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Between the Lines: Gender-Specific Types and Communicative Multi-Functions of Speech Fillers in Day-to-Day Interaction

ما بين السطور: الأنماط النوعية والوظائف التواصلية المتعددة لمالئات الكلام في التفاعلات اليومية

Asst. Prof. Eman Riyadh Adeeb (Ph.D)
College of Education for Humanities/ University of Diyala/ Diyala, Iraq

Email:
emanr.en.hum@uodiyala.edu.iq

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Abstract

This study investigates the multifunctional use of pauses in the sitcom "Friends", with a particular focus on lexical and non-lexical pauses, as well as the less-examined category of false repairs. It examines how male and female characters strategically employ these pauses as communicative tools, revealing nuanced patterns in their discourse. The analysis identifies a spectrum of pause functions, some of which have been extensively studied, while others remain underexplored. Gender-based distinctions emerge as a central theme, with female characters exhibiting a higher propensity for pauses related to cognitive processing, speech planning, and turn-holding, indicative of a more reflective and deliberative communicative style. Furthermore, pauses serve as mechanisms for emotional expression and discourse segmentation, reinforcing the notion that female speech often prioritizes precision, cooperation, and audience engagement. In contrast, male characters demonstrate a comparatively lower reliance on pauses for these functions, reflecting a preference for direct and assertive speech patterns. These findings align with existing sociolinguistic theories on gendered discourse, particularly those emphasizing women's heightened sensitivity to conversational dynamics and social expectations. By examining these structures within everyday interactions in scripted dialogue, this study provides valuable insights into the intersection of language, cognition, and gender, illustrating how linguistic choices in fictional media both reflect and perpetuate broader communicative norms (Stenström, 1994; Clark & Fox Tree, 2002).

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الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة الاستخدام متعدد الوظائف للوقفات في المسلسل الكوميدي " الاصدقاء" ، مع تركيز خاص على الوقفات المعجمية وغير المعجمية، بالإضافة إلى الفئة الأقل تناولًا في الدراسات السابقة، وهي الإصلاحات الزائفة. تبحث الدراسة في الكيفية التي يوظف بها الشخصيات الذكور والإناث هذه الوقفات استراتيجيًا كأدوات تواصلية، مما يكشف عن أنماط دقيقة في خطابهم. وتحدد التحليل مجموعة واسعة من وظائف الوقفات، حيث نالت بعضها اهتمامًا بحثيًا مكثفًا، بينما ظلت وظائف أخرى غير مستكشفة بالقدر الكافي. وتبرز الفروقات القائمة على النوع الاجتماعي كموضوع محوري في الدراسة، إذ تبدي الشخصيات الأنثوية ميلًا أكبر لاستخدام الوقفات المرتبطة بالمعالجة الإدراكية، وتخطيط الكلام، والحفاظ على الدور في المحادثة، مما يعكس أسلوبًا تواصليًا أكثر تأملًا وترويًا. علاوة على ذلك، تؤدي الوقفات دورًا في التعبير العاطفي وتقسيم الخطاب، مما يعزز الفرضية القائلة بأن خطاب النساء غالبًا ما يولي اهتمامًا بالدقة والتعاون والتفاعل مع الجمهور. في المقابل، يظهر الشخصيات الذكور اعتمادًا أقل على الوقفات في هذه الوظائف، مما يعكس تفضيلًا لأنماط خطابية أكثر مباشرة وحزمًا. تتماشى هذه النتائج مع النظريات السوسيولغوية القائمة حول الخطاب المرتبط بالنوع الاجتماعي، ولا سيما تلك التي تؤكد على حساسية النساء المتزايدة لديناميكيات المحادثة والتوقعات الاجتماعية. ومن خلال تحليل هذه البنى اللغوية في التفاعلات اليومية للحوار المكتوب، تقدم هذه الدراسة رؤى قيّمة حول التقاطع بين اللغة والإدراك والنوع الاجتماعي، موضحةً كيف تعكس الاختيارات اللغوية في الأعمال الدرامية الخيالية المعايير التواصلية السائدة وتعيد إنتاجها.(Stenström, 1994; Clark & Fox Tree, 2002)

1. Introduction

In everyday conversations, people construct and interpret meanings via discourse processes (Gee, 1999). The contextualization cues are means to support meaning-making processes, as they are created, conveyed, and construed by participants through interaction (Gumperz, 1982). Indeed, interactional communication is based on public speaking, a process shaped by typified patterns of interactions, known as speech genres (Hasling, 2006; Bakhtin, 1986). Accordingly, pauses are generally used to achieve a set of purposes and functional roles; Murphy (2017: 34) emphasizes in his study that the essential role of pauses in spoken communication, is to delineating linguistic structures such as clauses, phrases, discourse markers, word clusters, collocations, single words, and hesitation sounds. He considers the structural and communicative significance of pauses, which are not merely breaks in speech but vital tools that enhance comprehension and organize information. For instance, pauses can segment speech into manageable chunks, such as clauses and phrases. A speaker, accordingly, might naturally pause after a dependent clause, signaling its conclusion before proceeding to the main clause. Mills and Ruiter (2020: 3) further found that these pauses are particularly effective in aiding listener comprehension by marking syntactic boundaries.

Beyond larger linguistic units, pauses also play a role in emphasizing smaller structures, such as word clusters and collocations. In this context, pauses can draw attention to the relationships between commonly paired words, making them more salient to the listener. Similarly, pausing before or after a single word can highlight its importance, serving as a tool for emphasis or creating dramatic effect. According to Plug, et al., (2021: 9), deliberate pauses can enhance both clarity and emotional impact in communication, particularly during face-to-face interactions.

The functions and discursive purposes of pauses extend beyond their linguistic role to encompass cognitive and communicative dimensions. For the speaker, pauses offer time to organize thoughts, recall information, or adjust their phrasing. For the listener, they create natural boundaries that facilitate understanding by breaking speech into digestible segments. Moreover, strategically placed pauses can enhance the emotional or dramatic effect of

speech, making communication more impactful and engaging. Mills and Ruiter (2020:8) demonstrated that pauses used in tandem with vocal alignment toward the audience can significantly improve the perception of speaker confidence and competence.

Within sociolinguistics phenomena, contextualization cues have been scrutinized and documented. In such a perspective, pausing is definitely used to add more to the conversation, as ways of signaling the speakers´ intentions and in orienting their attention in shifts in content and in the direction of discourse (Stenstrom, 2011; Gumperz, 1982; Gumperz; 2001). At the physiological level, one function of these breaks is to provide the speakers the opportunity to breathe. These discourse gaps fillers are also understood as speech discontinuities or disfluencies.

