Quote-and-Reply in WeChat: A Conversation Analytic Study

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ABSTRACT

This study explores uses of the quote-and-reply (Q&R) function in WeChat through conversation analysis. Analyzing 7 naturally occurring chat samples, the research identifies 3 primary interactional practices: sequence-jumping, which enables responses to non-adjacent turns across temporal gaps; response facilitation, where quotes are incorporated in the message to enhance clarity and thematic coherence; and spotlighting prior text, which emphasizes specific messages for alignment or humor. Findings reveal how Q&R transforms digital communication by mitigating challenges of multi-party chats and asynchronous interactions. The study contributes to understanding how platform-specific features reshape conversation structures, offering insights for designing more effective digital communication tools.

Keywords: Quote-and-reply (Q&R), WeChat, conversation analysis, digital communication

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, WeChat has emerged as one of the most widely used communication platforms in China and globally. As a comprehensive social media application, WeChat offers various features that shape how users interact in digital spaces. One significant feature is the "quote-and-reply" (Q&R) function, which enables users to directly reference specific text messages, audio messages, images, links, and even emojis when responding. Prior conversation analytic studies have highlighted the flexibility of the Q&R function in reshaping traditional conversational practices, and in particular, how the quote function is used to reference the repairable in addressing misunderstandings even after significant time gaps in Facebook chats (Meredith & Stokoe, 2014) and to minimize delay-incurred confusions in general (Garcia & Jacobs, 1999). Yet to be explored is the role of Q&R features in shaping interaction patterns on platforms like WeChat. This study aims to address this gap by investigating the use of the Q&R function in WeChat.

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DATA AND METHOD

The data consists of seven WeChat conversation samples selected from the author's chat history using purposive sampling. The samples were chosen based on their inclusion of Q&R usage across different conversational contexts and participant relationships. After obtaining informed consent, all personal identifiers were anonymized to protect participants' privacy.

The analysis was conducted within a conversation analytic framework. Unlike traditional CA transcriptions, text-based chat records lack features such as intonation changes, pitch variations, and overlaps. Thus, the transcription reproduced the original text messages with English translations, along with timestamps preceding each message to show the amount of time passed between turns. While audio messages were present in some conversations, they were transcribed focusing on content rather than prosodic features, which are not the focus of this study. I then analyzed the transcripts line by line to examine the sequence structure, including base adjacency pairs (APs) and their expansions. Through this analysis, I identified different ways participants use the Q&R function.

ANALYSIS

Analysis of the WeChat conversation data reveals three distinct uses of the Q&R function: sequence-jumping, response facilitation, and spotlighting prior text. Sequence-jumping demonstrates how Q&R enables participants to break free from the typical conversation constraint of responding to the immediate prior turn. Response facilitation shows how participants incorporate quotes into their responses to achieve coherence and efficiency. The third use, spotlighting prior text, occurs when participants quote the immediate prior turn not for clarity but to emphasize its importance.

Using Q&R to Manage Sequence-Jumping

The Q&R function allows participants to respond to any prior message rather than being confined to the immediately preceding turn. This sequence-jumping capability fundamentally transforms how participants manage temporal gaps and navigate multi-party interactions in digital spaces. The following two examples illustrate how this use manifests in different conversational contexts.

The birthday conversation (Extract 1) is a group chat among Serry, Clarice and Yaqi. The participants are in different time zones: Serry and Clarice are in the Eastern Time Zone (ET) of the United States, and Yaqi is in China Standard Time (UTC+8). During November when this interaction occurs, there is a 13-hour time difference between these locations. All timestamps in the transcripts are presented in Eastern Time.

Extract 1: Birthday

[12:00 PM] Serry:
01 生日快乐啊宝贝！花会沿途盛开以后的路也是！

Happy birthday, my dear! May the flowers bloom along the journey ahead!
[12:01 PM] Serry:

02 虽然晚了一个小时

  Although it's one hour late
[12:01 PM] Serry:

03 因为我十一点没起来

Because I didn't get up at 11
[12:02 PM] Clarice:

04 哈哈哈哈哈哈哈哈

Hahahahahaha
[12:02 PM] Clarice:

05 我上了一个 10:50 的闹钟

I set an alarm at 10:50
[12:03 PM] Serry:

06 有道理，这冬令时真的是过得太迷糊了

That makes sense. The daylight-saving time switch is really making things so confusing.

