# "哈哈(haha)" in WeChat Chinese Conversations

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## ABSTRACT

Few studies have considered the micro-analysis of written laughter in the digital world in its sequential context (beyond frequency and distribution). The present study fills this gap by examining "transcribed" laughter "哈哈(haha)" in Chinese conversations on WeChat from a conversation analytic perspective. A line-by-line analysis was conducted to identify how speakers use "哈哈(haha)" in different sequences to perform different social actions. This study has shown that the sequential environments of the laughter "哈哈(haha)" in WeChat Chinese conversations can be classified into three types: TCU-initial "哈哈(haha)," TCU-end "哈哈(haha)" and stand-alone "哈哈(haha)." These three types of "哈哈(haha)" perform the actions of mitigating disalignment, managing failure or misconduct, and displaying minimal engagement, respectively. The findings expand the current conversation analysis literature on laughter by describing the use of written laughter in a previously unexamined context and help both native and non-native speakers better navigate informal Chinese digital communication and avoid misunderstandings.

Keywords: written laughter, haha, digital communication, WeChat, conversation analysis

## INTRODUCTION

As early as 1974, Sacks (1974) highlighted that refraining from laughing can signal disaffiliation, while laughing promptly after a joke is encouraged. Laughter and non-seriousness remain closely linked phenomena (Sacks, 1974, p. 350; Glenn, 1995). By laughing instead of responding in a way that aligns with the typical sequential implications of the preceding turn, the interlocutor signals their recognition of the ongoing conversation as non-serious while inviting the partner to laugh (Glenn,1991; Holt, 2013). A large body of conversation analytic studies on laughter in face-to-face interactions shows that laughter is far

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more than just a reaction to something funny (Jefferson, 1984; Haakana, 2001; Glenn, 2003, 2013; Potter and Hepburn, 2010; Holt, 2012). It can reflect a range of stances, spanning from alignment to disalignment (Du Bois, 2007). It is a "socially organized practice" (Jefferson et al., 1987, p.152) that participants finely and locally implement moment by moment as the interaction unfolds, thus achieving several relevant actions such as taking the floor (Ikeda and Bysouth, 2013), navigating topics (Holt, 2010), exhibiting resistance in trouble-telling (Jefferson, 1984), initiating remedy (Gavioli, 1995), displaying embarrassment (Glenn, 2013), or managing trouble (Osvaldsson, 2004; Wilkinson, 2007; Holt, 2012; Petitjean and González-Martínez, 2015).

Yet, while CA studies have investigated sequential organizations of laughter in various interactional settings (see for instance Holt, 2011 on laughter in ordinary conversations; Fatigante & Orletti, 2013 on laughter in institutional interactions), there is little CA research on written laughter in the digital world, which includes laughing acronyms (e.g., *lol*), laughter tokens (e.g., haha, hehe, hihi), and smileys and emojis (e.g., :-D,☺). Simply transferring the CA findings of research on spoken laughter to the study of written laughter is problematic as "spoken interaction and written dialogue differ not only in the semiotic resources used but also in the temporal coordination of individual contributions" (König, 2019, p.157). CA studies have identified differences between spoken laughter and written laughter (Herring et al., 2013, p.9). For example, laughing together through text is impossible in the written mode (McKay, 2015, p.69).

Written laughter, however, has been an object of inquiry in various discourse analytic and sociolinguistic studies. Among the various forms of e-laughter, the acronym *lol* ("laughing out loud") is perhaps the most extensively studied (e.g., Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008; Varnhagen et al., 2010). It has been characterized as a creative acronym functioning as a discourse marker in SMS communication, exhibiting a wide range of speech act features, ranging from its literal use as a laughter token to a figurative use that highlights irony within a message (Uygur-Distexhe, 2012). Beyond text messaging, *lol* has also been analyzed in instant messaging, where it is interpreted as a phatic filler (Baron, 2004; Varnhagen et al., 2010). Despite the focus on *lol*, "transcribed" laughter (e.g., haha) has been found to be the most recurrent form of e-laughter in various quantitative studies (König, 2019; Tagg, 2009; Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008). Tagliamonte and Denis (2008), in their analysis of a large corpus of instant messages, revealed that ha/haha/hahaha was the most frequently used laughter token, surpassing both *lol* and hehe in popularity. Supporting this pattern, Tagg (2009) found that ha/haha/hahaha was used more often than both *lol* and smiley emojis in text messaging data, suggesting a similar ranking across contexts. The use of e-laughter also appears to be age-related, with *lol* predominantly favored by younger users, particularly those aged 15 and 16, while older participants, especially those aged 19 and 20, showed a clear preference for haha (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008).