Moreover, Murphy's insights can be explored in this domain through the lens of gender differences. His work suggests that men and women may use pauses differently, reflecting distinct communication styles. Men might employ longer pauses to assert dominance or control the conversational flow, whereas women may use shorter, more frequent pauses to foster rapport and maintain the conversational dynamic. Plug, et al.,(2021: 7) argue that women's use of pauses often aligns with strategies to maintain conversational harmony, whereas men's pauses are more likely to reflect authoritative communication.

Thus, this study presents a comprehensive examination on the occurrence and multi-functions of speech fillers in the everyday spoken discourse by the characters, adopting the sitcom '*Friends'* as a sample- the first four seasons-[1] to explore the roles these fillers play in the meaning-making process by men and women. Through this analysis, the study aims to reveal the specific functions these pauses serve, such as signaling hesitation, managing turn-taking, or emphasizing points within the conversation (Schegloff, 2000). This gender-focused analysis sheds light on how pauses are not only a tool for communication but also a reflection of broader societal and gendered expectations within the everyday context as illustrated in the sitcom context.

To sum up, this analysis underscores the multifaceted role of pauses in spoken language. Thus, marking these linguistic structures and supporting cognitive and communicative processes, pauses enhance both the delivery and reception of speech. Evidence from studies by Mills and Ruiter (2020), Plug, et al., (2021), and Acton (2011) enriches this understanding and provides contemporary empirical support for the theoretical claims about the role of pauses in language.

2. Pauses and Communication

In oral communication, pauses-whether silent or filled- reveal insights about a speaker's proficiency, cognitive processing, and social positioning. Brennan and Williams (1995) and Mohammed and Adeeb (2021) note that frequent pauses often indicate reduced fluency, reflecting the speaker's confidence in speech production. Defined as moments of silence or hesitation sounds like "um" and "uh" (Richards& Schmidt, 2010), these speech disfluencies play distinct roles. Acton (2011) found gender differences in pause usage, with men favoring "uh" for deliberation, while women more often use "um" to convey empathy or politeness.

Cognitively, pauses assist in processing information and planning speech during communication. Levelt (1989) explains that pauses reduce cognitive load, enabling speakers to retrieve words and structure sentences more accurately. Clark and Fox Tree (2002) highlight this idea considering these filled pauses as signal ongoing speech, helping listeners

[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HPZ3hyVL7Q&list=PLkKwmZCHuEslxD78Yv5MzsgLcTlebxzP1 as proposed by https://www.youtube.com/@warnerbrostv

anticipate subsequent statements. Pragmatically, pauses manage conversational flow, marking hesitation, uncertainty, or contemplation (Schegloff, 2000), while maintaining turn-taking structures and fostering coherent dialogue.

Socially, pauses reflect power dynamics and relational cues. Stivers and Rossano (2010) link pauses to conversational dominance, whereas Ochs and Schegloff (2010) show their role in expressing deference or discomfort, shaped by cultural norms. The effect of these structure sometimes pass to interconnect with other non-verbal cues like gaze, pitch, and gestures to enhance meaning-making (Gumperz, 1982, 2001).

In communication, speech fillers or pauses usually defined as conversational markers, as Kjellmer (2003) such as "like" or "you know," which Rochester (1973) posits are critical in high-stakes situations. These markers enrich any communicative discourse, signaling thought processes and structuring speech (Rose, 1998; Crystal, 2010). Swerts (1998) further adds to this perspective that without well-placed pauses and fillers, discourse coherence may be compromised and misunderstood, highlighting their indispensable communicative function.

2.1. Filled Pauses Categories and Functions

2.1.1. Categorization of filled Pauses

Filled pauses are non-silent vocal markers that speakers use to manage hesitancy or uncertainty, allowing them to maintain conversational flow while formulating their next thoughts (Crystal, 2008). These markers typically occur in real-time as individuals produce speech during interactions. According to Brown and Yule (1983), filled pauses are embedded within discourse and often take the form of sounds such as "uh," "um," and "ah" or specific words that act as placeholders when the speaker experiences a momentary hesitation. In certain instances, speakers utilize such fillers strategically to mitigate direct aggression or to soften the impact of an uncomfortable situation, a practice commonly observed in political speeches and official announcements (Adeeb & Vieira, 2024). These pauses, often termed "gap-fillers" or filled pauses, serve a critical communicative function by providing brief moments for speakers to formulate their next statement without disrupting the conversational flow. Such speech interruptions bridge cognitive gaps, allowing speakers to organize their thoughts while sustaining audience engagement and avoiding uncomfortable silences. By facilitating smoother communication, filled pauses contribute to a natural and coherent conversational flow.

Filled pauses are essentially classified into two primary types: *lexicalized* and *non-lexicalized* (Rose, 1998; Stenstrom, 1994). Lexicalized pauses are made up of common words or phrases integrated into language use, such as "like," "you know," and "I mean." These fillers may also carry subtle meanings, depending on the conversational context. In contrast, non-lexicalized pauses are non-meaningful vocalizations like "uh" and "um", and "ah" that function purely as timing mechanisms for thought processing. Clark and Fox Tree (2002) state that there is a remarkable difference between "uh" and "um", as they are followed by a minor and major speech retardation, respectively. In speech delay, "um" refers to a higher cognitive load while "uh" refers to a lower load. Such pauses are connected strongly with the notion of formality and politeness; in the Western society, "um" is more formal and polite than "uh" (Wieling et al., 2016).

Additionally, *false starts* represent another less commonly used type of hesitation phenomenon intensively related to filled pauses. False starts occur when a speaker begins an utterance but interrupts themselves to reformulate or correct their message. For example: "I was going to-uh, no, I think it's better if we wait." False starts reflect real-time speech planning and self-correction, demonstrating the dynamic nature of spoken language

(Goldman-Eisler, 1968). They allow speakers to revise or clarify ideas mid-utterance, contributing to conversational fluidity and reducing misunderstandings (Levelt, 1983).

Table (1) below outlines the distinctions between lexicalized, non-lexicalized, and false-start filled pauses, emphasizing their unique functions in spoken interaction.

