The Use of iMessage Tapbacks as Sequence-Closing Seconds

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates iMessage Tapbacks (e.g., ❤️, 👍, ‼️) as *sequence-closing seconds*, or minimal responses that fulfill conversational obligations in text-based group chats. Through conversation analysis of three group conversations, the analysis demonstrates how Tapbacks operate as efficient second pair-parts (2pps) in adjacency pairs: (1) likes (👍) acknowledge directives (e.g., agreeing to plans), (2) loves (❤️) signal appreciation for commissives (e.g., offers), and (3) emphasize (‼️) affiliates with tellings (e.g., complaints). Findings indicate that Tapbacks address interactional challenges by enabling acknowledgment without prolonging discussion, particularly in asynchronous, multi-topic chats. The study contributes to digital communication research by distinguishing Tapbacks from emojis and theorizing their role in replicating nonverbal cues (e.g., nods) while streamlining interaction. Limitations include a small, homogenous dataset; future research should examine demographic variation and contextual ambiguity in Tapback usage.

Keywords: conversation analysis, digital communication, sequence organization, tapbacks, text messaging

INTRODUCTION

In the fast-paced world of digital conversation, small features can have a big impact. In 2016, Apple introduced “Tapback” into iMessage communication, which has emerged as a surprisingly influential feature that greatly transformed how users respond to text messages (*About iOS 10 Updates*, n.d.). Tapbacks allow iPhone users to quickly react to a message by pressing and holding a text message and selecting from a list of symbols such as the heart (❤️), exclamation point (‼️), or thumbs up (👍) (*React with Tapbacks in Messages on iPhone*, n.d.). Launched in iOS 10, this feature has since been enhanced further in iOS 18 (2024) with the ability to react

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with any desired emoji, expanding their potential for nuanced expressions (*iOS 18*, n.d.). Among frequent texters, tapbacks have since evolved into a shorthand for emotion, emphasis, agreement, and more, subtly shaping the flow of text-based conversation.

Despite the major role that tapbacks play in modern text conversations and the subsequent addition of similar features into messaging apps such as Whatsapp and social media platforms with direct-messaging such as Instagram, tapbacks remain underexplored in academic research. Prior studies have touched on tapbacks only tangentially, often placing them under broader examinations of emojis (MacDougald, 2024; Halverson et al., 2023). While popular media and opinion pieces have debated the social implications of tapbacks and their interpretative challenges, most discussion involves their role in managing tone and the potential for misinterpretation inherent in reaction images (Levin, 2021; Bryan, 2019). Research has yet to study tapbacks as a distinct category (Gibson et al., 2018; Holtgraves & Robinson, 2020). At the same time, conversation analytic studies in the digital space (e.g., Meredith et al., 2021) have yet to address the specific use of tapbacks. The current study seeks to fill this gap.

DATA AND METHOD

The data used in this study was collected from nine different iMessage text conversations involving friends and family. All conversations took place between September 14th, 2024, and November 9th, 2024, all drawn from regularly active group chats that involve 3 or more people. Texts were transcribed directly from each chat conversation, preserving all original features such as typos and instances of translanguaging. Messaging-specific actions, including tapbacks, the use of the reply function, or image sharing, were denoted using asterisks (*). The six different tapbacks recorded in these transcripts were: loved (“❤️”), liked (“👍”), disliked (“👎”), laughed (“*HAHA*”), emphasized (“!!”) and questioned (“❓”). As overlap and time taken between text responses cannot be recorded as in CA conventions, all time stamps indicated on iMessages were also transcribed to best capture any notable gaps or rapid back-to-back texts that may have occurred.

With the data collected, I first looked broadly at interesting features of text conversation that are absent in verbal communication, and how they may add additional dimensions to the conversation. Then, I conducted a line-by-line analysis examining the composition and position of each text before narrowing down my topic of interest to tapbacks and making a collection of tapbacks. Each case was examined more closely, guided by curiosities involving what role tapbacks played in the overall sequence of the conversation and why tapbacks may be used in lieu of typed responses. Ultimately, the collection was narrowed down to loved (“❤️”), liked (“👍”), and emphasized (“!!”) reactions due to the rarity of disliked (“👎”) and questioned (“❓”) reactions and the self-explanatory nature of the laughed (“HAHA”) reaction.

