



When Context Shifts Meaning: A Pragmatic Analysis of Audience Interpretation of 'I Love You So Bad' by LANY Amid Artist Controversy

Yosia Saad Martua Situmorang, Rolan Dasma Pahotan Siallaga, Muhammad Aldiansyah Ginting, Felix Christian Tampubolon, Rakha Athallah & Dian Marisha Putri*

Universitas Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

Popular music does not convey meaning exclusively through lyrical content, as audience interpretations may shift in response to changing social contexts and public discourse surrounding an artist. This study investigates how audiences reinterpret "I Love You So Bad" by LANY when the song is understood within the context of public controversy involving the artist, with particular attention to the ways contextual changes reshape implied lyrical meanings. Employing a qualitative pragmatic approach, the study integrates textual analysis of the song lyrics with thematic analysis of audience comments collected from *YouTube* and *Twitter/X*, drawing on Grice's theory of implicature and Hall's encoding/decoding model as analytical frameworks. The findings reveal that audiences initially interpreted the song predominantly as a sincere expression of romantic affection and emotional vulnerability. Following the widespread circulation of the controversy in digital spaces, some listeners reinterpreted the lyrics more critically, associating their previously romantic meanings with irony, performativity, and perceived inconsistencies between lyrical expression and the artist's public image. The study concludes that meaning in popular music remains context-dependent and dynamically negotiated, as digital discourse and changing perceptions of artists can substantially reshape how audiences interpret lyrical meaning.

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*CORRESPONDANCE AUTHOR

dian.marisha@usu.ac.id

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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary digital culture, music extends beyond its conventional function as entertainment and operates as a medium through which individuals express emotions, construct identities, and negotiate social experiences. Popular songs often acquire substantial emotional significance because listeners associate them with personal feelings, memories, and lived experiences (Maynarazbin & Putra, 2025). Among various forms of popular music, easy-listening songs frequently attract broad audiences through accessible melodies, relatable lyrical themes, and emotionally resonant atmospheres. LANY's "I Love You So Bad" (*ILYSB*), released in 2015, exemplifies this phenomenon through its romantic tone and emotionally expressive lyrics, particularly the recurring phrase "I love you so bad," which listeners have commonly interpreted as an expression of affection and emotional vulnerability (Sahid et al., 2026). The popularity of the song illustrates how lyrical expression can establish enduring emotional relationships between musical texts and their audiences.

Listeners often associate "I Love You So Bad" with romantic experiences, heartbreak, longing, and emotional attachment, demonstrating that musical meaning does not reside exclusively within lyrical content. Audiences actively construct meaning by connecting textual expressions with their emotions, experiences, cultural backgrounds, and surrounding social contexts (Farabi et al., 2026). Music consequently functions as an interpretive space in which listeners negotiate meanings rather than simply receive predetermined messages from artists. D. A. Putri et al. (2025) similarly explain that music contributes to the construction of emotional identity because listeners frequently develop personal attachments to songs and incorporate them into their emotional experiences. MacDonald and Saarikallio (2022) further demonstrate that musical meaning emerges not only through lyrics but also through melody, vocal delivery, emotional atmosphere, and audience perception within particular social environments.

Pragmatics provides an appropriate linguistic framework for investigating this interpretive process because it examines how context shapes meaning in communication. Yule (1996) explains that pragmatics addresses meanings

that communicators imply rather than explicitly encode, whereas Born (2011) emphasizes the importance of contextual knowledge, shared assumptions, and communicative circumstances in interpreting linguistic expressions. This perspective becomes particularly relevant to song lyrics because songwriters and performers frequently communicate emotions, intentions, and interpersonal meanings indirectly through implication, symbolism, and emotionally charged expressions. Contemporary discourse research also recognizes pragmatic analysis as an important means of understanding how audiences negotiate meaning within broader cultural and social contexts (Situmorang, 2026). Pragmatics therefore enables researchers to move beyond the literal meanings of individual lyrics and investigate how listeners construct additional meanings through contextual inference.

