communication introduces new complexities. Rafaeli & Sudweeks (1997) note that, in computer-mediated communication, the absence of a response can be as significant as a direct reply, prompting users to ascribe meaning to gaps and delays. The nuances of digital silence vary across platforms and contexts: for example, silence in a private group chat may provoke anxiety, while silence in a public thread may go unnoticed or be interpreted as boundary-setting. The lack of non-verbal cues online amplifies the ambiguity and potential impact of silence, making it a dynamic element that deserves greater scholarly attention.

2.2. Benedict XVI’s Vision: Silence and Word

Benedict XVI’s 2012 message offers a profound reflection on the role of silence in communication. He posits that “word and silence are two faces of the same coin”, and that effective communication requires both speaking and listening, as well as activity and contemplation. Silence, for Benedict, is not an escape from communication but its deepest fulfilment, enabling discernment, mutual respect, and authentic dialogue (Benedict XVI, 2012).

He writes, “When word and silence become mutually exclusive, communication breaks down, either because it gives rise to confusion or, conversely, because it creates an atmosphere of coldness; when they complement one another, however, communication acquires value and meaning.” Silence allows for reflection on meaning and creates space for genuine relationship. Benedict points out that, in a world overwhelmed with stimuli and information, silence is essential for

proper discernment and for maintaining the depth of human encounter.

Bridging Theory and Measurement

Translating these theoretical concepts into digital analytics, anticipation may be observed as spikes in @mentions or queries about an account's absence; respect as positive sentiment in comments during a pause; protest as organized, coordinated silences and subsequent surges in engagement; and boundary-setting as deliberate periods of non-response or explicit statements about withdrawal. These measurable signals provide a foundation for operationalizing "silence metrics" in digital environments.

3. Defining Digital Silence and Silence Metrics

For the purposes of this article, **digital silence** is defined as an intentional or unintentional pause in outward digital activity—posting, commenting, or replying—by a normally active account, lasting at least 24 hours, and perceptible to the intended audience. Digital silence can be categorized as:

- **Intentional** (strategic pause, digital detox, protest, commemoration)
- **Imposed** (government shutdowns, algorithmic suppression)
- **Accidental** (technical outages or unplanned disruptions)

Silence metrics are observable indicators—quantitative or qualitative—used to assess the effects of digital silence. These may include changes in engagement (likes, comments, shares), indirect mentions, follower growth or attrition, and shifts in sentiment as detected through content analysis.

4. Types, Forms, and Measurement of Digital Silence

4.1. Types and Forms

As Jaworski (1993) and Dauenhauer (1980) have shown, silence is not monolithic. Digital silence may be interactive (pauses within conversations), discursive (unsaid elements in broader discourse), or cultural (shaped by norms regarding when silence is appropriate). In the digital sphere, silence can serve as a tool for reflection, protest, mindfulness (Hanh, 2015), or artistic expression (Sontag, 1969). The meaning and impact of digital silence vary by context, intent, and audience expectations.

4.2. Measurement and the Concept of Silence Metrics

While traditional social media analytics focus on visible activity, silence metrics seek to capture the communicative power of absence. For example, spikes in @mentions following a period of silence may indicate anticipation or curiosity; positive sentiment during a content pause may signal respect; and coordinated silences may be followed by surges in engagement that reflect collective protest or solidarity. These proposed metrics are grounded in a synthesis of published reports and observed patterns, establishing a conceptual foundation for future empirical validation.

4.3. Case Examples: Silence in Action (African Perspectives)

4.3.1. Brands and Crisis Communication

In Africa, brands have increasingly had to navigate the complex relationship between digital silence and crisis communication. For example, in 2020, South African retailer Clicks faced a major backlash after publishing an advert on its website that was widely condemned as racist. The initial silence from Clicks on social media was met with mounting anger and calls for boycotts, especially as the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) staged protests nationwide. The brand's eventual apology and explanation came only after the silence had intensified public scrutiny, demonstrating how, in the African context, silence during social crises can escalate public emotion and pressure for accountability. However, some analysts noted that the initial pause, though risky, allowed the company to issue a more comprehensive and considered response rather than a rushed, defensive statement.

Another case is MTN Nigeria's response to the #EndSARS protests in 2020. As one of the country's most visible brands, MTN initially remained silent when some users accused it of restricting access to Twitter during protests. This silence created a vacuum filled with rumors and public suspicion. MTN later issued a statement denying intentional disruption, but the period of silence had already shaped public perception (Egbunike & Olorunnisola, 2021). These examples show that, as in other regions, African brands must carefully weigh the timing and intent behind silent periods in digital crisis management (Egbunike & Olorunnisola, 2021).

4.3.2. Influencers and Digital Detox

African influencers, especially in the mental health and advocacy spaces, have begun to embrace digital detoxes as part of their public personas. For example, Nigerian writer and activist Luvvie Ajayi Jones (though based in the US, she has a large African following and often addresses pan-African issues) has publicly announced social media breaks, which have been met with higher engagement and supportive messages from followers who value her authenticity and transparency about digital burnout.