Category of Filled Pause	Description	Examples	References
Lexicalized Filled Pauses	These pauses are described as words or phrases that are part of any spoken language and are sometimes preferred to fill gaps in conversation. These structures often carry meaning or are used to signal hesitation or transition.	Well," "Like," "You know," "I mean"	Clark & Fox Tree (2002); Stenstrom (1994)
Non-Lexicalized Filled Pauses	Non-meaningful sounds or noises often used to fill gaps, reflecting hesitation, uncertainty, or processing time.	"Uh," "Um," "Er," "Ah"	Crystal (2008); Brown & Yule (1983)
False Starts/Repairs-Mixture of lexical and non-lexical pauses	This kind indicates that where the speaker begins to say something, interrupts themselves, and restarts with a correction or modification. While not purely fillers, they share similar functions. It takes a form of a mixture of lexical and non-lexical structures.	"I was—uh, no, I mean I'm not sure."	Goldman-Eisler (1968); Stenstrom (1994)

Table (1) Categories of filled pauses in everyday speech

2.1.2. Speech Pauses multi-Functions

Pauses in spoken language serve various essential functions, helping manage cognitive processes, social interactions, and discourse flow. These breaks in speech, often marked by filled sounds like "um" or "er," allow speakers to pause and reflect, manage turn-taking, or convey hesitation. Understanding the specific functions of such structures and their linguistic

and social roles is vital for comprehending natural speech dynamics.In addition, people are not fully aware of the meanings when they act and talk, as Gee (1999) has noted, and this is also the case for the conveyance and interpretations of pauses.

Thus, it has been pointed that such speech breaks fulfill clear-cut functions in context; they are not used aimlessly, even though if these aims are communicated and construed frequently by unconscious socio-psychological processes, as is the case for the unconscious choices based on well-established cultural patterns of use of available discourse procedures, in which the purposes of the procedures are embedded into them, but the individual no longer readily recognizes consciously these micro-purposes though they continue to interpret and respond to them by means of discourse processes(Gee, 1999).

Christenfeld et al., (1991) state that one of the *cognitive functions* of those speech fillers is to give the speaker the opportunity to look for the coming linguistic ideas and to hold his/her turn. The non-lexicalized fillers main functions in communication are to let the speaker think, get relief, and pursue his/her mental purpose. Thus, all fillers are used in communication to allow the speaker to arrange and structure his/her ideas and views. Clark and Fox Tree (2002) showed they help manage speech complexity.

Pauses also aid in speech *segmentation* and *turn-taking*, marking the completion of thoughts and signaling when it's the next speaker's turn. Words like "so" or "like" often accompany these pauses, ensuring smooth transitions and maintaining conversation flow (Yule, 2010; Stenstrom, 1994). In stressful contexts, such sounds help *relieve social or psychological pressure*, allowing speakers to manage anxiety (Christenfeld et al., 1991). These hesitation markers regulate emotions and provide brief relief, as noted by Gee (1999). Strategic pauses are also used *for emphasis and rhetorical effect*, drawing attention to key points. Pauses after phrases like "well, actually" heighten the impact of the message (Clark & Fox Tree, 2002).In spontaneous speech, pauses *facilitate clarification or self-repair*, exposing that the speaker is revising and adjusting their message for clarity (Levelt, 1983; Stenstrom, 1994). *Engagement and interactional management* are maintained through pauses, with phrases like "you know" prompting listeners' responses (Gee, 1999; Yule, 2010). These filled pauses ensure the conversation remains interactive and that the speaker checks for understanding and catching up meaning.

In addition to what has been stated, pauses also convey *pragmatic functions*, such as hesitation or discomfort, signaling uncertainty or hedging (Brennan & Williams, 1995; Fox Tree, 2007). They soften the force of a response and introduce ambiguity when necessary. Such structures may also reveal the psychological tension and irritation that might occur in communication. *Semantic significance*, on another hand, is marked through pauses that follow key words, emphasizing their importance and their credibility (Labov & Fanshel, 1977; Christenfeld, 1991). This directs the listener's attention to critical elements. Moreover, *discourse demarcation* pauses indicate shifts in topic or focus, allowing listeners to prepare for a change in direction (Labov & Fanshel, 1977).

Finally, from a *psychological or emotional function*, pauses are significant markers of emotional states, and noting that speakers may pause when they are experiencing emotions such as anxiety, anger, irritation or excitement(Holmes:2013). Pauses thus serve as psychological indicators, reflecting the internal emotional state of the speaker. Kendon (1990) also emphasizes the psychological and emotional role of pauses, adding that such structures provide speakers with a moment to regulate their emotions, particularly in emotionally charged interactions, ensuring they maintain control over their reactions. Thus

table (2) summarizes all the above-mentioned multi-functions with their descriptions and founders:

Multi-Function	Description	Example	References
Cognitive	Allows the speaker to arrange and organize thoughts, search for linguistic content, and reduce cognitive load during speech production.	"um," "uh"	Christenfeld et al. (1991); Clark & Fox Tree (2002)
Turn-Holding	This function definitely helps maintain a speaker's turn in dialogue while pausing to think or gather their ideas	"uh, I think that...", asking short questions, repetition of certain lexical words.	Yule (2010); Stenstrom (1994)
Speech Planning	Signals a pause in discourse to plan upcoming words or phrases.	"well," "you know"	Rose (1998); Clark & Fox Tree (2002)
Signaling Uncertainty or Hesitancy	Indicates hesitation or uncertainty, allowing time to decide on appropriate wording or content.	"er," "um", repetition of certain words	Goldman-Eisler (1968); Clark & Fox Tree (2002)
Speech Segmentation and Turn-Taking	Marks the boundaries of speech units, signaling when a speaker may be ready to finish or transfer the conversational turn.	"so," "like"	Yule (2010); Stenstrom (1994)
Relief of Social or Psychological Pressure	Provides momentary relief from speaking anxiety or pressure in high-stress situations.	"ah," "uh"	Christenfeld et al. (1991); Gee (1999)
Emphasis and Rhetorical Effect	Utilized intentionally to emphasize a point or add rhetorical weight to a statement.	"well, actually"	Clark & Fox Tree (2002)
Clarification and Self-Repair Initiation	Introduces a correction or clarification in spontaneous speech.	"I mean," "let me rephrase"	Levelt (1983); Stenstrom (1994)
Engagement and Interactional Management	Helps engage the audience and maintain interactional flow.	"you know," "right"	Gee (1999); Yule (2010)
Pragmatic function	Conveys hesitation, uncertainty, emphasis, or discomfort, signaling that the speaker may not know the answer to a question.	I think," "maybe	Brennan & Williams (1995); Fox Tree (2007)