Implicature constitutes a central concept within pragmatic analysis because it explains how listeners infer meanings that linguistic expressions do not state explicitly. Tuten (2014) and Hietanen and Ruismäki (2021) discuss *implicature* as a mechanism through which communicators convey meanings beyond literal propositions, while listeners draw on contextual information and communicative expectations to interpret those meanings. Grice's account of communication further suggests that listeners generally assume that speakers communicate cooperatively by providing information that is truthful, relevant, sufficiently informative, and appropriately clear. Within "I Love You So Bad," listeners may consequently infer sincerity, intimacy, commitment, and emotional honesty even when individual lyrics do not explicitly articulate each of these meanings. The emotional force of the song therefore depends substantially on the audience's capacity to infer implied meanings from lyrical expressions and the contextual assumptions surrounding them.

Audience interpretation nevertheless remains dynamic because new contextual information can alter the assumptions through which listeners understand an artistic work. Public discussions and controversies involving LANY's lead vocalist circulated widely across social media, prompting some listeners to reconsider the emotional sincerity they had previously associated with the band's music. Lyrics once interpreted as romantic and genuine may consequently acquire alternative meanings when audiences connect them with information concerning an artist's public image or conduct. Some listeners may begin to perceive irony, emotional manipulation, or performative affection within expressions they previously understood as sincere declarations of romantic attachment (R. Putri, 2024). Such interpretive shifts demonstrate that audiences continually reconstruct musical meaning through interactions between textual content, contextual knowledge, and changing perceptions of the artist.

Audience reception theory provides an additional framework for explaining why listeners can interpret the same musical text differently across social and temporal contexts. El-Samir (2015) argues through the encoding/decoding model that producers cannot exercise complete control over textual meaning because audiences actively decode messages according to their social and cultural backgrounds, while Mans (2005) distinguishes among dominant, negotiated, and oppositional reading positions. A dominant interpretation may broadly correspond with the preferred meaning encoded within a text, whereas negotiated and oppositional interpretations allow audiences to modify or reject that meaning according to their experiences and ideological positions. This framework becomes particularly relevant when audiences encounter controversial information about an artist because contextual knowledge may shift their interpretations from admiration and emotional identification toward skepticism or criticism. Combining pragmatic analysis with audience reception theory therefore provides a broader explanation of how implied lyrical meanings emerge and subsequently change through audience engagement.

Digital media intensify this process by transforming the circulation, discussion, and reinterpretation of popular music. Social media platforms provide highly interactive environments in which audiences encounter information about artists while simultaneously sharing evaluations, emotional reactions, and competing interpretations of cultural products. Formilan and Stark (2023) demonstrate that digital platforms influence how audiences consume, interpret, and respond to cultural products, while information concerning artists can circulate rapidly across platforms such as *Twitter/X*, *TikTok*, and *YouTube*. Dasovich-Wilson et al. (2022) further explain that digital audiences actively participate in cultural interpretation through online interaction and media convergence rather than consuming cultural products exclusively as isolated individuals. Digital environments consequently transform musical interpretation into a collective process in which public discussions can rapidly influence how listeners understand both artists and their creative works.

The interaction between music, pragmatics, audience reception, and digital discourse demonstrates that lyrical meaning remains sensitive to contextual change. When controversies surrounding artists become part of public discourse, audiences may incorporate information about the artist's public persona into their interpretations of songs,

thereby modifying previously established emotional associations. Songs can consequently acquire meanings that differ substantially from those audiences constructed during their initial encounters with the same lyrical content. This phenomenon illustrates how textual meaning and social meaning interact within contemporary digital culture, particularly when online communities repeatedly circulate, contest, and reconstruct interpretations. Understanding this relationship requires an analytical perspective that considers both the pragmatic meanings embedded in lyrics and the interpretive activities through which audiences negotiate those meanings.

Previous studies have extensively examined song lyrics through linguistic approaches, but many have concentrated on semantic features such as metaphor, figurative language, diction, and lexical meaning. Such approaches often emphasize relatively stable, text-centered interpretations and provide limited consideration of how external social contexts reshape audience understanding over time. Studies employing pragmatic frameworks have also frequently concentrated on identifying *implicatures* within lyrics without systematically examining how listeners renegotiate those meanings when contextual circumstances change. Bennett (2002) indicates the importance of considering the relationship between popular music and its broader social context, yet research connecting pragmatics, audience reception, and contemporary digital culture remains comparatively limited. This limitation becomes particularly significant when artist controversies reshape the contextual assumptions through which audiences interpret emotionally meaningful songs.