On the continent itself, South African content creator Mhlali Ndamase took a break from social media in 2023 after facing intense public scrutiny. Her return was met with a surge in positive engagement, as followers expressed empathy and appreciation for her openness about the pressures of online life (Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2019). These cases suggest that digital silence, when framed as self-care or reflection, can humanize influencers and deepen connections with African audiences (Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2019).

In addition, some African digital creators have begun incorporating regular "silent days" into their content schedules—not only for mental health but also to honor cultural traditions of contemplation, fasting, or remembrance. These practices offer unique opportunities to study the intersection between indigenous cultural values and modern digital strategies, suggesting a rich area for future re-

search that could benefit both academic and practitioner audiences.

4.3.3. Collective Silence as Protest or Solidarity

Collective digital silence has also played a role in African social movements. During the 2021 #ShutItAllDown protests in Namibia, activists and organizations observed a coordinated social media silence for several hours to honor victims of gender-based violence. The absence of regular posts was itself a powerful statement, drawing attention to the gravity of the issue and inviting followers to reflect rather than react (Eniayejuni, 2023; Ndakalako, 2024).

Similarly, in Nigeria during the #EndSARS movement, coordinated online silences were used by protest organizers to mark moments of mourning after reports of police violence. These silences allowed for collective reflection and amplified the movement's emotional weight, with analytics showing spikes in mentions and engagement immediately after the pauses ended.

4.3.4. Algorithmic and Accidental Silence

African digital spaces are also subject to algorithmic and accidental silences, particularly due to government-imposed internet shutdowns and throttling. During the 2021 Ugandan elections and the last Tanzanian elections in October 2025, the governments ordered a complete internet blackout. While the silence was imposed rather than chosen, the resulting absence of digital communication sparked widespread speculation, underground communication efforts, and international attention. The vacuum created by this silence was filled with rumors and heightened anxiety, demonstrating how the absence of digital voices can become a focal point for public discourse and analysis (Olukotun, Micek, & Kenyanito, 2016; Anthonio & Roberts, 2023).

Across all case examples, claims about spikes in engagement, mentions, or sentiment are based on descriptive accounts or secondary analysis and serve to illustrate the relevance and applicability of the conceptual framework proposed here. Additionally, as Goffman (1967) notes, silence can serve as a form of face management, shaping social boundaries and protecting identity in both offline and digital interactions. Turner's (1969) concept of liminality is also relevant, as collective digital silences can become ritualized moments that mark transitions or signal solidarity in online communities. Foucault (1978) reminds us that silence can be imposed by structures of power, shaping not only what is said but also what remains unsaid, which is particularly pertinent in discussions of algorithmic or government-imposed silence.

5. Psychological and Cultural Power of Digital Silence

Digital silence—whether intentional, imposed, or accidental—exerts distinct psychological and cultural influences in online environments. **Intentional silences**, such as digital detoxes, planned content pauses, or coordinated moments of reflection and protest, are often used to foster anticipation, curiosity, and respect among audiences. For instance, a planned influencer break can spark followers'

curiosity or empathy, while a collective pause after a tragedy is broadly interpreted as a gesture of respect, empathy, or mourning (Jaworski, 1993; Benedict XVI, 2012; Mukadi, 2013; Pîrjol & Ionesc, 2019). Culturally, these intentional silences are associated with contemplation and solidarity, deepening the meaning of digital engagement.

In contrast, **imposed silences**—such as government-mandated internet shutdowns or algorithmic suppression—typically generate anxiety, frustration, or a sense of powerlessness. These forms of silence are often interpreted as acts of censorship or oppression, undermining trust and community cohesion. **Accidental silences**, resulting from technical failures or unplanned disruptions, usually lead to confusion or speculation but lack the agency or intentional communicative value of chosen silence. While accidental silences rarely carry positive cultural meaning, they can still disrupt routines and prompt uncertainty.

From a psychological perspective, research suggests that intentional gaps—such as pauses before responding or planned group “quiet times”—can heighten attention and deepen memory (Kahneman, 2011). In contrast, imposed or accidental silences, being outside the user’s control, may cause uncertainty or even erode trust, as they are often interpreted as neglect or avoidance (Pîrjol & Ionesc, 2019). Overall, while intentional digital silence can enhance anticipation and foster deeper engagement, imposed and accidental silences tend to provoke negative reactions, underscoring the importance of agency and context in interpreting online absence.

6. Ethical Considerations, Risks, and Strategic Recommendations

Consistently distinguishing between intentional, imposed, and accidental digital silence is vital, as each form carries unique ethical implications, risks, and communicative challenges. **Intentional silence**—such as a planned pause or digital detox—should be clearly signalled and contextualised to prevent misinterpretation as indifference, neglect, or avoidance. In contexts where transparency is expected, such as in crisis communication, a brand’s silence may be seen as irresponsible or a lack of accountability, potentially provoking backlash (Ott & Theunissen, 2015). Prolonged or unexplained silences can also foster the spread of misinformation when authoritative communication is absent (Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997). Therefore, communicators must carefully weigh when silence is appropriate and when a timely response is ethically warranted, especially in sensitive domains like public health or justice (Guttman, 2017; Bowen, 2005).