Semantic Significance and Focus	Highlights or emphasizes preceding words, giving weight to critical parts of speech.	Pause after "important" in a key statement	Labov & Fanshel (1977)
Discourse Demarcation	Marks transitions between discourse stages, signaling changes in action or topic.	Pauses at topic shifts	Labov & Fanshel (1977)
Speech Disfluency Indication	Indicates disfluency and allows time for speakers to manage or correct their speech.	"uh," "um"	Fox Tree (2007); Stenstrom (1994
Psychological and emotional state	Pauses sometimes are related to certain psychological states as anxiety or annoyance and emotional as wrath, or irritation. This demonstrates that pauses help manage psychological tension during communication.	"Huh, uhhh, um"	Labov & Fanshel (1977) and Christenfeld (1991)

Table (2) Pauses Functions in Conversation with their Descriptions and References

2.2. The Connection of Sitcom Conversations and Pauses

In communication, filled pauses are rather answerable to keep the flow of speech; they retain the segments boundaries, marking redundantly changes in the direction and content of speech. Zellner (1994) states that human neurological device controls the duration, frequency and the apportionment of speech pauses, and this neurological modulation is responsive to discourse processes. Impulsive speech has a considerable set of salient features concerning intonation, tone, clichés, colloquialism, vagueness, idiomaticity, syntactic and morphological constructions and other marked properties that essentially contribute to the discourse production. Sitcom speech, on the other hand, evinces standard accent of language as in correct pronunciation, high level of syntactic completeness, avoidance of untimely pauses as well as of unimportant slang language. Romero-Fresco (2009) claimed that the nature of sitcom speech enables the audience to draw a clear-cut recognition of these fictional components: time, location, and characters. By means of these elements, the audience often realizes the characters' attributes and real impulses that push them to act and perform their roles in a specific way.

In sitcom conversation, the characters do not reveal themselves, but they voice the dialogue and the script they perform. Concerning English register, Quaglio (2009) supports an estimable notion that sitcom dialogue has some expressive traits of real conversations. So, it has been suggested that the employment of use of linguistic devices unveil a minor divergence in relation to the occurrence of language-in-use in natural conversation. Ultimately, sitcom scripts sometimes used to delineate the existence of pauses, i.e. lexical non-lexical fillers, and false starts . Those pauses exist in any conversation within the script to cover some roles and points; they add some sort of uniqueness upon the work rhythm and sound tempo. Beside the former operative function, pauses represent some negative internal presentiment as, embarrassment, discomfort, anxiety, and distraction.

3. Gender and Communication

Gender, as many other variables, plays a pivotal role in the process of communication and in its markers. Communicatively, women tend to speak plentifully though they lack the floor holding. In alignment to this idea, men are characterized as more dominant in running the speech stream comparing with women who usually manipulate less the delivery techniques of speech.

Carr and Pauwels (2006), and Adeeb and Abbas (2019), discuss the main differences between men and women engagement into discourse from an emotional point of view. Often, women see the process of conversation and dialogue traits as a way of contacting emotionally and sensitively compared to men who tend to be more directive, practical. In this domain, women are basically characterized as good listeners and mitigate any ignominious situation; men tend to be less attentive to others' feelings. It is commonly argued that there are remarkable differences in gendered speech. Yule (2010) stated that pitch ranges vary conspicuously between men and women; men tend to typically speak in somehow a lower pitch than women who mostly oriented to the higher pitch in speech. What is supposed to be the most important trait of women's speech is the use of hedges and question tags; women tend to be more tactful and polite in their speech and to give opinions and agreement rather than using assertive forms.

Another feature that also affects the style of communication is the women's tendency to use back-channels (as "yeah" and "really") whereas men tend to be more directed and floor-holders of speech (Yule, 2010). So, it is not a myth that gender influences the uses of language, but it influences also the linguistic and discursive behavior of the language user. Not surprisingly, the social network that humans belong to may influence upon the language use. Bergvall (1999)and Mohammed and Adeeb(2021) claim that women according to what already mentioned have a tendency for solidarity increasing and maintaining, for formality and standard forms of language, and for flexibility compared with men who tend to be more direct and informal. It is important to note the reversion of these phenomena, since roles and ways to talk are cultural driven, so in some cultures and micro-cultures men may also tend to be less assertive and more involved emotionally into conversations, and women may be more objective, assertive, and keeping the floor and direction of speech.

4. Methodology

The methodology of this study consists of two phases. The first phase employs a quantitative statistical approach to analyze the categories of speech fillers used in interactive communication by male and female characters in the first four seasons of the popular TV sitcom *Friends*. This show was selected for its global acclaim and widespread cultural impact. The appeal of The *Friends* lies in its resemblance to everyday interactions, as it explores commonly discussed topics and reflects real-life situations. Thus, the episodes were examined to identify and categorize pause types-lexical, non-lexical, and false starts-used by the main characters, treating gender as a variable.

The process of analysis begins with the first phase that represents the description of some fragments that contain these pauses in the conversations among the characters. This qualitative analysis interprets the discussion of the data to identify and explain the gender-preferences for certain pause functions and the reasons behind. This interpretative framework is guided by the theoretical model presented in Section 2.1.2 and detailed in Table 2 (Goldman-Eisler,1968; Christenfeld et al. ,1991; Stenstrom ,1994; Rose ,1998; Clark & Fox Tree,2002).

The second phase of the data analysis delves into the quantitative discussion of the findings, focusing on how filled pauses-lexical fillers, non-lexical fillers, and false starts-are

distributed between male and female characters in the sitcom. To determine whether these differences are meaningful, a chi-square test was used to compare the observed distribution against the null hypothesis, which assumes no variation between the groups.