The present study addresses this gap by integrating pragmatic analysis with an audience-oriented approach to investigate how contextual changes influence the interpretation of “I Love You So Bad.” Rather than treating lyrical meaning as fixed, the study examines how *implicature* constructs emotional meaning within the song and how audiences subsequently negotiate that meaning in response to external contextual information. Specifically, the study seeks to identify the implied meanings contained in the lyrics, analyze how pragmatic elements such as *implicature* construct the song’s emotional meanings, and examine how audience interpretations shift when external contextual factors influence the song’s reception. Accordingly, the study investigates how listeners interpret the implied meanings of “I Love You So Bad” before and after the emergence of controversy surrounding the artist. By integrating textual, pragmatic, reception-oriented, and digital perspectives, this research seeks to explain how popular-music meanings emerge through the dynamic interaction among text, context, and audience perception.

The study contributes to pragmatic scholarship by demonstrating that meaning does not remain permanently embedded within linguistic texts but develops through continuing interactions between textual cues, contextual knowledge, and audience interpretation. Its focus on “I Love You So Bad” provides a specific case through which the study can examine how audiences renegotiate emotionally established meanings when an artist’s public image becomes part of the interpretive context. The research also extends discussions of popular music and digital culture by examining how online controversies can reshape the emotional and interpretive relationships that listeners establish with songs. This perspective positions audiences as active participants who continually reconstruct musical meaning rather than passive recipients of an artist’s intended message. The study ultimately offers an integrated account of how pragmatic inference, audience reception, and digitally mediated context interact in the construction and transformation of meaning in contemporary popular music.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the meanings and interpretive processes underlying audience engagement with song lyrics rather than quantify them through numerical measurement. Qualitative inquiry provides an appropriate methodological orientation for examining phenomena that are complex, context-dependent, and not readily reducible to numerical indicators (Creswell, 2015). The study integrated two complementary analytical methods: a close pragmatic analysis of the lyrics of “I Love You So Bad” (*ILYSB*) and a thematic analysis of audience responses collected from social media platforms. This methodological integration enabled the researchers to examine both the implied meanings constructed through the song’s linguistic features and the ways audiences interpreted those meanings within changing social contexts. The research design therefore connected textual interpretation with audience reception to capture the context-sensitive nature of meaning construction.

The researchers used the complete lyrics of “I Love You So Bad” (*ILYSB*) by LANY as the primary textual data for pragmatic analysis. LANY initially released the song on the album *Acronyms* in 2015 and subsequently included it on the band’s self-titled debut album in 2017, while the researchers obtained the lyric transcript from the verified lyrics database *Genius.com* to ensure textual accuracy. The study also incorporated supplementary audience-response data

collected from *Twitter/X* and the comment sections of official and fan-uploaded *YouTube* videos featuring the song. The researchers organized these responses into two temporal periods: a baseline period preceding the artist controversy and a post-controversy period following the circulation of relevant disclosures concerning the lead vocalist, Paul Klein. This temporal distinction allowed the researchers to examine whether changing contextual information corresponded with shifts in how audiences interpreted the song's lyrical meanings.

The contextual controversy examined in this study concerned allegations of emotional manipulation and inappropriate conduct in romantic relationships that gained public attention through social media in late 2021. These allegations generated substantial online discussion and created a new interpretive context in which audiences could reconsider the song's emphasis on intense romantic devotion. The researchers selected approximately 120 audience comments through *purposive sampling*, prioritizing responses that explicitly addressed meaning, sincerity, or interpretation in relation to the song and the controversy. This sampling strategy ensured that the selected comments provided substantive evidence of how listeners articulated and negotiated their interpretations rather than merely expressing general reactions to the song. The resulting dataset enabled the study to compare audience interpretations across different contextual conditions while maintaining a specific focus on meaning construction and reinterpretation.

The researchers conducted the pragmatic analysis of the lyrics in two stages. In the first stage, they examined the lyrics using Bennett's (2002) maxims as analytical tools, paying particular attention to expressions whose communicative meanings extended beyond their literal propositional content and consequently generated *implicatures*. The researchers identified key expressions and traced the inferential processes through which listeners could derive implied meanings from the lyrical language. In the second stage, they reread the same lyrics in relation to the controversy and examined how altered contextual premises could destabilize previously available *implicatures*. This comparative procedure enabled the researchers to identify new implied meanings that became available when audiences interpreted unchanged lyrical expressions through a substantially different contextual framework.

