



Experiencing Digital Discourses

Multimodality,
Engagement, Activism

Edited by
Camilla Vásquez · Jan Chovanec

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Contents

1	Experiencing Digital Discourses: From Engagement and Multimodality to Social Action	1
	<i>Jan Chovanec and Camilla Vásquez</i>	
Part I	Engagement (‘Relating Discursively’)	23
2	Mobile Conversations in Context: How Patterns of Engagement Shape Mobile Messaging Interactions	25
	<i>Caroline Tagg and Shi Min Chua</i>	
3	Conveying the Message, Characterising the Audience: Memetic Resemiotisation of “Elder Pictures”	63
	<i>Vincent Wai Sum Tse</i>	
4	Language Ideologies, Citizen Sociolinguistics and YouTube Comments: The Issue of “Italenglish”	93
	<i>Antonella Gazzardi and Camilla Vásquez</i>	

Part II	Multimodality ('Experiencing Multimodally')	123
5	Filming and Editing Resources and Vlogger's Styles of Telling about Experiencing COVID <i>Anna De Fina and Jungyoon Koh</i>	125
6	Multimodality in Digital Discourse: Exploring Image-Text Interrelations in WeChat Sticker Use <i>Jing Ge-Stadnyk, Susan C. Herring, and Lusha Sa</i>	161
7	YouTube Science Dissemination: A Multimodal Analysis of Humor Construction for Engagement <i>Edgar Bernad-Mechó and Carolina Girón-García</i>	193
Part III	Social and Political Activism ('Acting Politically')	221
8	"I stand with you. I'll fight for you" #StopAsianHate Collective Identity in Twitter Activism <i>Minh Nghia-Nguyen</i>	223
9	Recontextualizing Black Lives Matter Across Transnational Contexts: A Raciolinguistic Analysis of Online Comments on <i>Living While Black, In Japan</i> <i>Masataka Yamaguchi and Risako Ide</i>	249
10	"Do You Believe in Coincidences?": Digital Breadcrumbs in QAnon Forum Posts <i>Addie Sayers, Ellie J. Passmore, and Hanson Egerland</i>	287
Index		319

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List of Figures

Fig. 2.1	MoCo time-use diary	32
Fig. 2.2	A screenshot submitted to the project (and then anonymised)	33
Fig. 2.3	Task attending	56
Fig. 3.1	Elder picture in the initiating post	73
Fig. 3.2	Elder picture featuring a Lotus Flower	76
Fig. 3.3	Elder picture featuring the Buddha	76
Fig. 3.4	Elder picture using the visual style of a patriotic media outlet	77
Fig. 6.1	(Custom sticker). Image subordinated to text: text conveys proposition and humor, image adds cuteness and source	176
Fig. 6.2	(Standard sticker). Image subordinated to text: text conveys proposition, image adds cuteness	177
Fig. 6.3	(Custom sticker). Image subordinated to text: text conveys proposition, image provides illustration	177
Fig. 6.4	(Standard sticker). Image subordinated to text: text conveys proposition, image both functions as illustration and adds cuteness	178
Fig. 6.5	(Standard sticker). Image subordinated to text: text conveys proposition, image provides background	178
Fig. 6.6	(Standard sticker). Image subordinated to text: text conveys proposition, image functions as both intensification and source	179

xii List of Figures

Fig. 6.7	(Custom sticker). Image subordinated to text: text conveys proposition, image functions as both source and humor	179
Fig. 6.8	(Custom sticker). Text and image co-construct the proposition; both modes contribute to the humor of the sticker	181
Fig. 6.9	(Custom sticker). Text and image co-construct the proposition; image also adds cuteness	181
Fig. 6.10	(Standard sticker). Text and image co-construct the proposition; image adds cuteness	182
Fig. 6.11	(Standard sticker). Image conveys the proposition, and text (meaning “cheers”) restates the proposition in the image	183
Fig. 6.12	(Custom sticker). Image conveys the proposition (something like, “I stare at you”) and cuteness, text (meaning “stare”) restates the image	183
Fig. 6.13	(Custom sticker). Image conveys the proposition, text intensifies the proposition	184
Fig. 6.14	(Custom sticker). Text and image convey the same proposition, image also adds source	184
Fig. 7.1	Strategies for humor creation in the dataset	204
Fig. 10.1	Washington Post (8chan)	301
Fig. 10.2	Soldier W/WG1/WGA (8chan)	302
Fig. 10.3	No borders (8chan)	304
Fig. 10.4	Kissinger (8kun)	305
Fig. 10.5	Trump and advisors (8kun)	308
Fig. 10.6	FREEDOM (4chan)	310
Fig. 10.7	Pattern (8chan)	311