5. Analysis of the Data

The analysis of data was done qualitatively, quantitatively and comparatively to reveal the categories and functions listed in tables (1) and (2). In this respect, the qualitative method was used to analyze the speakers' conversational turns, whereas the quantitative one was based on the absolute numerical frequency of the identified pauses and the percentages were provided. Due to the focus of our research, the comparative method is utilized to assess the gender -based differences in employing the categories and functions of gaps-fillers in the sitcom setting. The analysis shows that the non-lexical fillers were more used and favored in comparison to the other two types. These conversational devices fulfilled the roles that characters tend to convey through their turns. For instance, in the example below:

(Season 1, episode 2)

***Chandler: Oh, that would be mine. See,* I wrote a note to myself, and then I realized I didn't need it, so I balled it up *and... (Silent pause)* ... now I wish I was dead.**

***Phoebe:* She's already fluffed that pillow... *(Silent pause)* … Monica*, huh, mmm, you know, you've already fluffed that - (Monica glares at her.) - but,* it's fine!**

According to Son, et al., (2020), gender-specific differences in non-lexical filler usage have been observed, with females more frequently employing "uh" and "huh" while males tend to use "ah, oh " The use of "ah" among males is associated with a more assertive and extroverted speech style, whereas females' preference for "uh" reflects a more modest and passive tone in communication (Son, et al., 2020).

The false starts and how using them to repair speech, speakers tend to utilize such structures to process their thinking or to achieve other contextual functions as in:

Rachel: "I'm sorry. *I didn't-I don't* come in here a lot (season 4, episode 4).

The false start "I didn't-I don't" represents a correction in Rachel's thought process, and in this manner, it is emphasizing nervousness. The false starts often preferred by speakers particularly men to emphasize their views.

Thus, the analysis of the data exposes that the utilization of the different categories of pauses in the same turn clearly does not fulfill the same purpose of expressing the feelings and empathetic emotions towards the preceded event, as in for instance in Chandler's talk (the previous example). Such utterances, which were used more often by female characters than by the male ones, manifest the empathetic style and the clarification needed. Accordingly, pauses made by women show that they are more enthusiastic in running the conversation pivots than men. In this aspect, it has been noticed that most of these pauses are employed to add some focus on the preceding word or phrase and to drag along the audience's attention to the speech act. Thus, these gaps fillers could be extracted in some of these multi-functional pauses as:

1. Cognitive Pauses (Thinking Time)

This function is well illustrated when characters particularly women tend to gain more time to think for better answer and to avoid any direct misunderstanding. For instance, Phoebe says in (Season 1, episode 15):

Phoebe: "Hey guys, guys! Chandler's coming, and he says he has, like, this…*huh*.. incredible news, so when he gets here, we could all act like, you know..."

The pause here is manipulated as a mental search of Phoebe for right and suitable choices before using the utterance "incredible news". Such structures are excessively used by the female characters in particular to emphasize what Coates(2015) already confirms in his study that women use more deliberative language strategies, pausing to choose their words thoughtfully and to think more deeply. In opposition to that notion, Chandler's nervous hesitation as he said: (season 1, episode 13)

Chandler: *"*I had...*Uh*... nothing to do with them*"*

This gap filler represents how male usage of cognitive pauses occurs in conversation but with less frequency, just for highlighting the user's typical self-deprecating style. In the sentence below, Phoebe is almost trying to process her thoughts saying:

Phoebe*: "I just, uh, don't know what to say."* (Season 3, Episode 1)

It has been noticed that most of the female characters in the sitcom show a clear preference for using non-lexical fillers, primarily to avoid giving direct responses or engaging in confrontation. The non-lexical pause "uh" by Phoebe, for example, signals that she is uncertain or trying to recall the right words, allowing her time to think. These non-lexical structures, such as "um", "huh" and "uh," are favored over more explicit lexical words or false corrective strategies, allowing them additional time to think and maintain conversational control. This strategic use helps them manage the flow of dialogue and subtly assert a dominant position in the interaction.

She, through this pause, decides what to say next.

Ross: *"I just don't know if- I mean, it's complicated.*"

In this example, the pause with ("if-") marks a shift in Ross's thinking, possibly reconsidering his words or not fully committed to his statement. The second pause ("I mean") is a hedging marker, softening the uncertainty of his comment.

Joey: "*All right, all right, all right.* I mean I'll have to check with him first, but I'll think he'll be cool with it. "

Joey's repetition of "all right" in his speech conveys his anxiety and attempt to quickly resolve the situation to be analyzed as a false start.

2. Turns Holding (interactional pauses)

The analysis of the whole seasons 1-4 shows that this function occupies a great frequency in comparison to other functions. Most speakers, particularly women, attempt to manage and control their conversation. For instance, in Season 4 episode 13, Rachel demonstrates hesitation by asking multiple questions filled with doubt, such as ***"What if he says no?"*** Such fillers in her speech give the other speaker 'Phoebe' the opportunity to interject and reassure Rachel, which results in shared turn holding. Another example extracted from season 2, episode 22[1] also illustrates the same function:

Phoebe: "I'm still here! Just don't go anywhere I'm still here. Don't-don't switch or anything, 'cause I'm, I'm right here. *Just one sec. One sec! One second*!! "

The example represents how Phoebe attempts to hold the floor through the repeated utterances of "just one sec" and "one second!" in her conversation with Monica. This represents a critical issue involving her phone call, which is effectively highlighted through this repetition. It reflects her determination to control the flow of the conversation. In this aspect, pauses are not merely used to fill gaps in speech but serve as a mechanism to exert dominance and maintain conversational power over other characters.

[1] https://www.livesinabox.com/friends/season3/322screm.htm

On the other hand, this function is also frequently utilized by male characters, but to achieve another different target. They often exhibit a tendency to assert dominance and maintain control over the conversational flow through using this filler. In the following example, Chandler effectively holds the floor despite Ross's attempt to interject with "What?" Ross's interruption does not succeed in claiming the turn, showcasing Chandler's conversational dominance (Season 4, Episode 7). This aligns with research indicating that men, in mixed-gender or competitive settings, often employ this function to assert control in conversations, such as interrupting or resisting turn-yielding (Coates, 2015; Tannen, 1990).

Chandler:

"I mean, the guy is perfect for her, he's really talented..."

Ross:

"*What? No!*"

Chandler:

"*Yeah, but he's also a pretty good-looking guy. I mean, Kathy's going to be in a Broadway show and she's gonna be on stage with him for hours. He's gonna have that effect on her!*"

3. Speech Planning

This function is crucial for both genders, helping them structure their speech in a way that ensures smooth communication and minimizes the risk of confusion or unintended meanings. According to studies (Coates, 2015) on conversational dynamics, pauses play a key role in managing the flow of speech and maintaining clarity. In *Friends*, Season 3, episode 2, Chandler's speech exemplifies this:

"I mean, it's not like we're going to... uh, well, okay, maybe we are." …. "But you don't want to do this!"