Imposed silence—resulting from government shutdowns, censorship, or algorithmic suppression—raises profound concerns about agency, freedom of expression, equity, and access to information. Such silences can erode trust, amplify rumors, and undermine community, as communicators and audiences alike lose control over the flow of information (Olukotun et al., 2016).

Accidental silence, caused by technical failures or unforeseen disruptions, is best addressed with prompt clarification and reassurance to prevent confusion or

speculation. Since these silences are typically not chosen, rapid and transparent communication is essential once activity resumes.

Strategically, communicators should plan intentional silences, clearly signal their intent, monitor audience sentiment, balance silence with necessary responsiveness, and educate audiences about the value and purpose of intentional pauses. For imposed or accidental silences, swift, transparent messaging is crucial to maintain trust and minimize the risk of misinterpretation or misinformation.

The observed effects of digital silence—such as increased engagement—referenced in this article are drawn from published reports and anecdotal evidence and are included to demonstrate the conceptual framework’s potential for future empirical exploration.

7. Towards a New Digital Wisdom: Strategic Integration and Future Research

This article makes a foundational conceptual contribution by synthesizing existing literature, secondary sources, and observed patterns to advance new frameworks and definitions for understanding digital silence. Where engagement effects or audience responses to digital silence are discussed, they serve as illustrative examples that highlight the value and future research potential of the proposed conceptual approach. Empirical research will be essential to validate, refine, or challenge these insights, building upon the groundwork established here.

Future research should focus on:

- Collecting and analyzing original data on silence events, including clear sample sizes, defined time windows, and transparent analytic procedures;
- Reporting quantitative metrics such as changes in engagement, sentiment shifts, or audience behavior, with appropriate effect sizes and statistical testing;
- Comparing the impact of intentional, imposed, and accidental silence through controlled studies, in order to clarify their distinct effects and ethical implications (Puschmann & Burgess, 2014; Ott & Theunissen, 2015).

For practitioners and communicators, integrating digital silence thoughtfully into social media strategy involves several key recommendations:

- **Plan for Pauses:** Schedule intentional content breaks, digital detoxes, or moments of collective silence for reflection, commemoration, or strategic timing.
- **Signal Intent:** Whenever feasible, communicate in advance about upcoming silences, providing context and rationale to prevent misinterpretation (Ott & Theunissen, 2015).
- **Monitor Sentiment:** Use analytics to track audience reactions during and after intentional pauses, noting whether curiosity, empathy, or confusion result.
- **Balance with Responsiveness:** Ensure that silence does not replace necessary or urgent communication, especially in times of crisis or emergency.
- **Educate and Model:** Promote understanding of digital silence within your community, explaining its value and modelling reflective digital habits (Benedict XVI, 2012).

- **Coordinate Across Platforms:** Maintain consistency in messaging about intentional pauses across all relevant accounts and platforms.

In cases of **imposed or accidental silence**, communicators should respond promptly once communication is restored, clarifying the cause and nature of the silence and providing reassurance about continuity. It is also important to address any rumors or misinformation that may have arisen during the absence to safeguard trust and minimize reputational risks (Olukotun et al., 2016).

By combining strategic planning with further research, communicators and scholars can move towards a new digital wisdom—one that recognizes the creative and ethical potential of silence, and grounds practice in both conceptual insight and empirical evidence.

8. Conclusion

Digital silence is not a void, but a meaningful presence that wields substantial influence within contemporary communication ecosystems. Far from being mere absence, intentional pauses and reflective gaps in digital activity can shape anticipation, trust, and engagement, serving as powerful tools for fostering deeper connection and understanding. Drawing on Benedict XVI's insights and integrating perspectives from communication theory and social media analytics, this article argues that silence—when recognized and measured through conceptual frameworks such as “silence metrics”—emerges as a creative and transformative force in online interaction.

Silence creates space for contemplation, demonstrates respect, and can, at times, carry greater communicative weight than even the most viral content. By intentionally incorporating silence into digital habits—whether as individuals, organizations, or communities—we open the door to more authentic dialogue, richer engagement, and a more balanced relationship with technology. Silence is not the opposite of communication but its essential partner, offering a counterpoint to the relentless flow of digital noise.

Appreciating both the visible activity that fills our feeds and the wisdom of knowing when to pause is essential to advancing digital communication. As Benedict XVI reminds us: “Word and silence are two faces of the same coin. The great speaker is the one who knows how to keep silent.” In an age of constant connectivity, recognizing the power of silence—and equipping scholars and practitioners with the conceptual tools to understand and measure it—opens new possibilities for research, strategy, and authentic digital engagement.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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