List of Tables

Table 2.1	MoCo participant background information	34
Table 2.2	Criteria for categorising messages as orienting to the six engagement styles	37
Table 2.3	Communicative features in mobile messaging	41
Table 2.4	Focused attending (1)	44
Table 2.5	Focused attending (2)	45
Table 2.6	Focused attending (3)	46
Table 2.7	Interlocutor attending	48
Table 2.8	Device attending (1)	49
Table 2.9	Device attending (2)	50
Table 2.10	World attending	53
Table 4.1	Most frequent language ideologies in the YouTube dataset	104
Table 6.1	Types of image-text relations	171
Table 6.2	Pragmatic functions of image and text	172
Table 6.3	Image-text relations: Frequency distribution in standard and custom stickers	174
Table 6.4	Image subordinated to text: Frequency distribution of image functions	175
Table 6.5	Text and image interdependent: Frequency distribution of text and image functions	180
Table 6.6	Text subordinated to image: Frequency distribution of text functions	182
Table 7.1	Video collection for analysis	201

Table 7.2	Multimodal framework for the analysis of <i>YouTube</i> research dissemination videos (adaptation from Valeiras-Jurado & Bernad-Mechó, 2022)	203
Table 7.3	Multimodal analysis of the use of humor in an introduction. (V05_00:00–00:03)	207
Table 7.4	Multimodal analysis of the use of humor after an explanation. (V10_03:47–03:51)	210
Table 9.1	Ethnonational categories and the choice of language(s)	261
Table 9.2	Summary of the analysis	273



1

Experiencing Digital Discourses: From Engagement and Multimodality to Social Action

Jan Chovanec and Camilla Vásquez

1 Introduction: Towards Mediated Discourse Analysis

One of the most fascinating challenges for modern linguists has been to undertake the study of changing discourses and communicative practices, which have arisen from the rapidly developing communication technologies in the past few decades. The existence of diverse mediational tools (within what has been called the ‘second mediation’; Androutsopoulos, 2016) has fundamentally transformed the human experience; the way we perceive the world, interact with others, and create meaning both in the

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physical world and in digital spaces. Moreover, interlocutors realize frequent shifts between online–offline contexts, and their online identities and actions intersect with their roles and behaviour in the actual world. The virtual and the real are thus often tied inextricably in the online–offline nexus (Blommaert, 2019).

The emergence of what appears to be an almost inexhaustible field of research focusing on communication in the digital sphere has attracted extensive attention from linguistics scholars, particularly those focused on discourse analysis and pragmatics, that is, the disciplines that trace individuals' construction of meanings in the course of their ongoing interactions. Over the past several years, the field of digital discourse analysis has developed into a full discipline of its own, complete with many foundational texts, numerous edited thematic volumes and collections of papers in journals, as well as several handbooks, with studies drawing on the whole gamut of modern linguistic approaches and methods from sociolinguistics and pragmatics to corpus studies and critical discourse analysis (Herring, 1996; Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011; Herring et al., 2013; Frobenius et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2015; Dynel & Chovanec, 2015; Georgakopoulou & Spilioti, 2016; Bublitz & Hoffmann, 2017; Johansson et al., 2017; Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2019; Thurlow et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2021; Johansson et al., 2021, KhosraviNik, 2023; Vásquez, 2022; Tanskanen et al., 2024, etc.).

The fact that much interpersonal interaction has become technology-mediated has substantially affected people's lived experience. Characterizing the era when communication technologies have become an integral part of our everyday lives, Deumert (2014, p. 9) describes the current situation as a 'mediated interaction order', which is very different from the traditional interaction order (Goffman, 1983, p. 2), that is, the conventional processes underlying social interaction in face-to-face communication. This situation has two central components, which concern its contextual and textual dimensions, namely the spatiotemporal aspect of communicative situations on the one hand and the linguistic/semiotic resources deployed therein on the other. Concerning the first of these dimensions, the time–space relations between participants in the mediated interaction order are reorganized in novel ways. As suggested by Deumert, “[b]y enabling interaction in the absence of physical

co-presence, new media allow us to experience mobility in new ways”, where the notion of mobility concerns not only the physical movement of people but also the instant movement of ideas and semiotic resources. As a result, the digital environment allows us to transcend space and time, giving rise to translocality, where “[w]e are interacting with objects and events that are *physically absent* as if they were *present*” (Deumert, 2014, p. 9, original emphasis).