The researchers analyzed the audience-response data using Bennett's (2002) framework for thematic analysis through iterative coding, theme identification, and interpretive synthesis. They developed codes inductively from the collected data and focused particularly on changes in evaluative language, explicit references to the controversy in interpretive commentary, and rhetorical strategies through which audiences negotiated competing readings of the song. The analytical process subsequently organized recurring patterns into broader themes that represented how audiences constructed, challenged, or reformulated meanings across the two contextual periods. To strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis, each research team member independently coded a subset of the audience-response data before comparing interpretations through collaborative discussion. The researchers resolved differences through consensus, thereby using researcher triangulation to enhance the consistency and credibility of the thematic interpretation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

Implied Meanings in "I Love You So Bad": A Pragmatic Reading

A close pragmatic reading of "I Love You So Bad" (*ILYSB*) demonstrates that its lyrics generate meanings that extend substantially beyond their literal propositional content. The title expression, "I love you so bad," employs a grammatically unconventional construction that pragmatically functions as an intensifier of emotional commitment. The substitution of *bad* for the grammatically expected *badly* or the semantically conventional *so much* operates not merely as linguistic irregularity but as a stylistic choice that foregrounds the overwhelming intensity of the speaker's affection. This unconventional formulation allows listeners to infer an emotional state that exceeds ordinary linguistic expression and communicates urgency, intensity, and a degree of emotional helplessness. The apparent grammatical deviation consequently becomes a pragmatic resource through which the lyrical persona communicates the perceived excess of romantic emotion.

The recurring imagery of physical proximity and sensory immediacy further reinforces the emotional meanings constructed throughout the song. References to the beloved's presence, the desire for closeness, and the vivid recollection of shared moments generate what Dasovich-Wilson et al. (2022) characterize as conversational

implicatures of intimacy and emotional vulnerability. Rather than explicitly stating every dimension of the speaker's attachment, the lyrics invite listeners to infer that the relationship carries unusual emotional significance and that the speaker has invested substantial emotional stakes in it. Listeners construct these inferences partly through the cooperative assumption that the lyrical persona communicates genuinely and intends the emotional expressions to be understood as sincere. This assumption establishes an interpretive foundation through which intimacy, attachment, and vulnerability become central implied meanings of the song.

The maxim of quality plays a particularly important role in sustaining this initial interpretation because listeners generally assume that the lyrical persona expresses genuinely held emotions rather than strategically performing affection. This assumption produces an *implicature* of authenticity that constitutes a central component of the song's emotional appeal. The maxim of manner also reinforces this interpretation because the relatively simple and direct lyrical language minimizes rhetorical complexity and presents affection in an apparently immediate form. Elaborate rhetorical constructions could create an impression of calculation, whereas the linguistic simplicity of "I love you so bad" encourages listeners to interpret the expression as spontaneous and emotionally unmediated. The interaction between quality and manner therefore supports an initial pragmatic reading centered on sincerity, emotional transparency, and authentic romantic attachment.

These findings align with Formilan and Stark's (2023) observation that lyrical simplicity in popular music can function as a code of sincerity, through which audiences may associate less elaborate language with greater emotional authenticity. The musical arrangement of *ILYSB* further reinforces these pragmatic meanings through understated production and intimate vocal delivery. Linguistic simplicity and musical presentation consequently operate together rather than as independent semiotic resources. This convergence strengthens the audience's inference that the emotional message originates from genuine vulnerability rather than calculated performance. The song consequently constructs emotional authenticity through the combined effects of lyrical directness, pragmatic inference, and sonic intimacy.

Interpretive Shifts Following the Controversy

The emergence of controversy surrounding the lead vocalist substantially altered the contextual premises available to listeners and consequently transformed the *implicatures* that the lyrics could sustain. Before the controversy, audience comments collected from *YouTube* and *Twitter/X* predominantly expressed emotional resonance, identification, and personal attachment to the song. Listeners frequently characterized the song as "relatable," "genuine," and "healing," while many connected its lyrical content with personal experiences of romance, longing, and emotional vulnerability. In MacDonald and Saarikallio's (2022) terms, these responses reflected a predominantly affirmative form of emotional engagement in which listeners accepted the song's expressions of romantic devotion as sincere. The pre-controversy interpretive context therefore supported an *implicature* of authenticity and encouraged listeners to establish personal emotional relationships with the song.