ANALYSIS

This analysis explores how iMessage tapbacks work within conversational structures, focusing on three specific reactions: liking (“👍”), loving (“❤️”), and emphasizing (“!!”). The first section investigates the like reaction (“👍”) in response to directives, such as suggestions. The second section examines the love reaction (“❤️”) in response to commissives, where

speakers commit to future actions, illustrating this tapback as a signal of appreciation and acknowledgement. Finally, the third section analyzes the emphasize reaction ("‼") in response to tellings, such as complaints or storytelling, as a sign of emotional alignment. As will be shown, together, these illustrate how tapbacks function as *sequence-closing seconds*: concise, efficient second pair-parts (2pps) that fulfill conversational obligations.

👍 in Response to Directives

The first extract comes from a group chat involving L, SG, and AH, who were previously roommates but have since moved apart. It demonstrates the use of the like ("👍") tapback as a response to orders or suggestions, categorized as directives (Searle, 1976). They attempted to stay in touch through regular video calls to discuss major life updates, with varying success due to busy schedules. In this extract, SG initiates a plan for another group call to update L and AH about her recent breakup with her boyfriend.

Extract 1: Group Call

07	5:53 pm		SG	we have to call again soon! I have another
08				major life update, not a happy one but still
09				a reason to speak with my pals :)
10	6:56 pm		AH	ok! I'm free every week at the same time we
11				did the last call, just lemme know when yall
12				r free and we can set up a day 🥹
	(2 wks later)			
13	10:38 pm		L	omg i'm so sorry for leaving this hanging
14				for so long i totally did not notice!!
15	10:39 pm		L	but yes i would love a life update
16				sometime!! I can probably do any tuesday
17				night!

(Omitted lines 18-24, where L discusses availability other than Tuesday nights)

25			AH	all good! i can do tuesday nights if that's
26				easier for everyone
	(1 day later)			
27	8:52 am		SG	hiii! I'm def the one who left this hanging
28				lol but tuesday also works for me!
29			SG	shall we say this tuesday at 9?
30	9:00 am	→	AH	*reacts with 👍 to line 29*
	(2 days later)			
31	10:55 am		L	yes yes! sorry for the delay in reply but
32				tonight should work for me
33	1:16 pm		SG	hi, sorry to reschedule but i forgot i have
34				an event with my office, but would this
35				thursday work for you guys? same time?

36	3:01 pm		AH	thursday i'm picking up BF from the airport 😢
37	3:04 pm		SG	i love that he's visiting you 🥹💔
38			AH	yes hehehehe
39			AH	very exciting
40			L	BF!!
41			SG	uhhh i cry 🥹🥹so cute!
42			L	tell BF i said hiii
43		→	AH	*reacts with 👍 to line 42*
44			AH	ok hehee
45	3:06 pm		SG	i could also do tmrw night but ik that might
46				be kinda tough for L ;-; i can also do
47				sunday, monday,or next tuesday !!
48	3:07 pm		L	next monday or tuesday should work with my schedule!

SG initiates the conversation in lines 07-08 by proposing a call to share life updates. This invitation constitutes the first pair-part (1pp) of the Adjacency Pair (AP), making conditionally relevant a response regarding availability. AH and L both respond with second pair-parts (2pps) stating their own availability and flexibility (lines 10-12 and lines 13-17). Finally, SG suggests a specific date and time (lines 27-29), a directive as SG is attempting to get her interlocutors to carry out a specific action.

AH's tapback reaction in line 30 ("👍" to lines 27-29) seems to demonstrate compliance with SG's directive, evidenced by SG's lack of follow-up regarding AH's availability and L's agreement to AH's reaction (*"yes yes!"* in line 31). The "like" here closes the AP by providing the confirmation the 1pp calls for but does not make conditionally relevant any further response from SG. Line 30 is thus analyzable as a "sequence-closing second." Rather than reopening the conversation with an explicit textual response, the tapback serves as concise acknowledgement that fulfills the response obligation of the directive. Unlike textual responses that may provide further elaboration, the tapback ensures that no additional clarification or scheduling discussion is necessary, allowing the conversation to progress.