… (started to talk about other topics)

[5:44 PM] Yaqi:

→   07 (quoted line 01) 怎么回事！一大早打开手机开始流泪

                  OMG! I started to cry the moment I saw the messages in the early morning
[5:44 PM] Yaqi:

08 爱你宝

  Love you, my dear
[5:45 PM] Yaqi:

→   09 (quoted line 05) 😭😭😭

                  (three crying emojis)
[5:46 PM] Yaqi:

10 爱你们等你们回来

  Love you both. Wait for you to come back
[5:50 PM] Clarice:

11 好！

  Sure!

Serry initiates the sequence with a birthday greeting (line 01) as a first pair-part (1PP), but Yaqi is unable to respond immediately due to the time difference in China. Lines 02-04 form a new AP explaining why Serry doesn't send the message at the beginning of the day, while lines 05-06 constitute another new AP between Clarice and Serry about setting alarms and daylight-saving time. Hours later, Yaqi uses Q&R in line 07 to quote Serry's original greeting (line 01) and responds with emotional intensity, followed by heartfelt gratitude (line 08) -- together serving as the delayed second pair-part (2PP) in response to line 01. She then quotes Clarice's alarm comment in line 09 to acknowledge it with emojis before concluding the entire exchange with an affiliative statement (line 10) that receives agreement from Clarice (line 11).

Through the strategic use of Q&R, Yaqi is able to respond to much earlier messages despite the significant time delay given the different time zones. This temporal gap presents challenges to conversation coherence in several ways. First, the 13-hour time difference means that when one participant is active, others may be sleeping, creating extended periods where real-time interaction is impossible. Second, during these gaps, new conversation topics may emerge (as shown between lines 06 and 07), potentially burying earlier messages that still require responses. Third, the delay in response could make it unclear whether a turn is still relevant or if the moment for response has passed.

The Q&R function helps participants overcome these challenges by explicitly marking which message is being responded to. It eliminates any ambiguity about which prior turn is being addressed, even after hours have passed. In this case, Yaqi's quoting of the birthday message (line 07) and Clarice's alarm comment (line 09) create clear connections across the temporal gap, ensuring that her delayed responses are properly contextualized. In other words, with the Q&R function, she is able to accomplish sequence-jumping by providing a 2PP for an earlier 1PP (the birthday greeting) and engaging with an earlier thread (the alarm setting).

This sequence-jumping capability allows participants to complete adjacency pairs that were left open due to temporal constraints and reestablish the relevance of earlier messages in current interaction. The Q&R function thus transforms what could have been disconnected, time-separated exchanges into a cohesive interaction, enabling participants to maintain conversational coherence even when they cannot respond immediately due to temporal constraints. Such technological affordance alters traditional turn-taking constraints, where responses are typically bound to immediately preceding turns, by giving participants the flexibility to address prior messages while maintaining clear sequential relationships regardless of temporal distance.

While the birthday example demonstrates how Q&R helps bridge temporal gaps between participants in different time zones, the function is also useful in group settings with concurrent threads. Group chat in WeChat enables multiple participants to engage in conversation simultaneously. However, this multi-party interaction can create challenges when several participants send messages at the same time. The Q&R feature offers a solution by helping participants manage turn allocation effectively. The following extract from a large chat group, which includes more than 100 people, displays how Q&R can help solve the problem.

Extract 2: Group Chat

    [7:29 PM] Kimberly:
        01 今晚有人想在楼下打惯蛋嘛 三缺一
        Anyone wants to play Guandan (a card game) downstairs tonight? We need one more player.
    [9:30 PM] Liu:
        02 请问有出加湿器的吗
        Is anyone selling a humidifier?
    [9:35 PM] Lu:
   →   03 (quoted line 01) 还缺人的话我就来了
            If you're still waiting for another player, I'm coming
    [9:36 PM] Kimberly:
        04 来！
        Welcome!

