

“I SAW YOU LIKE THIS NOW I WANNA KNOW”:
NOTICING RECIPIENCY AND RESPONDING TO LIKES ON TWITTER

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In this paper, we focus on how interactants accomplish different forms of participation in the “one-to-many” context of social media interactions, where single users frequently have a wide audience of potential recipients to their posts. How do social media users ascertain who might be a relevant recipient to these posts, and how do other users who interact with these posts position themselves within a relevant participation framework? We explore these questions by examining how participants on Twitter orient to the act of “liking” a post as a resource for moving into the participation framework of the talk, and we show how this orientation allows likes to serve as possible pathways for launching new actions and activities. We examine these practices using the framework of conversation analysis (CA), showing how participants use public noticings of another user’s likes as a preface to, and justification for, a subsequent invitation sequence or complaint sequence. We additionally show how the specific media affordances of Twitter, which render likes publicly visible to others, facilitates the noticing of likes as a device for inciting new courses of action.

Keywords: conversation analysis, social media, response practices, Twitter

During face-to-face interaction, participants routinely display their reciprocity to an ongoing turn at talk through a range of interactional practices that include minimal response tokens or backchannels (Goffman, 1981) and embodied resources such as eye gaze and head nods (Goodwin 1980; Stivers, 2008). Such practices treat reciprocity as an accomplishment that requires work beyond simply being physically co-present with one’s interlocutors, though co-presence is also, in and of itself, a valuable resource for participation (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004). In the context of face-to-face interaction, being visibly co-present enables some of the most basic turn-taking mechanisms of interaction (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974) by allowing current speakers to address ongoing actions to particular participants, and it additionally allows participants to position themselves in meaningful ways within the embodied participation framework (Goodwin, 2000) of the talk.

The interactional affordances of visible co-presence are not only made relevant during face-to-face interactions but also those conducted over videotelephony platforms like Zoom or FaceTime, where participants can keep their cameras on to maintain a visible but remote co-

presence. However, interaction occurring in other technologically mediated environments that lack the affordances of visible co-presence, such as telephone calls or text-based modes of digital communication, may motivate shifts in how interactants project, invite, and enact participation in the talk. In this paper, we focus on how interactants accomplish different forms of participation in the “one-to-many” context of social media interactions, where single users frequently have a wide audience of potential recipients to their posts. How do social media users ascertain who might be a relevant recipient to these posts, and how do other users who interact with these posts position themselves within a relevant participation framework? We explore these questions by examining how participants on Twitter orient to the act of “liking” a post as a resource for moving into the participation framework of the talk, and we show how this orientation allows likes to serve as possible pathways for launching new actions and activities. We examine these practices using the framework of conversation analysis (CA), extending prior work that has used CA to examine various forms of text-based digital communication (e.g., Meredith, 2019) but has only rarely focused on social media as a site for conversation analytic inquiry.

One notable exception to this trend is Housley et al.’s (2017) exploration of Twitter data using ethnomethodological conversation analysis, which focuses on both sequential organization and membership categorization devices. In a somewhat similar vein, Giles (2021) offers an in-depth discussion of sequential organization on Twitter that interrogates platform-specific issues of context and media affordances. Giles additionally illustrates the relevance of *doubly articulated* units of talk (conceived with both a local and wider audience in mind; Bou-Franch et al., 2012) to a micro-analytic account of talk on Twitter, particularly interactions between public celebrities and the fans who follow them. While both of these papers focus on the written modality of social media interactions, other streams of discourse analytic research have investigated the interactional work that participants accomplish by liking posts on social media. West and Trester (2013) offer one such discussion of likes on Facebook, which they describe as a response practice “signaling acknowledgment and approval” (p. 138) of a post’s content. The authors focus on the types of facework conducted by responding to posts with written comments, describing such comments as a form of “meaningful engagement” that contrast with the more limited possibilities for doing facework engendered by simply liking a post, which instead offers only a “minimal effort response” (p. 145). Their analysis positions likes as working toward pro-sociality by offering quick, positive feedback, yet nonetheless carries the “risk” of being a missed opportunity for the

types of facework made available through leaving comments on a user’s post. In a briefer discussion of likes on Facebook, West (2013) describes them specifically as a backchannel device (Goffman, 1981) and again contrasts them with written comments left on a social media post, which are instead described as an “active” form of response practice. Though interaction and interpersonal engagement on Facebook differs from Twitter in significant ways, the two platforms overlap considerably in how both offer two primary ways of responding to a user’s post: by liking it or producing written comments. (While Facebook has expanded its platform in recent years to offer users a range of emotive “reactions” in addition to likes, this feature was not yet implemented during the prior research cited here). West and Trester (2013) and West (2013) thus both offer relevant insight into the ways that likes may be used and understood across Twitter as well as Facebook. More recent work by Proctor and Raclaw (2018) has focused on the social meaning of likes on Twitter, examining how users produce metacommentary (i.e., talk about talk) about the presence or absence of likes on their posts. The authors find that likes are treated as a noticeable form of response, with participants producing explicit noticings that either celebrate or lament the likes a particular post has received. It is this particular understanding of likes as a *noticeable* form of response that drives much of the present analysis, which applies a conversation analytic lens to examine participants exploit this noticeability to incite further forms of participation in interactions on Twitter.