Despite its use as a sequence-closing second, however, tapbacks can on occasion be followed by additional textual responses. In line 43, for example, L directs AH to relay a message to her boyfriend: "*tell BF I said hiii*" (line 42). AH's "👍" tapback in line 43 is followed by Ah's textual response "*ok hehee*" (line 44). While the "👍" tapback alone would have sufficed to confirm the directive, AH's additional text treats the minimal closing conveyed by the tapback as insufficient for acknowledging the playful tone of L's request (line 42). In other words, this "deviant case" (Schegloff, 1968) provides further evidence that the tapback is indeed produced to close the sequence, albeit perhaps prematurely at times.

❤️ in Response to Commissives

The second extract involves a conversation between individuals L, M, and S and demonstrates the use of the heart ("❤️") tapback reaction as a response to actions that benefit the recipient, i.e., commissives, wherein speakers may bind themselves to carry out an action such as an offer or a promise (Searle, 1976). Prior to this extract, the three individuals made plans to stay over at a mutual friend's apartment for a fall-themed celebration involving baking.

M previously offered to bake cookies for L and S, mentioning bringing cookie dough to the apartment and baking them there, which L and S accepted. As L heads to the apartment where S already is, L offers to pick up food and boba on the way to the apartment. Meanwhile, M prepares to leave her own apartment and discusses final preparations involving the cookie dough M offered to bring.

Extract 2: Donuts & Boba

01	5:00 pm		M	should i make dough for 12 or 24 cookies
02	5:03 pm		M	i'm also gonna pick up donuts
03			M	maybe
04	5:06 pm		M	imma do 12
05	5:36 pm	→	L	*reacts with ❤️ to line 04*
06		→	L	*reacts with ❤️ to line 01*
07			L	yaaaay donuts and cookies
08	5:37 pm		L	anyone want boba i'm omw up to ktown now
09				so can stop by alongside food
10			M	i'm okk
11			M	i went to heytea today
12			S	*replying to 09-10* [ooh yes please]

M initiates the interaction by asking about cookie dough quantities (line 01), constructing the 1pp of the AP. Although the offer was made previously, line 01 plays the role of expanding upon the initial offer, thereby committing to something in the future. M adds in lines 02-03 the possibility of purchasing donuts as well. By line 04, M answers her own question, stating "imma do 12." This is also commissive as M binds herself to bringing 12 portions of cookie dough to the apartment.

L's tapback reactions in line 05 and line 06 ("❤️" to line 01 and line 04) appear to display gratitude for M's offer to make 12 cookies, as in part evidenced in the celebratory "*yaaaay donuts and cookies,*" seen in line 07. The heart reactions here work to close the AP by producing the interactional work typically required of a 2pp, and in this case, gratitude for an offer, where simple "liking" (as those produced in response to directives) would have been insufficient. This is evidenced in the added weight of thankfulness expressed by L. At the same time, the tapback does not make conditionally relevant any further responses from M, and as such, are also analyzable as "sequence-closing seconds." L's celebration of M's plans ("yaaaay donuts and cookies" in line 07) performs the same action of acknowledging and appreciating M's contribution without requiring a response, allowing participants to move onto the next topic. Indeed, M does not respond to the tapbacks or line 07 and does not produce her next turn until line 10 in response to L's new offer about picking up boba.

!! in Response to Tellings

The final extract involves L, M, and S within the same group chat but at a different time and demonstrates how the emphasis ("‼") tapback serves as a conversational tool for responding to tellings, such as opinions, complaints, or elements of storytelling. This conversation revolves around weekend plans to put together a picnic in Central Park, plans which L, M, and S

previously discussed but never came to fruition. S reaches out to L and M to solidify plans and confirm the attendance of L and M.