Chandler pauses while choosing his words, indicating that he's carefully considering the best way to articulate his thoughts in response to the uncertain situation (planning). This pause serves as a tool for him to clarify his intentions before speaking- misunderstanding avoidance, ensuring that his message is both accurate and clear. By doing so, he minimizes the risk of miscommunication and prepares his audience for what comes next. This function aligns with findings in conversational studies, which suggest that pauses not only help speakers organize their thoughts but also signal to listeners the speaker's need for time to deliberate, thus aiding in effective communication(Coates, 1995).

4. Comic Relief from Social Pressure

In this function, speakers tend to use pauses as acts and moments of relief from social pressure or risky situations. Generally, such structures reflect the emotional struggle and hesitation that speakers may encounter through their conversations. The example below illustrates this function: (Season2, episode 12)

Ross: "Carol's pregnant."

Phoebe: "*Ooh!* I found it!" (while the others are stunned about the news)

Monica: "*W-w-wh-... wha-... w-w-w-...*"

Ross: "*Yeah. Mmm… Do that for another two hours,* you might be where I am right about now."

Actually, the above- mentioned preferable dynamic highlights how pauses serve as mechanisms to relieve social pressure. In this extract, Ross's pauses reveal his vulnerability, while Phoebe's humor provides relief, reflecting contrasting gendered approaches to handling tension. According to this aspect, a study done by Maclay and Osgood (2015) identifies and

emphasizes that pauses are used as tools to manage cognitive and emotional strain and to add comfort to the conversation. Holmes (2013), on another hand, emphasizes the humorous role of using some speech fillers in fostering social ease, particularly in female communication.

5. Semantic Significance and More Focused Attention

This function is fundamentally rooted in the idea that speakers often prioritize what they intend to say next, attempting to manage hesitation and uncertainty in their responses. To enhance the clarity and importance of their message, speakers may repeat certain phrases or use hesitating sounds (e.g., "um," "uh") to draw attention to specific points. These pauses and repetitions serve as semantic tools, helping speakers to organize their ideas while simultaneously signaling the importance of the idea they are presenting. Accordingly, Clark and Fox Tree (2002) highlight that such pauses function can indicate moments where speakers are organizing their text and planning their next words, thereby directing the listener's attention to the significance of what follows, for instance in the following extract:

Rachel: "I'm making him... *um*...a very fancy meal."

Monica: "Fancy? How fancy?"

Rachel: "Okay, so there's... (non-lexical pause) a salad, an entrée, and... a dessert. Pretty fancy, right?

The use of "um" by Rachel highlights the significance of what she is about to say. This definitely draws attention to her claim of preparing a "fancy meal," proposing she wants the listener to focus on the importance of her statement. Moreover, the silent pauses before listing each dish-"a salad," "an entrée," "a dessert"-add importance to each item, making each course seem more important. The pauses, hence, signal that each part of the meal is significant, contributing to the overall importance of the "fancy meal."

6. Demarcation of Discourse

This function marks the transitions between different segments of dialogue, topics, or ideas, helping structure the flow of the conversation. Accordingly, pauses in this way act as boundaries that signal shifts in focus or emphasis. The extract below taken from Season 4, episode 22:

Rachel: "I'm making him a fancy meal... *huh*… but what if his parents don't like me?"

Monica: "Whoa, whoa. Slow down. Parents? He didn't say anything about parents, right?"

In the extract above, the use of the non-lexical filler after "a fancy meal" signals the transition in Rachel's thought. Thus, she first focuses on the meal (main topic), then the topic is shifted to a concern about the parents, signaling a change in her emotional state and focus. On another hand, the second part of the sentence introduces a new issue, and the pause adds weight to her shift from excitement to worry.

7. Self-repair and Clarification of Vagueness

Holmes (2013) argues that speakers often use clarification and self- correction to maintain flow, and avoid any embarrassment. Thus, they aim to reinforce their goals in the conversation and refine their communication and manage any errors or misinterpretations. They attempt to achieve this function through the use of pauses while maintaining their relationships and social objectives. For instance, in season 2, episode 14, we find Joey gives Chandler a bracelet, and Chandler immediately assumes it's a romantic gesture. This causes confusion as in:

Chandler: (confused) "Joey, *is this... is this... a* bracelet? *I mean*, what's going on here?"

Joey: "*No, no, mmmm*! It's just a friendship bracelet."

Chandler: (laughs) "Oh, okay. I thought you were... you know, doing something more serious."

Joey: "No way, man! We're friends. Nothing more."

In the dialogue above, Joey immediately clarifies his intent by explaining that it's just a friendship bracelet, not something meant to be taken seriously. Chandler then corrects his assumption, acknowledging his misunderstanding with humor. This function of clarification not only smooths over the potential awkwardness, but also strengthens their friendship by showing how they both navigate and resolve such minor misunderstandings.

6. Discussion of Results

The discussion and analysis of filled pauses (categories) in the "*Friends*" sitcom reveals that the pauses are about 4, 980 ones as shown in Table 3. Table 3 demonstrates that the study adopts three primary categories, which are considered the most commonly used in daily conversation: "lexical, non-lexical, and false-start structures." These distributions, along with their percentages, were divided due to the gender variable-men versus women. Accordingly, the analyzed data indicates that lexical fillers, such as "you know" and "like," form a significant portion of filled pauses, accounting for 33.33% of female and 31.46% of male filled pauses. This frequency may suggest a social function, where speakers use such fillers to signal engagement and manage interpersonal dynamics during interactions. The use of these structures excessively contends their significance in the flow of speech.

The application of the Chi-square shows ($\chi^2 = 2.91$, $p = 0.088$) which indicates no significant difference between males and females in the use of lexical fillers. The slightly higher occurrence of lexical fillers in female speech in the sitcom likely reflects a tendency for women to engage more in these social cues, though the difference is not large enough to be considered statistically significant. Thus, this pattern is especially obvious in the female characters' speech in anxious situations, as shown in Table 3 below:

Function/Category	Female Frequency	Male Frequency	Total Frequency	Female Percentage	Male Percentage
Lexical Fillers	850	450	1,300	33.33%	31.46%
Non-lexical Fillers	1,400	700	2,100	54.90%	48.95%
False Starts	300	280	580	51.72%	48.28%

Table (3) Distribution of male-female occurrences and percentages of filled pauses

On another hand, the non-lexical filled pauses remarkably dominate both male and female speech, obtaining 54.90% of female and 48.95% of male ones. Doubtlessly, this diversity suggests that speakers rely more on non-lexical fillers to achieve certain functions than other categories, such as managing turn-taking and maintaining the flow of conversation. The Chi-square analysis of the non- lexical fillers shows ($\chi^2 = 10.47$, $p < 0.01$) representing a statistically significant difference in the employment of non-lexical fillers between males and females in daily speech. This finding aligns with what has previously suggested that non-lexical fillers such as "um" and "uh" help speakers manage cognitive load during speech production, with a tendency for females to employ them more repeatedly.