Indeed, the establishment of such virtual co-presence, and the ability of media to span physical and temporal divides, are among the key features that are relevant for much research into various genres of digital media (Georgakopoulou, 2017; Chovanec, 2018). Inevitably, the compression of time and space is complemented with new participant options arising from technical affordances of each media, including the possible synchronicity or asynchronicity, which is built into the interactional architecture of each form of communication. Such affordances may even enable users to delay the expected responses or avoid them altogether (Tagg, 2023), giving rise to some unexpected and dispreferred forms of interactions across online and offline spaces. Due to context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011), users can also reach out to new audiences from which they may be separated by not only physical and temporal, but also social and cultural, distance. Arguably, what is needed is a new set of digital literacies (Jones & Hafner, 2021) so that such ‘networked publics’ (boyd, 2010) can make sense of what is going on. Yet, users are certainly not naïve communicators: it has been pointed out that they possess many of the new skills that are needed for one’s existence in the digital social space. They already hold complex repertoires of interactional and semiotic means, allowing them to successfully engage in complex contextualization, that is, the process described by Szabla and Blommaert (2020, p. 277) as “forms of social action collaboratively performed by people drawing on the available resources and the normative expectations they hold with regard to specific forms of social action”.

However, there are also adverse effects of such time–space reconfigurations, that is, the loss of the users’ control over the further mediation of their messages, which may result in endless remediation and recontextualization. Thus, unexpected—and sometimes unwanted—audiences can become recipients of such (re-)mediated messages (Chovanec, 2016,

2017) that eventually become received and interpreted outside of the original context and in the absence of the original communicators, who are unable to provide any metapragmatic commentary, explanation or even defence of their intended meanings. Indeed, it appears that the extensive remediation beyond one's imagined audiences, coupled with the digital permanence of communicative acts, are likely to have an increasingly powerful impact on the existence of individuals in the physical world. Digital speech acts can have radical, and sometimes detrimental, effects upon the interlocutors in their real lives: at the moment of utterance and at any point in the future, for example, in the form of their 'cancellation' (cf. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2024). The latter possibility is particularly tricky because there is no way of knowing what the future sociocultural norms will be in which current speech acts, produced in the digital sphere, will be re-interpreted many years following the time of their original posting. Neither can we foresee the future macro-level implications arising from the companies' ownership and monetization of the data that people produce in the digital sphere.

The second dimension of the mediated interaction order concerns the role of creative practices. It is not only that the technical affordances of various media allow for specific forms of interaction, participant roles and communicative practices to arise for their users; users themselves tend to appropriate the formal means and use them expressively and in novel ways, ultimately with a transformative potential (Thurlow, 2012) with respect to the existing communicative, linguistic or semiotic norms. Such 'vernacular' digital creativity, consisting of non-institutionalized and non-elite ('bottom-up') discourses, underlies much of the playful and phatic forms of verbal and multimodal interaction encountered in diverse digital formats, social media platforms and mobile apps (Vásquez, 2019; Yus, 2022). At the same time, the omnipresence of ludic language can be perceived as a new convention (Deumert, 2014), and in some communicative contexts it even operates as a cliché. Needless to say, creative forms quickly tend to become not only conventional but also obsolete, and they may come to index specific sociocultural communities, groups, contexts, and practices. In spite of that, users will seek and find ways of modifying such conventionalized forms and to adapt them in novel and creative ways (e.g. creating semiotic blends of existing and new

memes, as described by Vásquez & Aslan, 2021; see also Tse, this volume). Arguably, creative semiosis is, beyond the complex time–space reconfigurations of digital communicative situations, among the central ways of experiencing the digital sphere.