Individual audience responses further illustrate this initial interpretive orientation. One listener described the song as "comforting and genuine," while another stated that it "perfectly captures what being in love feels like." These comments demonstrate that listeners did not merely recognize the literal expression of romantic affection but interpreted the song through their own emotional experiences. The responses consequently positioned sincerity and relatability as important criteria through which audiences evaluated the song's meaning. Such interpretations exemplify dominant readings in which listeners largely accepted the emotional meanings presented by the lyrics without substantially challenging their authenticity.

Audience responses displayed a marked shift in register and interpretive orientation after allegations concerning the artist circulated more widely online. The thematic analysis identified several recurring patterns, the first of which involved listeners explicitly reframing the lyrics as ironic or hypocritical. These listeners questioned whether expressions of intense romantic devotion could retain their original sincerity when interpreted alongside allegations concerning the artist's personal conduct. Comments within this pattern frequently juxtaposed lyrical expressions with descriptions of the alleged behavior, thereby constructing an ironic contrast that retrospectively destabilized the song's emotional claims. The operative *implicature* consequently shifted from sincerity toward performativity, as some listeners began interpreting the expressions of love as potentially performed rather than as transparent representations of genuine emotion.

Several audience comments illustrate this critical reinterpretation particularly clearly. One listener stated that the lyrics now felt “performative after everything that came out online,” while another commented that the song “doesn’t sound as genuine anymore.” These responses indicate that contextual information surrounding the artist altered the interpretive premises through which some listeners evaluated the same unchanged lyrical expressions. The lyrics themselves remained textually stable, but the contextual assumptions that supported their earlier interpretation no longer remained equally persuasive. This pattern demonstrates that changes in contextual knowledge can reshape perceived emotional sincerity without requiring any modification to the linguistic text itself.

A second group of listeners adopted a negotiated reading by acknowledging that the controversy had changed their experience of the song while simultaneously attempting to preserve their earlier emotional relationship with it. These responses frequently invoked an art-versus-artist distinction, allowing listeners to recognize concerns about the artist’s public image without completely abandoning the personal meanings they had previously attached to the song. Rather than accepting either unconditional admiration or complete rejection, these listeners actively managed the tension between new contextual information and established emotional attachment. This interpretive strategy reflects the flexibility anticipated by Hall’s model because audiences negotiate textual meaning in response to competing personal, cultural, and contextual pressures. The negotiated responses demonstrate that reinterpretation does not necessarily erase earlier meanings but may instead produce multiple, potentially conflicting layers of interpretation.

A smaller but notable group adopted an oppositional reading and rejected the song as an emotionally meaningful text after encountering the controversy. These listeners reported that they could no longer engage with the song without experiencing discomfort, skepticism, or anger. For this group, the new context activated an *implicature* of emotional manipulation in which declarations of affection could be interpreted as rhetorical control rather than genuine emotional expression. This alternative *implicature* became sufficiently dominant to displace the romantic and vulnerable meanings that had previously structured their listening experience. The oppositional responses therefore represent the most extensive form of contextual meaning reconstruction identified in the audience data.

Discussion

Context, Implicature, and the Instability of Meaning

The findings demonstrate that *implicature* does not function as a static property permanently embedded within a text but emerges dynamically through interaction between textual expressions and contextual assumptions. Born’s (2011) framework, although primarily developed in relation to conversational discourse, offers a productive perspective for analyzing song lyrics because it foregrounds the cooperative assumptions underlying inferential meaning construction. Listeners initially interpreted *ILYSB* through assumptions of sincerity, emotional honesty, and communicative authenticity, which enabled the lyrics to generate *implicatures* of romantic devotion and vulnerability. New contextual information challenged those assumptions by introducing reasons for some listeners to question the authenticity they had previously attributed to the lyrical persona. Once audiences revised the contextual premises of interpretation, the same linguistic expressions became capable of generating substantially different *implicatures*, including irony, performativity, and emotional manipulation.