In particular, we show how participants use public noticings of another user’s likes as a preface to a new course of action, such as an invitation or complaint. In this way, likes are treated as providing for another user’s availability as a relevant recipient to a subsequent unit of talk. For example, in Excerpt 1, Sam posts a single tweet at lines 1-4. The tweet is a humorous announcement formulated using a popular compound TCU (Lerner, 1991) meme format that contrasts Sam’s inner monologue about what they should do for the evening (stay at home because they have work the following morning) and what they actually spent their evening doing (going out dancing).

(1)
 01 SAM: me to myself: i am not going out tonight
 02 i have work in the morning
 03 me the same night:
 04 (([animated GIF](#) of child dancing in a nightclub))
 05 SAM: linda **i saw you like this**, come hop state lines
 06 with the crew
 07 LIN: i'm in br for landons state tournament :/
 08 SAM: i'll take shot for you and him xoxo

This initial tweet receives several likes, including one from Linda, who is addressed as a recipient in Sam's subsequent talk at lines 5-6. Here Sam formulates a noticing of the fact that Linda had liked the initial tweet before producing an invitation for Linda to "hop state lines with the crew," possibly to participate in the same activity described in the initial tweet (going out dancing). Linda rejects the invitation at line 7 by offering an account for why they are in fact unavailable for a visit, and Sam closes the sequence at line 8 by accepting the rejection ("i'll take [a] shot for you and him").

In this excerpt, we see that Linda's like of the initial tweet is treated as moving them into the participation framework of the talk by positioning them as a relevant recipient to Sam's invitation. This particular understanding of Linda's like is made salient during Sam's explicit noticing of this like at line 5, which is formulated as both a preface to, and justification for, Sam's subsequent invitation. We note that this understanding of likes as a springboard for a new course of action is in part enabled through one of the media affordances (Giles, 2018) of Twitter, namely in how the platform automatically notifies the author of a post or comment when another user has liked it. Even outside of these notifications, likes are publicly visible to other users who come across the original post or comment, and Twitter's timeline algorithm may even show users which tweets have been liked by other users they follow. This relatively high, public visibility of likes facilitates subsequent turns at talk in which these likes can become explicitly noticed. Such noticings are routine occurrences in the data we examine, and they typically serve as both a preface to, and justification for, some new course of action that unfolds in the talk that follows.

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A related case occurs in Excerpt 2 as Arc posts a single tweet at lines 1-7. This tweet is composed of multiple units of talk: an initial instance of troubles talk (Jefferson, 1988) about a problem in the game of Dungeons and Dragons that Arc runs, followed by a solicitation of advice formulated through two questions. In terms of reciprocity, the tweet is directed to a limited but still potentially vast set of recipients, namely individuals who also run games of Dungeons and Dragons (serving as a DM or GM, respectively short for “dungeon master” and “game master”).

(2)

01 ARC: 🤔 Ok DM/GM friends. An open campaign recently
02 took such a hard left I've found myself searching
03 for an idea for a decent arc... And coming up
04 with nothing...It happens...
05 Has it ever happened to you? And how did you work
06 through it?
07 (([Animated GIF](#) of actor Nathan Fillion))
08 LOR: ask the players what their theories are and adlib
09 off off that, or just do a fun, completely
10 unrelated side arc and see where it leads (man a
11 one-shot is written to fit into any setting :D)
12 ARC: That's great advice! Unfortunately it's that side
13 arc I'm searching for lol. So far the theories
14 haven't solidified. And sadly, in this case, I
15 would be absolutely amazed if a one-shot actually
16 fit the setting/situation...I've really stuck my
17 foot in it 😞
18 ARC: **I saw you like this shit** @Shad. You up for a call?
19 In fact, who's up for a discord voice chat? @Chao,
20 @TX, @Dust? Anyone else?

At lines 8-11 Lorai responds with advice, and at lines 12-17 Arc initially accepts and praises the advice but ultimately rejects it as irrelevant to the trouble at hand. Subsequently, at lines 18-19 Arc

produces a noticing of Shad’s like of the initial post from lines 1-7. Just as in the prior excerpt, this noticing is formulated as a preface to, and an account for, an invitation: at lines 18 Arc “tags” Shad by mentioning their username (which sends a notification to Shad alerting them to this tweet) and invites them to talk about Arc’s trouble at hand (an invitation that is broadened out to other users at lines 19-20). As with the prior excerpt, Shad’s liking of the initial tweet is treated as positioning them as a relevant recipient to a new course of action—an invitation. While likes may thus be used to “indicate having noticed and appreciated a friend’s post” (West & Trester 2013:145), the data from our larger collection illustrate how likes on social media may also position a participant as being interested in the talk such that their further participation is made relevant.