Concerning the last category, the false starts(false- repairs) get (51.72% for females and 48.28% for males). Such result represents more variation in comparison with the other two types, as males and females use false starts at roughly the same frequency. This could be due to "differences in speech patterns" (Coates, 2015), with males potentially revising their speech more often or more openly to express instability and uncertainty. False starts, often regarded as a sign of cognitive processing or hesitation, reflect the speaker's need for more time to plan or rethink their message. The Chi-square analysis ($\chi^2 = 38.05$, $p < 0.001$) represents a highly a significant difference, with females showing a higher frequency of false starts compared to males, indicating a tendency for males to take less time in planning their speech or rethinking their conversational turns. Such types of filled pauses are drawn from the notion of hesitancy and uncertainty, basically reflecting the speaker's need for time to re-think, search for the right word, or process information. These pauses serve as a way for speakers to maintain the floor in conversation while signaling to listeners that they have not finished speaking or that they are unsure about what to say next. In this way, they reflect both cognitive and social functions, offering insights into how uncertainty is managed in discourse.

Figure (1) below illustrates the distribution of filled pauses types by gender:

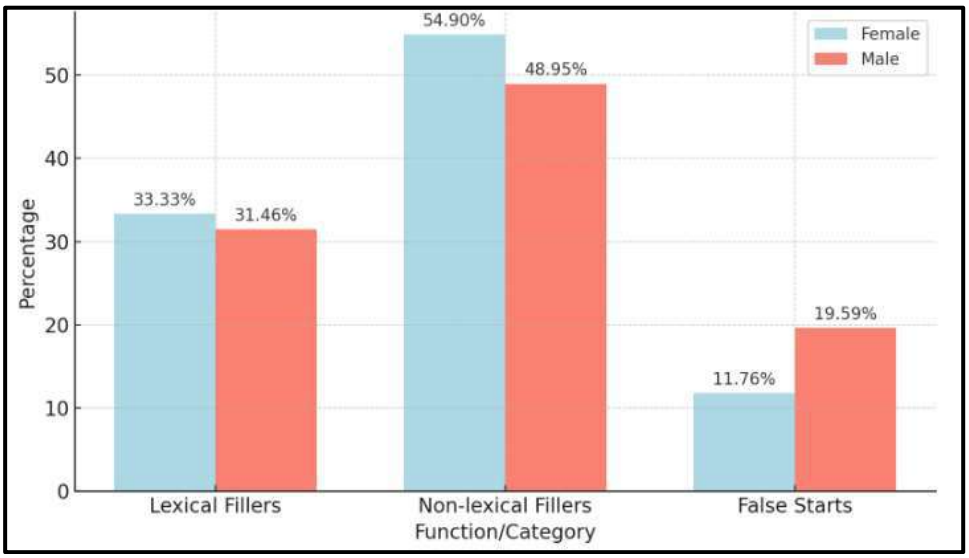

Figure (1) Distribution of Filled Pauses Types (Categories) by Gender in *'Friends'* Sitcom

6.1 Analysis of Multi-Functional Pauses and Discussion

As mentioned earlier that the ultimate aim of this analysis is to examine the multi-functions of speech fillers (i.e., gap fillers and pauses) in the everyday dialogues done by male and female characters in the sitcom '*Friends'*. To achieve this, the conversations were analyzed, highlighting the most frequent categories derived from recorded data on the official website of the sitcom[1], along with episodes viewed. Thus, the functions of the identified pauses were categorized, and subsequently tabulated as shown in the table below:

[1] https://www.fanfr.com/scripts/saison1/friendsgeneration2.php?nav=script&episodescript=115&version=vo

https://www.livesinabox.com/friends/season4.shtml

Pauses Functions	Female Frequency	Male Frequency	F. Occurrence (%)	M. Occurrence (%)
Cognitive (thinking time)	220	100	5.5%	2.5%
Turn-Holding	210	120	5.3%	3.0%
Speech Planning	200	130	5.0%	3.3%
Signaling Uncertainty	180	150	4.5%	3.8%
Speech Segmentation Turn-Taking	230	160	5.8%	4.0%
Relief from Social Pressure	210	90	5.3%	2.3%
Emphasis and Rhetorical Effect	180	160	4.5%	4.0%
Clarification and Self-Repair	170	140	4.3%	3.5%
Pragmatic (expressing emotions)	240	100	6.0%	2.5%
Discourse Demarcation	210	120	5.3%	3.0%
Speech Disfluency Indication	200	130	5.0%	3.3%
Psychological (emotional states)	220	130	5.5%	3.3%
Total	2,550	1,430	64,0%	36,0%

Table (4) Distribution of speech pauses' functions in the American sitcom '*Friends*'

Concerning the cognitive function or what is labeled as 'Thinking Time', the analysis of the data shows that females tend to use pauses for cognitive purposes (220 occurrences, 5.5%), while men utilize this function significantly (100 occurrences, 2.5%). No doubt that a Chi-Square test result with a p-value < 0.05 reveals that this difference is statistically significant, emphasizing that females are more likely to take deliberate pauses when giving responses. This finding suggests that female characters in '*Friends'* may exhibit more cautious speech patterns and reflective, likely depending on a greater concern for the precision of their language or the social impact of their words. In this way, the females' behavior tends to adopt more deliberative communication strategies, which may be socially tied to cognitive processing preferences (Coates, 2015).

Furthermore, the analysis also reveals that turn-holding function is more prevalent among females with (5.3%) than males (3.0%). The Chi-Square test produces a value of $\chi^2 = 10.24$, $p < 0.01$, exposing a statistically significant difference between them. This result definitely confirms that female characters more actively maintain control over their speaking turns, suggesting that they may use pauses to assert conversational space in environments where they have commonly received less (Coates, 2015). Similarly, pauses used for the function of speech planning were also more frequent among females (5.0%) than males (3.3%), with a Chi-Square score of ($\chi^2 = 7.81$, $p < 0.01$). This also indicates a significant difference, highlighting a greater tendency among females for detailed cognitive preparation and a stronger emphasis on message clarity, possibly driven by societal expectations that reward careful articulation and precision in female speech (Holmes, 2013).