This pattern also resonates with and extends Born’s (2011) encoding/decoding model by demonstrating that interpretive positioning can develop temporally as audiences encounter new information. Hall’s account emphasizes the role of audiences’ social and ideological positions in determining which potential meanings they actualize when engaging with a text. The present findings add an informational and temporal dimension by showing that audience interpretations can change even when the text remains unchanged because new contextual knowledge alters the premises available for meaning construction. Meaning in popular music therefore operates not only as polysemic but also as historically situated, since audiences may interpret the same cultural text differently at different moments. The findings consequently demonstrate that pragmatic interpretation develops through an ongoing relationship among textual stability, contextual variability, and audience positioning.

Digital media environments play a central role in accelerating and collectively organizing these interpretive transformations. Social media platforms enable information about artists to circulate rapidly while simultaneously providing spaces in which listeners encounter, reproduce, challenge, and negotiate competing interpretations.

Hietanen and Ruismäki (2021) characterize such social formations as “interpretive communities” in which shared assumptions, conventions, and evaluative criteria influence textual interpretation. Within contemporary digital environments, these communities operate as networked and fluid formations rather than geographically bounded groups, allowing contextual information circulated through *Twitter/X* and other platforms to reach extensive audiences almost immediately. Pragmatic meaning-making in this context consequently becomes not merely an individual cognitive activity but a socially distributed and technologically mediated process.

The findings also reveal an affective dimension that extends beyond audiences simply changing their intellectual interpretations of particular lyrics. For many listeners, contextual change produced an emotional reorientation in their relationship with the song, transforming feelings of comfort, identification, or romantic attachment into skepticism, discomfort, or rejection. Bennett (2002) conceptualizes this relationship as an “affective alliance” between listener and text, emphasizing that musical engagement involves emotional and identificatory processes alongside cognitive interpretation. When new contextual information disrupts the assumptions supporting this alliance, audiences may experience changes in both the meanings they attribute to the song and the emotions they associate with it. The reinterpretation of *ILYSB* therefore demonstrates that pragmatic meaning in popular music remains inseparable from the affective relationships through which listeners incorporate songs into their personal and social experiences.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the pragmatic meaning of “I Love You So Bad” (*ILYSB*) by LANY undergoes substantial reinterpretation when audiences encounter the song within the context of public controversy surrounding the artist. Drawing on Grice’s theory of *implicature* and thematic analysis of social media responses, the findings demonstrate that pre-controversy interpretations predominantly constructed the song as an expression of sincerity, emotional authenticity, and romantic devotion, supported by cooperative assumptions regarding the lyrical speaker’s sincerity and reinforced by the song’s lyrical and sonic simplicity. Once the controversy introduced new contextual information, some listeners renegotiated these assumptions and produced dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings, ranging from preserving their original emotional attachment to interpreting the lyrics as ironic, performative, or emotionally manipulative. These findings demonstrate that pragmatic meaning in popular music remains context-dependent, historically situated, and dynamically constructed through interactions among textual features, contextual knowledge, and audience interpretation, while extra-textual information concerning an artist can substantially reshape the *implicatures* associated with an otherwise unchanged text. Digital media further intensify this interpretive instability by accelerating the circulation of contextual information and enabling audiences to collectively negotiate, challenge, and reconstruct musical meaning.

This study remains limited by its reliance on self-selected audience comments from online communities, which cannot represent the interpretive responses of all listeners, and by its comparison of audience responses across two temporal periods rather than longitudinally tracing changes in the interpretations of the same individuals. Future research should therefore employ longitudinal designs, in-depth interviews, or other audience-centered qualitative methods to investigate how individual listeners negotiate changes in meaning and emotional attachment over time, while broader comparative studies could examine whether similar interpretive shifts occur across different artists, controversies, musical genres, and digital platforms. Researchers should also consider integrating pragmatic analysis with reception and affective perspectives to examine more systematically how cognitive interpretation interacts with listeners’ emotional relationships with music. Despite these limitations, the study contributes to pragmatics, popular music studies, and audience reception theory by demonstrating how audiences dynamically construct, destabilize, and reconstruct meaning within contemporary social and digital environments. The findings ultimately reinforce the pragmatic principle that meaning does not reside exclusively within a text but emerges through the continuing interaction among linguistic expression, contextual circumstances, and interpretive communities.

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