Overall, detailed micro-analysis of transcribed laughter in its sequential context (beyond frequency and distribution) conducted from a conversation analytic perspective is rare, with the exception of Petitjean and Morel (2017), who combined conversation analysis and quantitative analyses to find that "hahaha" laughter in WhatsApp conversations perform different actions depending on its position. While standalone laughter (a message composed only of laugh particles) followed by an assessment from the same speaker signals sequence

closure and topic termination, message-initial laughter combined with an assessment invites recipient responses. In this paper, I extend this research by investigating "transcribed" laughter "哈哈(haha)" in Chinese conversations on WeChat (an instant messaging application)—a previously unexamined context. I do so by asking the following research questions: (1) what are the sequential positions of "哈哈(haha)" in WeChat Chinese conversations? and (2) what specific actions does "哈哈(haha)" perform?

## DATA AND METHOD

The data used in the study were drawn from WeChat Chinese conversations, including conversations between myself and my friends as well as conversations between my friends and their own contacts, all of whom provided consent. All extracts were transcribed in Chinese and English and the focal lines were arrowed. The laughter "哈哈(haha)" with exactly two "哈(ha)" tokens is the focus of this research. The analysis is conducted within a conversational analytic (CA) framework. I first looked broadly at how "哈哈(haha)" are positioned within a turn-constructional unit (TCU) and within a sequence in 60 instances of WeChat conversation. I then focused specifically on how speakers use "哈哈(haha)" in different sequences to perform different social actions. I conducted a line-by-line analysis, examining how and when each "哈哈(haha)" is produced in the larger sequence (i.e. position) (Schegloff, 2007). Common characteristics across various instances were identified and will be demonstrated in the following sections. Among the 60 examples, I have selected 9 representative instances and analyze them below.

## ANALYSIS

In this section, I show how TCU-initial "哈哈(haha)" is used to mitigate disalignment, TCU-end "哈哈(haha)" to manage failure or misconduct, and stand-alone "哈哈(haha)" to display minimal engagement.

### TCU-initial "哈哈(haha)" for mitigating disalignment

TCU-initial "哈哈(haha)" is the laughter token "哈哈(haha)" placed at the beginning of a TCU. The first extract is a casual conversation between Xu and Lila about arranging a time to chat. Xu and Lila are good friends.

*Extract 1: Chat*

[4/1/2024 23:16] Xu:
      01      找地方聊天
            Let's find a place to chat.
[4/1/2024 23:18] Lila:
      02      我这两天都行，你晚上不忙就知我一声
            I'm free these two days. Just let me know if you're not busy in the evening

[4/2/2024 07:54] Xu:
→       03      哈哈 超级忙

          Haha, super busy.

[4/2/2024 07:55] Xu:
      04      但是可以聊聊的

          But I'm available to chat

In line 01, Xu initiates the interaction with a suggestion to find a place to chat. This serves as the first pair-part in an adjacency pair (proposal-acceptance). Lila responds cooperatively two minutes later, indicating her availability and leaving the final decision to Xu in line 02 "我这两天都行，你晚上不忙就知我一声 (I'm free these two days. Just let me know if you're not busy in the evening)". Xu's response "哈哈 超级忙(haha, super busy)" is dispreferred as it does not lead to the closing of the sequence (Schegloff, 2007, p. 117), with the subsequent "但是可以聊聊的 (But I'm available to chat")" claiming general availability without proposing any specific time (line 04). What would have closed the sequence in this case would be letting Lila know Xu's availability as directed. Xu's response is also produced with the dispreferred format of a 9-hour delay as well as the account (super busy). Within this sequential context then, Xu's "哈哈(Haha)" is hearable as a mitigating device to downgrade the disalignment conveyed by the dispreferred response, which also fits in the broader patterns in conversation where laughter is often used to ease social tension in delivering dispreferred responses (Hanks & Egbert, 2022).