2 Digital Experience in the Online–Offline Nexus

As suggested above, digital media have opened up new forms of interacting in the online world and, thus, new forms of experiencing it. As Blommaert (2019, p. 8) observes, online discourse provides us with “infrastructures for social action”, consisting of the setting of the interaction and the sociocultural conventions governing such interactions. In the digital sphere, people are free to adopt identities of their choice and the ensuing anonymity of the interactions has a tangible impact on the linguistic means they use when communicating with each other (Vásquez & Liska, 2023), both bona fide interactions and in the fictional world of, for instance, online gaming (cf. Berger et al., 2012). The increased polarization of opinions, and the ensuing incivility and impoliteness have, for a long time, been seen as the hallmark of anonymous interactions in the digital space of the online media, most notably in discussion forums and other forms of polylogical online media where the underlying interaction is often based on conflict (cf. Hardaker, 2010). On the other hand, online interactions are also rife with the collaborative playful deployment of humour, with users jointly developing fictional scenarios through fantasizing (Hirsch, 2020; Chovanec & Tsakona, 2023; Sinkeviciute, 2024) as well as aggressive humour that is meant to hurt (Breazu & Machin, 2019) or that represents mock aggression (Dynel, 2020, 2021).

However, as already noted above, the online–offline nexus also means that verbal acts realized in the online space can have implications in the real physical world, for example, as far as hate speech, racism, and other forms of societally sanctioned forms of communication are concerned, particularly if targeting disadvantaged or minority groups or individuals on the basis of their ethnicity, race, sexuality, national origin or personal

bodily characteristics (Goodman & Rowe, 2014; Assimakopoulos et al., 2017; Catalano & Fielder, 2018; Chovanec, 2021; Ermida, 2023, etc.). The real-world effect of acts carried out in the digital sphere extends to the entirely fictional worlds of online gaming, where, for instance, acts of virtual physical / sexual violence have been committed against game characters and causing real-life trauma to the gamers (cf. Dibbell, 1993 cited in Deumert, 2014, p. 11 on a rape in cyberspace). Despite the occurrence in the virtual world, the real-world effects of such acts on the psychological well-being of individuals prompts the vital exploration of what constitutes ‘the digital experience’ and what are the mutual relations—and differences, if any—between the online vs. offline worlds.

All this gives rise to hybrid spaces, where the online–offline dimensions are mutually interconnected in complex ways, existing as a scalar phenomenon rather than some clear-cut dichotomy. In a similar context, when writing about the conceptualization of space in the digital sphere, Parini and Yus (2023, p. 9) quite rightly claim that “in the digital age place is being reconfigured through the enactment of social practices that can be initiated in the digital space and then materialised in the physical space”. The digital and the physical spaces are, inevitably, intertwined, as long the digital communicative acts involve animate human actors, who are, by definition, always living in the physical world. Exploring what we call here ‘the digital experience’ has several dimensions. It involves how users engage with others, negotiate relations and navigate through online content via technologies in the digital spheres, including virtual reality, although it also involves how they ‘digitally experience’ the physical world through discourses and actions that are technologically mediated. We suggest that for the online–offline nexus, the key areas for investigation involve (a) identities, represented by the real or virtual roles and subject positions from which users interact digitally, including the identities of the audience (whether defined or imagined); (b) semiotic content, understood as the materiality of discourses consisting of forms and meanings; and (c) actions, seen as the real-world implications, consequences, and results of digital interactions. These are the key focal areas where one’s experience can be expressed, shared, and applied digitally.

In Sect. 3, we take up the three areas—identities, materialities, and actions—in relation to the structure of this volume and the individual

contributions. We use these underlying concepts to elaborate on the idea of ‘digital experiences’ by noting, first, how digital identities are linked to interpersonal engagement, representing the relational axis of the digital experience; second, how digital materialities, realized through multimodality, constitute the experiential axis; and third, how digital actions encapsulate social activities, representing the axis of social and political activism aimed at transforming the world in consequential ways that extend beyond the digital.