[10:30 PM] Eva:
→   05 (quoted line 02) 我
                  Me
[10:30 PM] Liu:
      06 私
      Let's move to a private chat

The group chat shows two parallel conversation threads: Kimberly's card game invitation (line 01) and Liu's humidifier query (line 02), each serving as the first pair-part of separate adjacent pairs. Through Q&R, Lu jumps back to respond specifically to Kimberly's invitation in line 03, bypassing Liu's intervening message. Similarly, in line 05, Eva uses Q&R to respond to Liu's earlier humidifier query, despite temporal distance and intervening messages. In both cases, participants use quotes to explicitly link their responses to a specific prior message, enabling them to navigate multiple conversation threads without confusion.

      The Q&R function here enables sequence-jumping in a different way from the Excerpt 1 ("Birthday"). Rather than bridging long temporal gaps, the Q&R function in this group chat allows participants to selectively respond to specific messages among multiple concurrent threads. By quoting a particular message, participants can create focused channels of interaction within the larger group conversation, effectively managing turn-taking when multiple topics and speakers are involved. This demonstrates how Q&R helps maintain conversational coherence in complex multi-party interactions by allowing participants to clearly indicate which prior turn they are addressing, regardless of intervening messages.

Using Q&R to Facilitate Response

      The second use, response facilitation, reveals how participants incorporate quotes into their responses to enhance communication effectiveness. In these cases, the quote becomes an integral part of the response itself, serving distinct interactional purposes. Extract 3 below is among Jiali, Qihan, and Yajing, while they are talking about booking hotels for the trip they are going to take together. It illustrates how participants use quotes as explicit reference points in collaborative decision-making.

Extract 3: Hotel

[8:40 PM] Jiali:
      01 (sent link 1)
[8:40 PM] Jiali:
      02 (sent link 2)
[8:40 PM] Jiali:
      03 (sent link 3)
[8:41 PM] Jiali:
      04 目前筛选出来的酒店，大家一起选选
      Here are some suitable hotel options I've shortlisted. Let's pick one
[8:41 PM] Qihan:
      05 稍等下 我看看
      A moment please. Let me check

[8:48 PM] Qihan:
    06 我们租车不
        Shall we rent a car
[8:48 PM] Yajing:
    07 可以
        Sure
[7:59 PM] Qihan:
    →   08 (quoted line 02) 那我觉得这个不错
            Then I think this is good
[8:01 PM] Yajing:
    09 我也觉得不错
        I agree
[8:01 PM] Jiali:
    10 ok 那我们就定这家
        Ok. Let's book this one.

Jiali initiates the sequence by sharing three hotel options (lines 01-03) and inviting group evaluation (line 04), which constitute the first pair-part. Line 05 and 06 together serve as the 1PP of the pre-second insertion expansion as Qihan requests for information, to which Yajing responds (line 07). In line 08, Qihan quotes Jiali's second hotel link in Line 02 and expresses a preference for it. This is the 2PP in response to Jiali's original proposal, with which Yajing agrees (line 09), and the group comes to a decision in line 10.

The Q&R function in this excerpt eliminates potential ambiguity about which option is being evaluated, particularly important when multiple links have been shared in quick succession. It also creates a clear foundation for other participants to build their responses -- as seen in Yajing's immediate agreement in line 09 without having to restate which option is being discussed, thus maintaining efficiency in the decision-making process by allowing participants to directly access the referenced option through the quote rather than scrolling back to locate it. When Jiali confirms the final decision in line 10, all participants can be confident about exactly which hotel has been selected, demonstrating how Q&R facilitates achieving mutual understanding in group decision-making processes.