The following extract depicts another situation in which "哈哈(Haha)" is used at the beginning of a TCU to mitigate a disaligning action of a correction. This extract is a conversation between Gao and Soong regarding a work schedule for construction tasks. A minor miscommunication about dates arises.

*Extract 2: Thursday*

[7/5/2023 08:43] Gao:
      01      工人师傅后天周四进场

          The workers will move in the day after tomorrow, which is Thursday

[7/5/2023 08:45] Soong:
→       02      哈哈 周四是明天

          Haha Thursday is tomorrow

[7/5/2023 08:45] Soong:
      03      后天是周五

          The day after tomorrow is Friday

[7/5/2023 08:45] Soong:
      04      周四还是周五 高辉

          Is it Thursday or Friday, Gao Hui?

[7/5/2023 08:48] Gao:
      05      宋老师，周四上料周五开始铺贴！

          Mr. Soong, materials will be delivered on Thursday, and tiling will begin on Friday!

In line 01, Gao announces a scheduled event, specifying that the workers will enter the site on Thursday. However, Gao is mistaken about the day of the week, thinking that "the day after tomorrow" is Thursday. Soong produces an other-initiated other-repair, correcting the mistake by pointing out that "Thursday is tomorrow" and "后天是周五(The day after tomorrow is Friday)" (lines 02-03). This exposed correction (Jefferson, 1987) temporarily disrupts the progression of the interaction to overtly address a trouble-source, which is "后天周四(the day after tomorrow, which is Thursday)" in line 01. The use of the TCU-initial "哈哈(haha)" in line 02 is hearable as softening the correction. By framing the correction with "哈哈(haha)", Soong ensures that the interaction remains friendly and cooperative.

## TCU-end "哈哈(haha)" for managing "failure" or "misconduct"

TCU-end "哈哈(haha)" is mainly used to manage one's own failure or misconduct by acknowledging it and at the same time rendering it light-hearted. The following extract is a conversation between Sara and Yaru, who are colleagues and talking about the rating task that they are required to do. The TCU-end "哈哈(haha)" in this extract is used by Yaru to manage her own failure.

*Extract 3: Rating*

[4/2/2022 17:01] Sara:
     01      雅儒  你在家里打分了没
            Yaru, have you done the rating at home yet
[4/2/2022 17:01] Yaru:
     02      没看到表啊
            I didn't see the form
[4/2/2022 17:01] Sara:
     03      你没在那个群里啊
            Aren't you in the group chat
[4/2/2022 17:02] Yaru:
     04      没
            No
[4/2/2022 17:02] Sara:
     05      我发给你一下
            Let me send it to you.
[4/2/2022 17:03] Yaru:
     06      现在还要打吗  我有点忘记了
            Do I still need to do it now? I kind of forgot.
[4/2/2022 17:04] Sara:
     07      需要我把 ppt 发给你看看不
            Do you need me to send you the PPT to take a look?
[4/2/2022 17:07] Yaru:
→    08      好吧  哈哈

Alright haha.

[4/13/2022 17:07] Sara:

09  这个膏 好好吃呀 谢谢

   This paste is so delicious. Thank you.

In line 01, Sara asks Yaru if she has completed the rating using a yes/no question. Instead of directly answering the question, Yaru responds with a dispreferred, nonconforming response (Raymond, 2003), providing an account "没看到表啊(I didn't see the form)". This response signals a problem in task completion, as it highlights her lack of access to the necessary materials. In line 03, Sara follows up with "你没在那个群里啊(Aren't you in the group chat)", implying that Yaru should have had access to the resources required for the task. This question subtly places Yaru in a position to account for her lack of preparedness. Yaru's response in line 04, a type-conforming "没(No)" confirms her exclusion from the group chat, reinforcing her inaccessibility to the materials. Sara then takes the initiative to resolve the issue by offering to send the form in line 05. However, Yaru later produces a yes/no question "现在还要打吗 我有点忘记了 (Do I still need to do it now? I kind of forgot.)" in line 06, which could be seen as a subtle way of gauging whether the task might be excused or no longer required. This might reflect an inclination to avoid unnecessary effort if the task has lost relevance. Interestingly, the yes/no question from Yaru in line 06 also gets a dispreferred, nonconforming response from Sara, who offers to send Yaru her PPT (line 07).