3 Overview of the Chapters

As mentioned in the previous section, the central theme of this volume is based on the notion of ‘digital experiences’; in other words, how users rely on mediating technologies not only to communicate and bond with others but also to organize themselves for joint action. To this end, the papers are grouped into the overarching themes: user engagement, multimodal communication, and online activism. Accordingly, the volume is divided into three sub-sections, each comprising three papers which address related topics on how personal experience can be articulated in the digital sphere. On a general level, the three sections address three broad concepts that are central for the expression and sharing of such personal experience: identity, form, and action. Here, identity comprises relational work and interpersonal reactions; form encapsulates the specific linguistic and multimodal means employed to achieve communicational goals; and action covers the social, political, and activist aspirations of users in the digital sphere. These three dimensions map onto the three focal areas specified in the title of the book—namely engagement, multimodality, and activism—and correspond to our desire to investigate: (1) several different ways of interpersonally relating and engaging with others in the online/offline world; (2) diverse multimodal means of communication when sharing one’s experiences online; and (3) various digital forms of expression in the service of social activism and political engagement.

Methodologically, the papers in the individual sections affirm the fact that the exploration of digital discourse is, inevitably, a multidisciplinary undertaking where individual scholars apply diverse tools that they find

most suitable in order to analyse their unique data (Vásquez, 2022). The papers in this volume, thus, adopt diverse approaches that may, on the one hand, appear kaleidoscopic, addressing very specific issues tackled by the individual researchers within the specific designs of their studies and the methodologies of their branches of discourse analysis. On the other hand, the chapters complement each other, painting a surprisingly rich picture of the field of current digital discourse analysis and, in some cases, offering novel perspectives on digital communication. Thus, well-established methodologies for linguistic, multimodal, and semiotic analysis are supplemented with innovative ethnographic methods, approaches from citizen sociolinguistics, as well as raciolinguistics, which all underlie the authors' desire to uncover the many dimensions of communicative and interactional practices, including the online/offline nexus, lay/expert ideologies, and sociopolitical/activist motivations.

3.1 Part I—Engagement: Relating Digitally

The first part of the book, which is labelled “**Relating discursively**”, focuses on those discursive practices whereby users engage with each other online. These practices include how users of digital media express their standpoints, articulate their online identities and construct relations with other users. The practices are grounded not only in the framework of the users' mutual relations and the technological architecture and affordances of the specific digital media platforms on which communications take place, but also the broader social and ideological background against which the users' relational work is carried out. In this way, the papers collectively show how users' online engagement draws on a number of mutually interconnected dimensions.

The section opens with Chap. 2 by Caroline Tagg and Shi Min Chua entitled “Mobile Conversations in Context: How Patterns of Engagement Shape Mobile Messaging Interactions”. While the chapter addresses the relatively well-researched phenomenon of ‘mobile conversations’, that is, interactions conducted by people on mobile messaging apps, it approaches the topic from an entirely innovative angle by focusing on the simultaneous engagement of people in both online and offline activities, that is, a

perspective that has not been hitherto subject to a systematic study in digital discourse analysis. Drawing on ethnographic methods—interviews with users and time-use diaries produced by the respondents—the chapter sets out to demonstrate how interlocutors communicating via various digital media draw on their different physical contexts to shape their digital messages. In this process, they use a combination of multi-modal elements (emojis and images) and linguistic involvement strategies, including vocatives and deixis as positioning cues. The findings reveal that users are involved in multiple engagements at the same time, juggling multiple issues competing for their attention while communicating. In this respect, the authors identify several distinct ‘engagement styles’ which include ‘task attending’, ‘world attending’, and ‘device attending’. The chapter offers a fascinating glimpse of how multitasking affects the formal shape and content of digitally transmitted messages and how the consideration of interlocutors’ physical and digital contexts is crucial to understanding their interactional patterns on mobile messaging applications and, more generally, their experience of an increasingly hybrid, post-digital world.

In Chap. 3, titled “Conveying the Message, Characterising the Audience: Memetic Resemiotisation of ‘Elder Pictures’”, Vincent Wai Sum Tse explores the delicate nature of Chinese inter-generational communication by discussing a case of a collaborative act of digital ridicule. The chapter draws attention to a specific type of Chinese meme popular among the elderly—so-called elder pictures, which are characterized by stereotypical verbal and visual means (typically, a combination of formulaic blessings and greetings with floral imagery). These memes are interpreted as ‘mediational means’ because they enable resemitisation, whereby meaning shifts from one context to another. Using data from a discussion forum, Tse analyses how the young people in an online forum design, share, and spread elder pictures, drawing on their stereotypical verbal and visual repertoire, and thus select elderly people as the intended audience of such memes. In this case of complex audience and referee design, the pictures are used humorously to ridicule elderly people’s assumed position on a specific social issue, in this case the criticism of a Hong Kong development project. The creative adoption and appropriation of semiotic means which are assumed to belong to a different group

of people or community is shown to be a potent strategy of positioning the self and the other and it is also shown to potentially have a political function, linked to the current socio-political movements and generational divide in Hong Kong.