While the hotel example demonstrates how quotes can function as clear reference points in responses, explicitly marking which specific prior turn the response is addressing, Extract 4 ("Guanyin") shows a more creative application of Q&R in facilitating a response. Instead of using quotes to simply clarify what is being referenced in one's responses, participants can incorporate quoted content to build thematic connections between different parts of the conversation. The example is from a group chat among Clarice, Serry, and Yaqi, while they are talking about Clarice's freshly developed films.

Extract 4: Guanyin

[7:57 PM] Clarice:
    01 (sent a picture)
[7:57 PM] Clarice:
    02 漏光了
        The light leaked

[7:58 PM] Clarice:

03 这个花车巨好看

This parade float was extremely beautiful

[7:58 PM] Clarice:

04 现在这中间就像有个观世音菩萨

Now it feels like there's a Guanyin statue in the middle

[7:59 PM] Serry:

05 真的哈哈哈哈哈哈哈哈哈哈哈

Exactly hahaha

[8:06 PM] Yaqi:

06 哈哈哈哈哈哈哈哈哈哈哈

Hahaha

[8:06 PM] Yaqi:

07 (sent a picture)

[8:07 PM] Yaqi:

08 又是一个大雾天 渡劫一样到单位了

Another foggy day, like going through a tribulation to get to work

[8:08 PM] Serry:

09 (audio message) 你渡劫我也渡劫，你都不知道波士顿有多冷，被风吹得我脸都僵了，说话都张不开嘴

You're going through tribulation, so am I. You have no idea how cold Boston is. The wind freezes my face, I can barely open my mouth to speak.

[8:09 PM] Clarice:

→   10 (quoted line 01) 得 让菩萨渡渡你俩

Alright, let Guanyin bless you two

In this conversation, there are two conversational threads. To initiate the sequence, Clarice sends a picture (Line 01) and provides an announcement (Lines 02-04), commenting on the scene shown in the leaked film. These lines establish the first pair-part, creating a shared reference point (the picture) and inviting contributions from the other participants, to which Serry and Yaqi respond with aligning laughter in lines 05 and 06. Together, these turns complete the second pair-part of this adjacency pair and mark the end of the first thread.

In Line 07, Yaqi shifts the focus by sending a new picture, initiating a second conversational thread. This action prompts a new AP, with Yaqi's description of a foggy day (Line 08) forming the 1PP. Serry's response (Line 09), delivered as an audio message, completes this AP by drawing on their shared struggles. Finally, in Line 10, Clarice's use of the Q&R function brings the two conversational threads together. By quoting her original message in line 01, she reframes it as a blessing for Serry and Yaqi, tying the earlier metaphor of Guanyin to the ongoing troubles-telling narrative.

In this example, Q&R demonstrates a more sophisticated use -- connecting separate conversational threads in response to the immediately prior turns. By quoting the original picture in Line 01, Clarice reintroduced the shared visual context into a new phase of the conversation. The quote enables Clarice to connect the otherwise separate threads into a unified interaction, where the Guanyin in the earlier image offers the much-needed blessing to ease the "tribulation" and the shared struggle described in lines 08-09, creating a cohesive narrative within the group chat. Through this creative integration of past and present conversational elements, Clarice not

only responds to her friends' current situations but also enriches the interaction by building thematic connections that cover the entire conversation. This practice exemplifies how Q&R can be used creatively to weave separate elements into a unified narrative response that enriches the ongoing interaction.

The previous examples have illustrated how Q&R facilitates responses by referencing multimedia content, such as images or links. In these cases, participants effectively incorporated visual elements to enhance clarity and coherence within their responses. However, Q&R can also operate with textual content to achieve similar functions. The following example demonstrates how quoting textual messages can bridge separate threads to facilitate responses. It features a conversation between Flora and Yajing, where two distinct threads emerge: one focusing on Flora's work and exam-related stress, and the other on her eventual success in finding a job. The two threads are separated by a few days.