Extract 3: Picnicking and Coffee Chats

01	7:32 pm		S	are we picnicking this weekend
02	8:29 pm		M	i'm busy sat and it looks like it's
03				gonna rain sunday ☹️☹️☹️
04	8:32 pm		M	yesterday today was like peak
05				picnicking weather i hate having a job
06	11:00 pm		M	i'm also having my first coffee chat
07				tomorrow guys
08			M	i'm so grown
09	11:08 pm		S	OMG!
10			S	with who???
11	11:10 pm		M	this girl who's applying for an
12				internship at our company
13			M	she went to barnard LOL
14	11:13 pm		M	she interned at like louboutin and
15				the met so i'm like 😳😳
16	11:21 pm		S	OMGGGGG
17			S	*replying to line 14-15* oh
18			S	*replying to line 14-15* hello
19			S	help lmao
	(1 day later)			
20	12:41 pm		S	the K-ification of A's stories is
21				getting a little concerning
22	1:15 pm		M	no literally that's what i think of
23				every time I see it
24	2:37 pm	→	L	*Reacts with !! to lines 04-05*
25		→	L	*Reacts with !! to lines 06-07*
26		→	L	*Reacts with !! to line 13*
27		→	L	*Reacts with !! to lines 20-21*
28	2:38 pm		L	*replying to 01* yeah unfortunately i
29				am busy sunday as well so no gaps </3
30				but mayhaps some other weekend!

S initiates the interaction by asking about picnic plans (line 01), thus producing the 1pp of the base AP. M responds with her unavailability (line 02-03) and introduces a complaint about her lack of availability due to work (line 04-05). She then announces her first coffee chat since beginning her new position (lines 06-08) and remarks on the applicant's background (line 13), relating it to L's own university background. S revisits the conversation a day later in lines 20-21, introducing a complaint regarding their mutual friends K and A, specifically about A's recent Instagram Story posts mirroring K's posts.

L's delayed reactions (lines 24-27) serve as sequence-closing seconds for these tellings, providing a strong emotive response that affiliates with the telling without inviting further discussion. For example, L's "!!" tapback in line 24 in response to M's lament about missing

ideal picnic weather (lines 04-05) aligns with M's emotional stance, acknowledging its significance without necessitating further interaction. Similarly, the "‼" reactions in lines 25-26 to M's coffee chat announcement (lines 06-07) and description of applicant's university (line 13) demonstrate engagement but eliminate the need for third-turn acknowledgement. In line with this analysis, neither M nor S responds to L's tapbacks, as they do not make conditionally relevant any response from either party. In asynchronous group chats, where overlapping topics and delayed participation are common, the tapback effectively allows L to engage with the conversation by providing just enough emotional validation without incurring further interaction.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study provides insight into the use of tapbacks in text-based communication, particularly in group chats: The like ("👍") reaction demonstrates compliance with directives, the love ("❤️") reaction gratitude for commissives, and the emphasis ("‼") reaction emotional alignment in response to tellings. Collectively, these operate as sequence-closing seconds, completing adjacency pairs without reopening further discussion. Tapbacks resolve a very real interaction issue many have, wherein participants may desire to engage, but only to a limited extent. Tapbacks as sequence-closing seconds allow individuals to acknowledge the conversation without continuing the conversation. This is especially helpful when individuals attempt to steer the conversation in their desired direction or end a conversation entirely. Minimal engagement in these cases may also be rendered possible given someone else's less than minimal engagement within the context of group chats (see Extract 3).

These findings also contribute to understanding the evolving nature of digital communication by demonstrating how minimalistic tools like tapbacks can replicate nonverbal cues such as nods or smiles in face-to-face interactions. Theoretically, this aligns with frameworks emphasizing the role of nonverbal elements in maintaining conversational coherence (e.g., Ruben et al., 2021). In addition, tapbacks offer an efficient way for users to engage with multiple conversational threads, reducing the cognitive load in asynchronous group chats. They also allow participants to "sequence jump" – a term coined by Yajing Yang (this issue) without the time constraints often posed by spoken interaction. These findings may inform the design of messaging platforms in the future. Pedagogically, the study highlights the potential of tapbacks as a teaching tool for developing digital literacy and communicative competence. Language educators could incorporate tapback functions into their lessons to better prepare students for digital conversation.

At the same time, I acknowledge the limited sample size of a small dataset of informal group chat conversations, which may not represent diverse communication contexts. Future studies should explore the full range of tapbacks including "👎" and "❓" in different communicative contexts with a wider range of demographic scopes. Also of interest is the unanswered question regarding when someone may opt for a tapback and when a typed response is deemed more appropriate. The work to investigate tapbacks as versatile tools for bridging the gap between emotional engagement and conversational efficiency in digital communication is just beginning.

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