In line 08, Yaru accepts the offer with a type-conforming "好吧" with the added final particle *ba* conveying downgraded commitment or reluctant compliance (Yang, 2024). Within this sequential context, the ensuing TCU-end "哈哈(haha)" appears to be used by Yaru to manage her "failure" of trying to avoid the rating task in this context. More specifically, Yaru treats her acceptance of help as laughable. After all, she is accepting help she shouldn't have needed in the first place. "哈哈(haha)" indicates Yaru's understanding that accepting Sara's offer is somewhat embarrassing. Without "哈哈(haha)", her response would sound like straightforward reluctant acceptance rather than a light-hearted gesture that displays Yaru's acknowledgement of her "failure".

A different type of failure is featured in the next extract taken from a conversation between two good friends Sophia and Xu. Sophia initiates the conversation to check if Xu is in Shenzhen.

*Extract 4: Shenzhen*

[2/17/2024 19:57] Sophia:

01  dear~~

   dear~~

[2/17/2024 19:58] Sophia:

02  你在深圳吗

   Are you in Shenzhen

[2/18/2024 12:13] Xu:

03  今天晚上回深圳

   I'm returning to Shenzhen tonight

[2/18/2024 12:13] Xu:
       04     现在在上海！
             I'm in Shanghai now!
[2/18/2024 12:57] Sophia:
→       05     好吧哈哈等你回来约！
             Alright haha let's plan to meet when you're back!
[2/18/2024 15:31] Xu:
       06     好呢
             Sure

In this extract, Sophia produces a greeting "dear~~" in line 01 to start the conversation and then asks Xu the yes/no question "你在深圳吗 (Are you in Shenzhen)" in line 02 in a format that prefers confirmation. However, Xu's response to Sophia the next day in lines 03 and 04 is not produced in a type-conforming format (Raymond, 2003) and does not offer confirmation. Instead, Xu clarifies that she is currently in Shanghai but will return to Shenzhen that evening. Therefore, Sophia's earlier assumption built into her yes/no question about Xu's location is proven incorrect. In other words, she has failed to correctly locate Xu's whereabouts. She then accepts the situation in line 05, first with "好吧(Alright)". The ensuing TCU-end "哈哈(haha)" signals that Sophia recognizes her error in locating Xu and at the same time reframes the "failure" as a laughable. Without "哈哈(haha)", the two TCUs "好吧等你回来约! (Alright, let's plan to meet when you're back!)" could sound like a serious sequence closing without any lighthearted treatment of one's own "failure".

      TCU-end "哈哈(haha)" may also be used to manage one's misconduct. In the next extract, Yuan and Wen are teachers and colleagues in a school that conducts a teaching quality inspection, requiring the submission of graded student homework, ideally along with teachers' lesson preparation books and class observation notes.

*Extract 5: Submission*

[7/12/2022 21:17] Yuan:
       01     你的备课本啊听课本那些打算交吗
             Are you planning to submit your lesson preparation book and class
               observation notes?
[7/12/2022 21:19] Wen:
       02     不打算交
             Not planning to submit them
[7/12/2022 21:19] Wen:
→       03     哈哈
             Haha
[7/12/2022 21:55] Yuan:
       04     嘻嘻嘻
             Hehehe
[7/12/2022 21:55] Yuan:
       05     那我也不交

Then I won' t submit them either

In line 01, Yuan asks if Wen plans to submit her lesson preparation book and class observation notes according to the school's policy. Wen's response, "不打算交 (Not planning to submit them)", indicates a refusal to comply with this institutional requirement—a misconduct of some sort. The TCU-end "哈哈(haha)" is then used to signal her awareness of the school's policy and her deviation from it. While not submitting the notes deviates from the expected behavior, Wen's laughter acknowledges this deviation in a self-aware and humorous way. As such, "哈哈(haha)" reframes her noncompliance as a lighthearted and playful choice, positioning it as a shared moment of levity rather than an act of defiance. Without "哈哈(haha)", Wen's response might be perceived as blunt or even dismissive. Later in line 04, Yuan responds with "嘻嘻嘻(Hehehe)", mirroring Wen's use of laughter to maintain the playful tone and signal mutual understanding.

Similarly, the following extract shows how TCU-end "哈哈(haha)" is used to manage misconduct in a conversation between Yuan and Xu negotiating about their lunch meeting.