Chapter 4, by Antonella Gazzardi and Camilla Vásquez, converges on several issues relevant to digital discourse analysis, as evidenced by its title “Language Ideologies, Citizen Sociolinguistics and YouTube Comments: The Issue of ‘Italenglish’”. The chapter offers an analysis of viewer comments responding to a TED Talk video which decries the increasing use of anglicisms by Italian speakers. Their study explores the language ideologies held by common people as articulated in their comments when reacting to the video on YouTube. The study reveals a surprisingly rich range of interactions whereby YouTube users present heterogeneous opinions and beliefs about naturalized language ideologies, and seek to support the validity of their views by claiming linguistic authority in diverse ways. Negative views on the practice of code mixing and language hybridity prevail, and are expressed through several mutually overlapping language ideologies, for example, national language, endangerment, and linguistic purity. These negative stances are constructed using strong metaphorical language, wherein Italian language is presented as the victim of aggression. Nevertheless, the findings also reveal the existence of a number of counter discourses and alternate opinions among the lay public. Interestingly, those arguing that language contact and language change are inevitable contest the TED Talk speaker’s “expert” opinions, and even deconstruct the speaker’s arguments. The authors argue that an investigation of such citizen sociolinguistic activities in digital spaces can help us understand how networked language users influence each other’s beliefs and behaviours through sharing and articulating their language ideologies.

3.2 Part II—Multimodality: Experiencing Multimodally

The second part of the book, titled “**Experiencing Multimodally**”, deals with how users discursively react to the reality they are experiencing, and what multimodal resources they draw on when posting their content

online. The chapters in this section explore the verbal–visual relationship in vlogs, WeChat stickers and humorous aspects of otherwise serious digital content, with some of the data referencing the recent COVID-19 pandemic and users’ communicative response to it. The chapters thus relate to some of the most recent research in the field, both thematically and methodologically.

The section opens with Chap. 5 by Anna De Fina and Jungyoon Koh on “Filming and Editing Resources and Vloggers’ Styles of Telling about Experiencing COVID”. Identifying video blogs as one of the most typical genres on the Internet through which users construct and share their experience in relation to diverse content, the authors note the great potential of vlogs for the study of how semiotic resources are used in order to attract attention of, and create engagement for, virtual audiences. The study considers a set of American and Korean vloggers telling their stories during the 2020 Covid pandemic, focusing on how they use communicative resources to engage their audiences as well as to create a subjective view of their quotidian experiences. The analysis shows how communicative resources are handled across different spatiotemporal coordinates, for example, at the time of filming and at the time of editing. Importantly, this results in particular styles of telling that form a scale ranging from personal and involved to more objective and detached. These styles are characterized by a differential deployment of a number of strategies (e.g. the vloggers’ self-disclosure versus their focus on their physical environment) and are driven in opposite directions by the demand for informativeness on the one hand, and attractiveness on the other.

In Chap. 6, on “Multimodality in digital discourse: Exploring image-text interrelations in WeChat sticker use”, Jing Ge-Stadnyk, Susan C. Herring, and Lusha Sa contribute to the growing research on the verbal-visual interplay in digital communication. The study compares professionally designed stickers with more creative user-produced stickers among Chinese users of social media, focusing on image–text relations and the pragmatic functions of stickers in naturally occurring online conversations. The findings reveal that the dominant image–text relation in both standard and custom-made stickers is that of an image being subordinated to text. As regards the functions of such stickers, not only do they

relate to the main proposition of the text but they also pragmatically enhance the perceived ‘cuteness’ of one’s conversational contribution. Noting the immense popularity of custom stickers among Chinese social media users, the authors interpret this practice as a form of ‘democratized content creation’ that is facilitated by the affordances of the specific media and as a specific characteristic of Chinese digital culture, which favours cuteness and humour in users’ contributions in the digital sphere. The research illustrates several interesting trends in this area of digital discourse analysis; first, the customization of stickers represents a less common type of user-generated content in the digital sphere, namely the personalization of the visual aspect of communication; second, such customized content can be liked and reused by other members after being added to their sticker collections, thus indicating a broader acceptance of such originally individual creations (and, possibly, a shift towards genericity); and third, such bottom-up creativity affecting the visual elements of online conversations may lead us to reconsider the mutual relationship of the verbal–visual nexus, where the verbal element has traditionally been unique and individual, being often accompanied by a generic visual used for illustrative purposes.