In the prior two excerpts, the talk is organized such that the original author of a post notices another user’s like and thus initiates the subsequent invitation sequence. In other cases, a third party goes on to produce this noticing as well as the new course of action that the original like has engendered. For example, in Excerpt 3 the official Twitter account for the multiplayer video game Dead by Daylight formulates an announcement advertising an unlockable download for players of the game (lines 1-5). The original post does not specify any one recipient, though it receives a response from a user called Leila who notices that the original post was liked by the official Twitter account for Trixie Mattel, a celebrity drag queen and television personality.

(3)

01 DBD: Zarina's bringing in the Year of the Ox in style.
 02 If you want to be like Zarina... Enter code
 03 "ZARINOX" in the in-game store by February 25th to
 04 unlock this limited time Lunar New Year cosmetic.
 05 ((image of the game character Zarina))
 06 LEI: Excuse me @trixiemattel
 07 **I saw you liked this** does it mean you play will
 08 you party with me? 🙄

At lines 6-7 Leila first tags Trixie Mattel by mentioning her username, then formulates an explicit noticing of Mattel’s like of the original tweet that prefaces Leila’s invitation for Mattel to join them in a multiplayer game of Dead by Daylight by forming an in-game “party” (the invitation is

additionally accompanied by a “pleading face” emoji). While Leila’s invitation receives no uptake from Mattel, it offers an example of how liking a tweet can be understood as positioning a participant as a relevant recipient to a related course of action (here again, an invitation), even when this noticing is accomplished by a third party rather than the author of the original post.

Similarly, in Excerpt 4, a popular Twitter account, Rate My Takeaway, posts a video of food service workers at the restaurant Chip Inn preparing a large meat box with curry sauce (lines 1-2). As with the prior excerpt, this initial post does not specify any one recipient, though it receives a response from Ben as they notice that the original post was liked by a mutually known party, Soph (line 3).

(4)

01 RMT: 15" Chip Inn Meat Box with Curry Sauce
02 ((video of service workers preparing food))
03 BEN: @soph **i saw you liked this**, its 15 mins away
04 from me and its fire
05 SOP: Omw to yours now
06 BEN: Its at a place called huthwaite

Ben’s noticing of Soph’s like at line 3 serves as a preface to two subsequent units of talk: an announcement that the restaurant featured in the video is only 15 minutes away from where Ben lives, and a positive assessment of either the restaurant or the specific meal advertised in the original post (“it’s fire”). While neither unit of talk formulates an explicit, on-record invitation for Soph to visit the restaurant, it is nonetheless heard that way as Soph responds at line 5 by announcing that they are “on [their] way” to visit Ben, ostensibly so that the two of them might visit the restaurant together. While Ben’s subsequent turn at talk (line 6) disaligns with this particular interactional project—that is, it offers Soph specific directions to get to the restaurant on their own rather than solidifying plans for the two of them to visit together—this case nonetheless illustrates how Soph’s like has positioned them as potentially interested in and available for further participation regarding the content of the original post. Ben’s noticing of Soph’s like thus becomes a preface to, and an account for, this expanded participation, which Soph treats as an invitation.

The previous excerpts each illustrate how likes may be treated as noticeable forms of response that provide for the relevance of the respondent’s further participation in the talk. In each of these cases this call to participation is treated as an invitation. And yet because of their sequential organization, none of these noticings are quite analogous to the types of pre-invitations (Schegloff, 2007) that speakers routinely use during talk-in-interaction to first ascertain the relevance of an invitation sequence. For example, in the landline telephone interaction below, Nelson initiates a pre-invitation at line 4 as he checks to see whether Clara is available for the subsequent invitation that follows at line 6, while Clara signals this availability through the “go ahead” response she provides at line 5.

- (5)
- 04 NEL: Whatcha doin’.
- 05 CLA: Not much.
- 06 NEL: Y’wanna drink?
- 07 CLA: Yeah.
- 08 NEL: Okay.

Here, the pre-invitation checks the recipient’s availability for a specific course of action—the invitation. By contrast, in the Twitter data examined above, a user’s like does somewhat different work; rather than simply providing for the specific action-type relevance of a forthcoming invitation, these likes provides for the respondent’s more general relevance as a recipient to a subsequent course of action. By explicitly noticing these likes, and organizing such noticings as prefaces to this next course of action, participants display an understanding of likes as signaling both the participant’s interest in the talk as well as their potential availability as a relevant participant within it.