*Extract 6: Lunch*

[9/2/2024 09:45 AM] Yuan:
      01        这周吃午饭不!
                Are we having lunch this week？

[9/2/2024 10:38 AM] Xu:
      02        走起！！
                Let's go!

[9/2/2024 10:38 AM] Xu:
      03        周三？
                Wednesday?

[9/2/2024 10:38 AM] Xu:
→   04        老板们都不在哈哈可以旧点
                Bosses aren't here haha we can stay longer

[9/2/2024 10:39 AM] Yuan:
      05        哈哈我老板明天回来，周四周五嘞？
             Haha my boss will be back tomorrow. How about Thursday or Friday?

[9/2/2024 10:39 AM] Xu:
      06        好啊
                Sounds good

Yuan's invitation in line 01 "这周吃午饭不！(Are we having lunch this week!)" is accepted by Xu with a preferred response "走起！！(Let's go!!)" in line 02. Xu proceeds in line 03 to suggest Wednesday as a possible day for the lunch, moving the conversation into the phase of negotiating the details of the plan. Xu also provides a justification for choosing Wednesday in line 04, which contains two TCUs: The first "老板们都不在 (Bosses aren't here)" and the second "可以旧点 (We can stay longer)". There is a typo (旧点) in the second TCU, which

should be "久点" in Chinese, but this error doesn't invite any repair from the speaker herself or the interlocutor. The two TCUs are logically related: the absence of the bosses is the reason why Xu feels they can relax and stay longer. The "哈哈(haha)" at the end of the first TCU"老板们都不在(Bosses aren't here)" is hearable as Xu managing and making light of her own minor misconduct of taking advantage of the absence of the bosses to extend her lunch break. The "哈哈(haha)" mitigates the seriousness of Xu's remark about staying longer during the bosses' absence and softens the implication of misconduct. By adding humor, it reframes the remark as a playful joke rather than any serious disregard for workplace expectations. Without "哈哈(haha)", the TCU might appear more defiant or rebellious.

## Standalone "哈哈(haha)" for displaying minimal engagement

Standalone "哈哈(haha)" is a TCU that consists only of "哈哈(haha)" without any accompanying words or phrases. It is typically used as a minimal response, displaying minimal engagement rather than contributing substantial content to the conversation. The following extract depicts how standalone "哈哈(haha)" is used to display minimal engagement in a conversation between Amanda and Nuo regarding Nuo's flight.

*Extract 7: Plane*

[11/18/2024 16:32] Amanda:
     01     在飞机上了？
              Are you on the plane
[11/18/2024 16:33] Nuo:
     02     飞新加坡
              Flying to Singapore
[11/18/2024 16:33] Nuo:
     03     我从上海飞过来的
              I flew from Shanghai
[11/18/2024 16:36] Amanda:
     04     飞机上还能上网
              You can access internet on the plane
[11/18/2024 16:36] Amanda:
     05     新加坡航空公司还是比较先进一点
              Singapore Airlines is indeed more advanced
[11/18/2024 16:42] Nuo:
     06     表崇洋媚外，我坐滴东航
              Don't be too into foreign things. I'm on China Eastern
              Airlines
[11/18/2024 16:43] Nuo:
     07     而且这业务 2015 年就有了，那时第一次弄，把不少人吓到了
              And this internet service has been around since 2015. When I first used
              it, I scared quiet a few people
[11/18/2024 16:43] Nuo:

08      我起飞前发的圈，然后挨个回复

I posted on Moments before takeoff and then replied to people one by one

[11/18/2024 16:46] Amanda:

→      09      哈哈

Haha

[11/18/2024 16:48] Nuo:

10      最近咋样

How have you been recently

[11/18/2024 16:49] Amanda:

11      还是那样

Same as always

In line 01, Amanda asks if Nuo is on the plane flight, and Nuo responds in line 02 and line 03 with both the destination and the origin of his flight. In lines 04 and 05, Amanda expresses surprise about in-flight internet and positively assesses what she assumes to be the Singapore Airlines. Nuo rejects Amanda's assumption in line 06 with "表崇洋媚外，我坐滴东航 (Don't be too into foreign things. I'm on China Eastern Airlines )". He then continues elaborating on the history of the in-flight internet service and his social media story of posting on Moments before taking off and then responding to messages during the flight in 2015. This somewhat extended telling is received by Amanda in line 09 with the standalone laughter "哈哈(haha)". Given that Nuo's previous turns introduce substantial new information, a fully engaged response would typically involve agreement, disagreement, or further elaboration. By contrast, "哈哈(haha)" here neither explicitly rejects the topic nor encourages further elaboration. This minimal uptake appears to effectively close topic by displaying minimal engagement. The ensuing 2-minute lapse may be a space for Amanda's further contribution. When that opportunity is not taken up, as can be seen, Nuo likely interprets Amanda's "哈哈(haha)" as topic termination, prompting him to shift topic entirely to Amanda's well-being with "最近咋样(How have you been recently)" in line 10.

Compared to the previous extract, where the standalone "哈哈(haha)" responds to something potentially laughable, the following extract presents a trouble-telling scenario in which "哈哈(haha)" appears, despite the absence of anything humorous, to display minimal engagement. This extract is a conversation between Yaru and Byron talking about business and investment.

*Extract 8: Yuan*

[2/7/2023 15:51] Yaru:

01      亏了上千万听起来还蛮痛的

Losing over ten million sounds quite painful

[2/7/2023 15:52] Byron:

02      之前人民大学的办公室 600 多平　一年 120 万租金　租了 5 年

Previously, we had an office at Renmin University, over 600 square meters, with an annual rent of 1.2 million yuan. We rented it for five years.

[2/7/2023 15:52] Byron:

03        只有 6 个人办公

Only six people were working there.

[2/7/2023 15:52] Byron:

04        现在到总部国际了  200 平  一年 40 万租金

Now we've moved to Headquarters International, 200 square meters, with an annual rent of 400,000 yuan

[2/7/2023 15:52] Byron:

05        目前只有个独苗在这里

At the moment, there's just one person working here.

[2/7/2023 15:53] Byron:

06        之前招了 10 几个销售和技术人员估计就接了 200 多万的活吧

Previously, we hired over ten sales and technical staff, but they probably only handled projects worth about 2 million yuan.

[2/7/2023 15:53] Yaru:

→       07    哈哈

Haha

[2/7/2023 15:57] Byron:

08        [a picture about the office mentioned below]

[2/7/2023 15:57] Byron:

09        [a picture about the office mentioned below]

[2/7/2023 15:57] Byron:

10        我去昆明搞个分公司  还没挂牌就接了 300 多万的活

I went to Kunming city to set up a branch office. Before we even got the signboard up, we secured projects worth over 3 million yuan.

[2/7/2023 15:58] Yaru:

11        云南那边是不是很多光伏项目

Are there a lot of photovoltaic projects in Yunnan province?

[2/7/2023 16:02] Byron:

12        有不少  但是很多项目也还没做起来

There are quite a few, but many projects haven't really gotten started yet.

In line 01, Yaru expresses sympathy for the pain of financial loss. This is followed by Byron's detailing of the loss with regard to office sizes, rental costs, staffing, and unsuccessful expansion. In line 07, Yaru does not respond to any specific details from Byron's extended narrative. Instead, she produces a stand-alone laughter "哈哈(haha)", despite the absence of any laughables, conveying a lack of investment in continuing the discussion. A more engaged response would include follow-up questions or sympathetic comments on Byron's failed expansion, but her brief laughter avoids elaboration, subtly disengaging while maintaining politeness.

After Yaru's minimal "哈哈(haha)" response, there is a notable silence (4 minutes) before Byron unilaterally shifts the topic by sending two office pictures about his branch company in Kunming (line 08-09). This lapse indicates a break in conversational momentum,

likely due to Yaru's lack of engagement. The fact that Byron introduces a new positive topic about setting up a branch office in Kunming city and securing a big project very soon in line 10 signals his understanding that Yaru's "哈哈(haha)" serves as topic termination. In line 11, Yaru actively contributes to the new topic by asking about photovoltaic projects in Yunnan province, where Kunming city lies, further demonstrating that her "哈哈(haha)" was used to move away from the financial loss discussion. The conversation never returns to Byron's prior narrative.