Extract 5: Finding jobs

[8:40 PM] Flora:
     01 找工作好难 555
     Finding a job is so hard. Crying
[8:40 PM] Yajing:
     02 确实 再加上你时间很紧张 但没关系慢慢来
     Absolutely, plus your schedule is so tight. But don't worry and take it slow
[8:40 PM] Flora:
     03 下周又要考两场试 但还没准备好
     I have two exams next week, but I haven't prepared well yet
[8:40 PM] Yajing:
     04 加油加油 你很棒！永远别怀疑自己！
     Hang in there! You're amazing! Never doubt yourself!

… (three weeks later)

[8:41 PM] Flora:
     05 啊啊啊啊宝我上岸了！！
     Ahhh! I've made it ashore (success)!!
[8:47 PM] Yajing:
     06 太棒了太棒了太棒了！！
     That's incredible! Amazing, amazing!!
[8:48 PM] Flora:
     07 总算有班上了
     I finally got a job.
[8:48 PM] Yajing:
 →   08 (quoted line 04) 我就说!!
                I told you so!!
[8:49 PM] Flora:
     09 谢谢宝
     Thank you, dear.
[8:49 PM] Yajing:

10 那就祝你工作顺利 我们早日见面!

    Then I wish you great success at work. Let's meet up soon!

Similar to Extract 4, the interaction consists of two distinct threads: the first thread revolves around Flora's work and exam-related stress, and the second centers on her celebration of finally securing a job. In thread 1, Flora initiates the first pair-part in Line 01 by expressing her difficulty in finding work. Yajing provides the second pair-part in Line 02, empathizing with Flora. Flora then creates the 1PP of a new AP in Line 03 by mentioning her additional stress related to upcoming exams. Yajing completes the 2PP in Line 04 with further encouragement and a motivational statement, closing the discussion on work and exams. In thread 2, Flora shifts the topic in Line 05. She announces that she has finally found a job, which marks the initiation of a new 1PP. Yajing, in her response in Line 08, quotes her earlier supportive statement from Line 04, bridging the two threads—revisiting her earlier encouragement in celebration of Flora's current success.

    Much like the "Guanyin" excerpt, Yajing uses the Q&R function to link two separate threads, demonstrating that while Q&R often facilitates responses through multimedia, it is equally effective in textual contexts.

Using Q&R to Spotlight Prior Text

    In both the above two categories, the use of Q&R is obligatory in re-activating a remote reference. In the next two instances, the responded-to text is in the immediately prior turn, and there is no practical need for using Q&R to specify what is being responded or referred to. The function is used, instead, to spotlight a prior text. In Extract 6, Iris uses a quote to highlight Yajing's comment as they discuss a new TV drama recommendation.

Extract 6: TV drama

[8:13 AM] Iris:
    01 我最近嗑茯苓和重昭的 CP 白月繁星里的男二女二

    Recently, I've been shipping the couple of Fuling and Chongzhao, the second male and female leads in *White Moon and Stars*

[8:13 AM] Yajing:
    02 是白鹿那个剧吗

    Is it that drama starring Bailu

[8:13 AM] Iris:
    03 对

    Yes

[8:13 AM] Yajing:
    04 我是真看不进去白鹿的剧，脸太出戏了

    I really can't get into Bailu's dramas; her face is too distracting

[8:14 AM] Yajing:
    05 一看她我就想起来她在综艺里呲个大牙乐

    Every time I see her, I just think of her grinning with her big teeth on variety shows

[8:14 AM] Yajing:

06 我看她跟罗云熙的那部剧，两个人都 emmm

I watched that drama of hers with Luo Yunxi, and both of them were…
emmm

[8:14 AM] Iris:

07 确实 他俩的大眼影我都无法食用

True. I couldn't deal with their heavy eyeshadow

[8:14 AM] Iris:

08 还有满头的违章建筑

And all that "illegal construction" (dramatic headpieces) on their heads

[8:14 AM] Yajing:

→   09 (quoted line 08) 哈哈哈哈哈哈哈哈哈

Hahahahahahaha

Iris launches a telling of her recent drama watching experience, to which Yajing responds, after a pre-second insert-expansion (lines 02-03), with a critique of the actress in that drama (lines 04-05). In line 06, Yajing turns her critique to the actress and her co-star in a different drama. Despite Yajing's incomplete turn, Iris claims her agreement and conveys her own disapproval of "their heavy eyeshadows" and dramatic headpieces (lines 07-08).