The innovative exploitation of the visual channel is also the subject matter of the next paper in this section: Chap. 7, “YouTube science dissemination: A multimodal analysis of humour construction for engagement”, by Edgar Bernad-Mechó and Carolina Girón-García. Their chapter addresses recent trends in the field of science dissemination, notably the production of brief YouTube videos in which scientific research is presented for the benefit of the general public. The choice of the media poses new challenges to science communicators, concerning not only the selection of relevant aspects of scientific research for public presentation but also finding ways of multimodally relating to their audiences. The chapter explores the strategies for engagement related to the adoption of humour, which is found to be present particularly in those sections of YouTube videos where speakers shift to the informal register and where they offer reformulations of the academic content. Interestingly, the producers of popularization videos use both embodied and filmic modes to attract their audiences. From the perspective of digital discourse analysis, the chapter shows how users have to adapt their texts in the

process of recontextualizing them for different audiences, different channels, and different genres. Interestingly enough, humour appears to have a systematic role here as a technique for securing the audience's engagement with science dissemination videos, and thus experiencing the research reported in such texts.

3.3 Part III—Social Activism: Acting Politically

The third part of the volume, “**Acting Politically**”, is devoted to the interface between digital communication and its tangible implications in the real world, namely how users avail themselves of various digital communication practices in order to engage in social activism and public political discourse. The chapters offer multiple interesting perspectives on highly relevant social phenomena. This includes not only the explicit and implicit expression of ideologies, but also the articulation of collective identities and polarized emotions, for example, in relation to anti-Asian movements, QAnon supporters, and BLM-related comments.

The first of those topics is addressed by Minh Nghia-Nguyen in Chap. 8, “‘I Stand with You. I’ll Fight for You’: #StopAsianHate Collective Identity in Twitter Activism”. Here, the author explores a corpus of tweets representative of the #StopAsianHate movement—which arose following the fatal shooting of six Asian women in the United States in 2021—by focusing on the interpersonal meanings (evaluative positionings) and ideational meanings (subject matter and content) that served as an expression of protest by Twitter users. The analysis, informed by both Appraisal Theory and an AsianCrit perspective, traces Twitter users’ reactions to the systemic racial and gender-based violence against minorities by diverse social actors in the United States and demonstrates how, by participating in the discourse of protest, such commenters create a collective identity in the digital sphere. Importantly, the analysis illustrates how the commenters extrapolate from a specific incident to which they are reacting to broader issues of systemic violence against minority groups. Collective identity emerges from personal experiences that involve the overlapping aspects of race, ethnicity and gender. Through their tweets, users share their lived experiences, struggles, interests, and values, attesting not only

to the social actors' collective consciousness but also their shared perception of a situation in need of collective action. In this case, the comments and reactions of social actors verbalized in the digital sphere result in creating the potential for the users' concerted social action in the physical world, enabling them to emerge as a collective organized around a shared experience of a history of discrimination and violence.

A related topic, namely the discrimination of particular social and ethnic groups, is addressed in Chap. 9 by Masataka Yamaguchi and Risako Ide. In their chapter, titled "Recontextualizing *Black Lives Matter* across Transnational Contexts: A Raciolinguistic Analysis of Online Comments on *Living While Black, In Japan*", the authors draw on raciolinguistics in their discourse analysis of a popular YouTube video in which African American expatriates describe their experiences living in both Japan and the United States. The paper traces the metapragmatic acts of self-identification expressed by viewers of the video in the comments section, reflecting their stances towards the Black Lives Matter social movement on the basis of their lived experiences. The study shows how the BLM movement became global, giving rise to anti-racist discourse realized through discursive acts of solidarity that seek to resist domination and marginalization. Overall, the chapter argues for an integration of raciolinguistics and discourse analysis and notes the potential of digitally mediated communication for social transformation and the construction of anti-racist discourse.