Though our focus thus far has been on the way that likes can engender a subsequent invitation, our collection also shows how other courses of action may also accompany the public noticing of other participants’ likes. For example, Excerpt 6 begins as Karti formulates a hyperbolic complaint about mint chocolate chip flavoring and the people who like it (lines 1-2). Another participant, Mari, follows this at line 3 with a turn composed of three distinct units of talk directed at a third

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party, Elli, who has liked this initial tweet: an initial response cry (“what the hell”) followed by a negative assessment (“you tweakin”) and a noticing of Elli’s like (“I saw you like this”).

(6)

01 KAR: if u like mint chocolate chip anything seek
02 help ur going 2 hell
03 MAR: @Elli wth you tweakin **I saw you like this**
04 ELL: I liked it because mint chocolate chip is my
05 favorite ice cream 🤔
06 MAR: Ohhh I thought you were agreeing 🤔🤔 I was
07 gonna say you missing out

In contrast to the prior cases we have analyzed thus far, Mari’s noticing of Elli’s like is not organized as a preface to the complaint they launch at Elli at line 3, but rather serves as the final unit of talk within her turn. Despite this difference in turn construction, Mari’s noticing of Elli’s like is nonetheless positioned as justification for Mari’s complaint and, more precisely, Elli’s like itself is positioned as the complainable. At lines 4-5 Elli responds by accounting for her like, noting that they liked the original tweet not because they agreed with the stance that it put forward but rather because they do, in fact, like mint chocolate chip (formulated through the extreme case formulation, “mint chocolate chip is my favorite ice cream”). Mari responds at lines 6-7 with an initial change of state token that offers an acceptance of this account and a justification for their original complaint from line 3.

A similar case occurs in Excerpt 7. At lines 1-3, U.S. Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy posts some points of disagreement with the COVID financial relief plan that was then being put forward by Democratic leadership. At lines 5-10 another user, Jess, produces a single tweet responding to McCarthy and disagreeing with his argument that funding for the arts should not be a part of this relief plan. At lines 11-16, Jess then produces a subsequent tweet that initially tags their local political representative, Senator John Cornyn, who has liked McCarthy’s tweet; Jess then produces an initial noticing of Cornyn’s like.

(6)

01 KM: Dear Democrats: Stop calling it a "COVID
 02 Relief" plan. A better name would be "The
 03 Pelosi Payoff."
 04 ((graph comparing COVID and non-COVID funding))
 05 JES: ARTS FUNDING IS NOT NON-COVID. Arts and culture
 06 are a KEY & SIGNIFICANT part of our economy and
 07 job market. & COVID has shut it down almost
 08 completely. I am an arts marketer & currently on
 09 unemployment because I lost my job. BECAUSE OF
 10 COVID. Learn @GOPLeader. Listen. For once.
 11 JES: Also, @JohnCornyn **I saw you liked this** & I'm
 12 absolutely DISGUSTED that you "represent" me. I
 13 miss the arts. I miss working. I miss my industry.
 14 I hate seeing so many of my colleagues and
 15 friends who are artists suffering. Because of our
 16 countries incompetence.

This noticing of Cornyn's like is formulated as a preface to Jess's subsequent complaint against Cornyn ("I'm absolutely DISGUSTED that you 'represent' me"), which is followed by further disagreements with McCarthy's stance that offer accounts for the complaint against Cornyn. Much as with the prior excerpt, Jess's noticing of Cornyn's like serves as justification for the complaint that follows, with the like itself serving as the complainable. As seen in the transcript above, Cornyn does not respond to this complaint.

In both this and the prior excerpt, likes may be understood as not just approving of a stance put forward in the liked tweet (cf. West & Trester, 2013) but also espousing this stance. Public noticings of these likes are thus positioned as justifying the complaints that call these parties to account for these likes and, by extension, the stances they index. The likes seen in Excerpts 6 and 7 thus differ from those seen in Excerpt 1-4, with the former being treated as affiliating with the stance put forth in the tweet the participant has liked, and the latter being treated as signaling that the participant is sufficiently interested in the topic of the talk that an invitation is made relevant.

However, each of these cases illustrate how participants on Twitter treat likes as a noticeable form of response that may be used to further bring these respondents into the participation framework of the talk. While likes may in fact be a more “passive” form of response compared to the types of written comments that also abound on social media (West & Trester, 2013), likes nonetheless engender “active” forms of participation as other participants treat them as justification for pursuing further courses of action such as invitations or complaints. Each of these excerpts also illustrate the way that participants are held accountable for their likes; in this sense, likes are not simply neutral ways of acknowledging a post or comment, but also display various stances toward the content that being liked, with such stances forming the basis for the invitation and complaint sequences that we see unfold in the excerpts above. We note that it is the specific media affordances of Twitter, that render likes so publicly visible to others, that facilitates the noticing of likes as a device for inciting these new courses of action.

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