The person who produces the standalone "哈哈(haha)" can also proceed to shift the topic themselves. This extract captures a conversation between Three and Amanda, initially centered on Three trying to rent a place in Dongguan (line 01), which Amanda questions given that Three is a native of Shenzhen, not Dongguan (line 02).

*Extract 9: Rent*

[1/29/2024 13:28] Three:
        01     我打算在东莞租个房子住
             I'm planning to rent a place to live in Dongguan.
[1/29/2024 13:28] Amanda:
        02     你不是深圳人吗
             Aren't you from Shenzhen
[1/29/2024 13:29] Three:
        03     我在找性价比高的地方
             I'm looking for a place with good value for money.
[1/29/2024 13:29] Amanda:
        04     一线城市的郊区
             Maybe a suburban area of a first-tier city
[1/29/2024 13:29] Three:
→        05     哈哈
             Haha
[1/29/2024 13:29] Amanda:
        06     深圳的盐田或者是宝安也不错呀
             Shenzhen's Yantian or Bao'an districts are good options, too.
[1/29/2024 13:29] Three:
        07     所以一般你回广州怎么走哇
             So, how do you usually get back to Guangzhou city?
[1/29/2024 13:30] Amanda:
        08     高铁或者是动车
             By high-speed rail or regular train.

In line 03, Three responds with an account that he is "looking for a place with good value for money." Amanda then suggests what is presumably such a place (line 04). Instead of accepting Amanda's suggestion or dismissing it outright, Three produces a stand-alone "哈哈(haha)", which appears to subtly disengage from the topic. As shown, despite Amanda's continuing suggestion (lines 06), Three launches a topic shift in line 07, explicitly steering the

conversation away from the housing discussion by asking "所以一般你回广州怎么走哇(So, how do you usually get back to Guangzhou city?)". The "所以(So)" preface, which is commonly used to preface new action trajectories (Bolden, 2006), makes the topic shift more noticeable. The abruptness of this shift also offers further evidence for the "哈哈(haha)" to display minimal engagement.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have shown that the sequential environments of the laughter "哈哈(haha)" in WeChat Chinese conversations can be classified into three types: TCU-initial "哈哈(haha)", TCU-end "哈哈(haha)" and stand-alone "哈哈(haha)". These three types of "哈哈(haha)" perform the actions of mitigating disalignment, managing failure or misconduct, and displaying minimal engagement, respectively.

Theoretically, the findings of this study expand the current conversation analysis literature on laughter by describing the use of written laughter in a previously unexamined context. My findings show that even in written communication, laughter serves interactional functions beyond reacting to something funny (Jefferson, 1984; Haakana, 2001; Glenn, 2003, 2013; Holt, 2012). In this study, the use of TCU-initial "哈哈(haha)" strategically placed before the TCU to preemptively mitigate the upcoming disalignment aligns with broader conversational patterns where laughter is frequently used to ease social tension when delivering dispreferred responses (Hanks & Egbert, 2022). The TCU-end "哈哈(haha)" used to manage own failure or misconduct extends prior conversation analytic work on the role of laughter in talk about trouble (Jefferson, 1984) into the digital space. While Petitjean and Morel (2017) found in digital interactions that standalone laughter (a message composed only of laugh particles) followed by an assessment (another message) marks topic termination, my study shows that "哈哈(haha)" alone—when produced as a full turn—can independently function to display minimal engagement and terminate a topic. This suggests that written laughter does not need to be paired with an assessment to play a role in topic management. These findings all shed new light on the interactional potentials of written laughter in the digital context.

Pedagogically, this research opens up possibilities for incorporating culturally specific conversational markers or laughters like "哈哈(haha)" into language teaching. Understanding the use of "哈哈(haha)" can help both native and non-native speakers better navigate informal Chinese digital communication and avoid misunderstandings. With text-based communication deeply integrated into daily life, the "laughing methods" participants employ in WeChat conversations in this study are essential tools for "doing being" an expert in navigating new communication technologies and reinforcing one's identity as a competent texter.

Given the small sample size of the current study, future research can examine a larger dataset and explore additional actions that the Chinese laughter token "哈哈(haha)" achieve in WeChat conversations or other contexts. It can also investigate the uses of other written laughter tokens, including variations of "哈哈(haha)" with different numbers of "哈(ha)" in Chinese, as well as laughter tokens in other languages.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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