Yajing's subsequent laughter could be produced without using the quote function to specify what is being treated as the laughable, given that line 08 is the immediate prior turn. By isolating and referencing Iris's comparison of the actors' headpieces as "illegal constructions," however, Yajing effectively spotlights the latter's humor in line 08, signaling that the quoted content is particularly noteworthy or amusing. The Q&R function here transforms a simple reaction into an amplification. In other words, unlike referencing earlier turns to clarify or maintain coherence, quoting a message just delivered suggests emphasis and perhaps special appreciation.

Extract 7 is another example, where Yajing asks Fangrui to help her buy a pair of sunglasses in France.

Extract 7: Sunglasses

[9:40 AM] Fangrui:

01 这款全法只有白色的了

This style is only available in white in France

[9:40 AM] Fangrui:

02 (sent a picture)

[9:40 AM] Fangrui:

03 但我感觉白色戴着不如玳瑁色

But I feel that the white doesn't look as good as the brown tortoise

[9:45 AM] Yajing:

04 555 我也觉得

 Crying. I feel the same way

[9:45 AM] Yajing:

05 白色的塑料感很重

The white one looks so plasticky

[9:45 AM] Fangrui:

   →   06 (quoted line 05) 111
                        Agree

[9:46 AM] Fangrui:
     07 我之后去米兰再给你看看
       I'll check that pair in Milan later for you

[9:46 AM] Yajing:
     08 爱你
       Love you

In lines 01 to 04, Fangrui states and shows that the only available sunglasses in that style are white, which she considers less than ideal, and Yajing agrees. In line 05, Yajing provides an account by claiming that the white one looks "plasticky". Fangrui's subsequent agreement could have been produced without using the Q&R function. By quoting Yajing's prior line, however, Fangrui signals that she not only agrees with but considers Yajing's assessment compelling enough to be spotlighted. Thus, there's no need for her to ask Yajing whether she should buy the white one or not. As shown, Fangrui offers to look for the sunglasses elsewhere for Yajing, showing her appreciation in line 08.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has examined how WeChat's Q&R function shapes conversation organization and user interaction patterns. Through detailed conversation analysis of naturally occurring WeChat interactions, three primary uses of the Q&R function were identified: to manage sequence-jumping, to facilitate response, and to spotlight prior text. The first use, sequence-jumping, demonstrates how Q&R liberates participants from the traditional constraint of responding to the immediately prior turn. This capability proves crucial in managing responses across significant time differences and navigating multiple concurrent threads in group chats. The second use, response facilitation, reveals how participants strategically incorporate quotes into their responses. In some cases, quotes serve as antecedents, creating explicit reference points that clarify exactly which prior turn is being addressed. In other cases, participants use quotes to connect separate conversational threads, weaving earlier content into their responses to create thematic coherence across different parts of the interaction. Finally, the third use, spotlighting prior text, shows how participants quote the immediate prior utterance to express strong agreement or alignment, amplifying the quoted text's importance. Together, these uses demonstrate the Q&R function's versatility in managing interaction in the digital space.

These findings contribute to our understanding of how technological affordances reshape traditional conversation structures, and in particular, both confirm and extend the prior CA literature on the quote function in the digital space. While its utility in locating a distant repairable (Meredith & Stokoe, 2014) fits within the broader practice of sequence jumping, response facilitation and spotlighting prior text appear to be previously undescribed uses of Q&R. These features of Q&R have practical implications for platform designs aimed at helping users manage complex multi-party interactions and maintain clarity across temporal gaps.

The study's limitations include its relatively small sample size and focus on a single platform. Future research could examine how Q&R uses vary across different types of relationships and social contexts, or compare similar functions across different platforms (e.g.,

Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp). Such investigations would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how technological features shape digital communication practices.

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