Last but not least, the final text in this section, Chap. 10 by Addie Sayers, Ellie J. Passmore and Hanson Egerland, moves the topic of social activism from discrimination to covert forms of political communication among members of digital subcultures. In their chapter ("Do You Believe in Coincidences?": Digital Breadcrumbs in QAnon Forum posts), the authors focus on the specific discursive behaviour attested from the socio-political conspiracy movement of QAnon, whereby encrypted comments ('Qdrops') are 'dropped' across imageboard posts with the aim of having members pick them up and interpret them according to the group's shared ideologies. In the chapter, the practice of planting such encrypted comments, or 'breadcrumbing', is subject to a multimodal discourse analysis with the aim of exploring how explicit and implicit meanings emerge through such communication via various hints that are

inaccessible to outgroup members. The study shows how potential ambiguity and multiple meaning potentials are exploited with the ultimate effect of establishing the ingroup who are able to piece together the partial hints, which constitute the “underlying ‘truths’” that QAnon’s existence revolves around. The multimodality and minimal syntax that often underlie the implicitly communicated meanings represent a special case of engaging the readers in specific interpretive practices.

4 Future Outlooks

As the overview of the individual chapters indicates, this volume brings together a rich collection of state-of-the-art papers that address a number of innovative topics, attesting to the breadth of current research in the field of digital discourse analysis, that is, a field that has been variously identified in the past decade as, among other, computer-mediated communication (Herring et al., 2013), Internet-mediated communication (Yus, 2011), digital discourse (Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011), online language (Barton & Lee, 2013), technology-mediated communication (Dynel & Chovanec, 2015), and digital communication (Georgakopoulou & Spilioti, 2015). Although the chapters analyse different forms, types, and genres of digital discourses (e.g. messaging apps, social media stickers, TED talks, YouTube videos and comments, memes, forum posts), spanning the whole spectrum from private messaging and semi-public communication to more institutionalized and public contexts, they reveal the existence of several trends in scholarship on these topics. First of all, it has become clear that the traditional approaches to the analysis of digital data, focusing on the analysis of linguistic form and patterns of interaction, are increasingly being complemented with broader interdisciplinary perspectives going beyond (mere) discourse analysis. As shown by some of the chapters in this collection, the field has benefitted immensely from insights from such areas as interactional pragmatics and metapragmatics as well as more recent sociolinguistic approaches such as citizen sociolinguistics and raciolinguistics.

The volume also shows that the key areas of concern—such as discursive identity construction (Bös et al., 2018), user engagement, and

multimodality (Thurlow et al., 2020; Moschini & Sindoni, 2022; Zappavigna & Logi, 2024)—remain stable components of mainstream research in the field. However, it is also evident that systematic attention needs to be paid to many other phenomena, most notably user creativity (Vásquez, 2019). Its highly diverse manifestations, including the innovation of lexical items, the transformation of syntactic patterns, the creation of memes, stickers, and other multimodal artefacts can have many socio-pragmatic functions ranging from generally positive ones such as playfulness and bonding (Ge-Stadnyk et al., this volume) to more negative ones such as ingroup/outgroup delimitation, ridicule, and mocking (cf. Tse, this volume) and even quite insidious ones such as coded communication, and political polarization (cf. Sayers et al., this volume). While discursive practices are, understandably, shaped by the technical affordances of the specific media or forms of digital communication in which they are carried out, users inevitably find creative ways around technological constraints and limits to assert their individualities, relate to others, and achieve their communicative goals.

Future research in the area of digital discourse analysis will no doubt bring further fascinating results. At present, the digital world is increasingly developing towards human–machine interactions, in response to the rapid onset of AI-generated content. While artificial intelligence has previously been a responsive interlocutor (e.g. trained to facilitate service encounters through various chatbots), it is now turning into a more creative participant that, thanks to AI’s learning processing, is assuming an initiative role and is likely to soon become even the dominant interlocutor in human–machine communication. Thus, in a very short time, we expect the emergence of the next generation of research in digital discourse analysis that will need to address not the traditional dichotomies that have underpinned digital discourse analytic research in the past 25 years (analogue vs. digital, online vs. offline, synchronous vs. asynchronous, etc.), but a new set of contrasts, juxtaposing human digital-mediated discourse on the one hand and non-human AI-generated discourse on the other, both text-based and multimodal.

Clearly, the entire dynamic of human digital experience is presently undergoing a radical transformation and the many new realities that result from this transformation will need to be addressed by future