With the function of uncertainty, on another hand, females pause gets slightly more (4.5%) than males (3.8%). Accordingly, the Chi-Square result ($\chi^2 = 1.43$, $p > 0.05$) which suggests no clear statistical significance. This value indicates that a slight preference among females to soften statements or express hesitation, but not to a generalizable degree across contexts (Lakoff, 1975). Speech segmentation also reveals clear distinctions, with females (5.8%) surpassing males (4.0%), and the Chi-Square results ($\chi^2 = 9.71$, $p < 0.01$) supporting the idea that female discourse promotes collaboration and smooth conversational flow as provided by Tannen(1994).

Concerning the filled pauses that relieve social pressure, it has been found out that females get 5.3%, whereas males have 2.3% with a highly significant Chi-Square result ($\chi^2 = 20.15$, $p < 0.001$). This heightened conversational stress management among females, potentially reflecting greater societal investigation of women's speech. Additionally, emphasis and rhetorical pauses, on another hand, show minor gender variance (females: 4.5%; males: 4.0%), with a non-significant Chi-Square result ($\chi^2 = 0.62$, $p > 0.05$), pointing out that both genders employ strategic silences similarly for rhetorical impact. Also, pauses for clarification and self-repair are more common in females (4.3%) than males (3.5%), with a Chi-Square result ($\chi^2 = 4.76$, $p < 0.05$) confirming significance. This emphasizes the idea that females prioritize accuracy, potentially reflecting greater self-monitoring under certain linguistic norms demanding verbal precision.

Emotional expression filled pauses exhibit a clear gender difference (females: 6.0%; males: 2.5%), with a highly significant Chi-Square result ($\chi^2 = 26.13$, $p < 0.001$). This reinforces the idea that women have greater emotional distinction (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013). Discourse demarcation pauses (females: 5.3%; males: 3.0%) produce a significant Chi-Square score ($\chi^2 = 11.54$, $p < 0.01$), supporting cooperative strategies aimed at clarity and listener engagement. In speech disfluency, females (5.0%) exceed males (3.3%), with a significant Chi-Square result ($\chi^2 = 7.81$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting a higher tolerance for hesitation and fillers, reflective of spontaneity.

Finally, pauses reflecting psychological (emotional) processing are significantly more frequent among females (5.5%) than males (3.3%). The Chi-Square test ($\chi^2 = 10.24$, $p < 0.01$) reinforces established ideas of women's expressiveness and transparency in emotional discourse (Coates, 2015; Holmes, 2013).

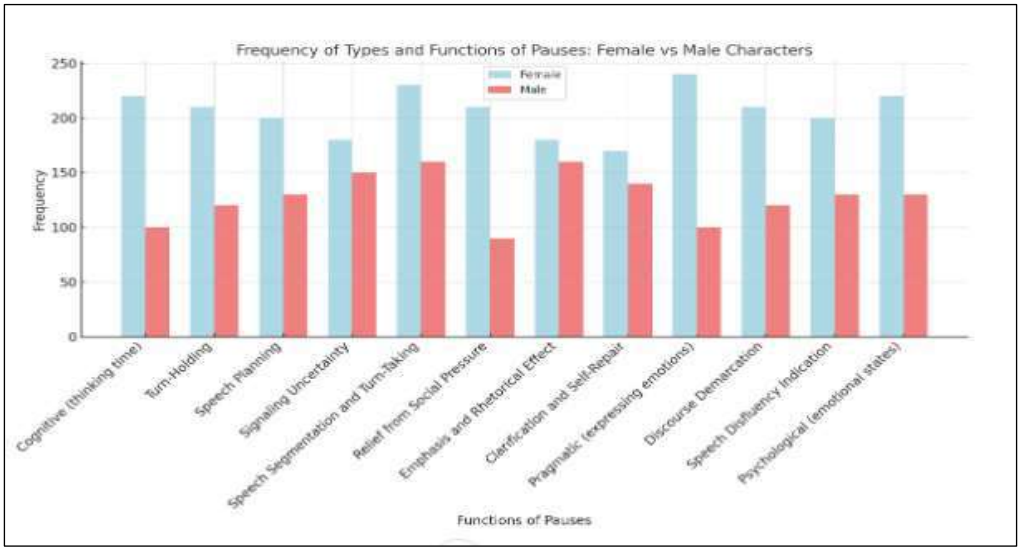

Figure (2) The Distribution of Pauses Functions in Relation to Gender Difference in 'Friends' Sitcom.

7. Conclusions

The analysis of pauses in the American sitcom "*Friends"* unveils explicit gender-based differences in their multifunctional use, highlighting obvious communicative and cognitive patterns between females and males. Statistically significant findings reveal that women utilize these gaps fillers more frequently across diversified functions, particularly in cognitive processing, speech planning, turn-holding, clarification, speech segmentation, and emotional expression. Thus, these structures suggest that females engage in more deliberate and reflective speech, emphasizing precision, emotional transparency, and collaboration.

It is noticed that women's use of cognitive pauses and speech planning conforms to previous studies suggesting that female speech is often more structured, well-directed and socially aware, reflecting societal expectations of careful articulation (Coates, 2015; Holmes, 2013). Likewise, their higher reliance on turn-holding and speech segmentation implies an active effort to maintain conversational control and ensure smoother discourse flow. The significantly higher use of filled pauses for social pressure relief and emotional expression further reinforces the idea that women navigate conversational dynamics with greater sensitivity to interpersonal and affective cues (Levon, 2010: Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013).

Despite the fact that men also tend to employ pauses across various functions, their lower frequency suggests a less cautious or less socially mediated approach to speech. The relatively minor gender differences in rhetorical and emphasis pauses represent that both genders recognize the strategic value of pauses for persuasion and impact. Moreover, the significantly higher use of pauses for emotional processing among females underscores established findings on gendered communication, where women's speech often conveys greater emotional depth and relational engagement (Coates, 2015; Holmes, 2013).

To sum up, this study reinforces the notion that pauses serve not only as linguistic tools but also as reflections of broader social and cognitive frameworks. The gendered use of pauses in "*Friends"* proposes that female characters exhibit greater conversational adaptability and attentiveness to social norms, while male characters display a comparatively direct and less structured approach to speech. These findings contribute to ongoing discussions in sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, emphasizing how gendered language practices manifest even in scripted media representations.

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