

A Study on the Pragmatic Functions of “Ha” Repetition on Weibo from the Perspective of Relevance Theory

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Abstract: *In Chinese online communication, the repeated form “ha” is a frequent expressive form whose pragmatic functions extend beyond the literal representation of laughter. Different repetition lengths tend to convey different interpersonal meanings and affective stances in specific contexts. Drawing on Relevance Theory, this study investigates the pragmatic functions of “ha” repetition on Weibo and examines how these functions are related to repetition length. The data consist of 109 Weibo posts collected during February 2026. These posts are divided into five groups according to the number of repeated “ha” characters and are then qualitatively analyzed in context. The findings show that shorter forms of “ha” are more likely to mitigate tone, maintain politeness, or signal irony; medium-length repetitions more often express mild amusement, affiliative interaction, and positive response; longer repetitions tend to intensify emotion, increase textual salience, and, in some contexts, produce exaggerated or performative effects. The study argues that the pragmatic value of “ha” repetition is not determined by form alone, but emerges from the interaction among repetition length, contextual information, and readers’ inferential processing. This research contributes to a better understanding of online laughter expressions and their pragmatic mechanisms in contemporary Chinese discourse.*

Keywords: *Repeated Onomatopoeia; Pragmatic Function; Relevance Theory; Online Discourse*

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of social media, written interaction has become an important site for the expression of emotion, stance, and interpersonal meaning. In online discourse, users apply punctuation, repetition, emojis, and other graphic resources to manage tone and shape social relations. Earlier research has shown that humor and laughter in computer-mediated communication are not marginal features, but important resources for creating social meaning and interactional connection^[1]. Written laughter is therefore more than a simple representation of amusement. It can also function as a discourse strategy in digital communication.

Among these resources, the repetition of the Chinese character “ha” is a common but flexible form on social media platforms such as Weibo. In actual use, “ha” does not always convey literal laughter. Depending on the context, it may soften tone, display friendliness, mark light amusement, or even signal irony and emotional distance. Research on online written laughter has suggested that such forms may carry language-specific and socially meaningful functions rather than serving as neutral emotional markers^[2]. Recent work on Chinese digital interaction has also shown that “haha” can perform different social actions in different sequential environments^[3]. However, although previous studies have examined online laughter, humor markers, and related pragmatic phenomena, less attention has been paid to the relationship between the length of “ha” repetition and its pragmatic functions in Weibo discourse.

This issue can be usefully approached from the perspective of Relevance Theory. Sperber and Wilson argue that human communication is inferential in nature and that utterances create expectations of optimal relevance^[4]. In online interaction, meaning is often not fully encoded in words alone, but emerges through the interaction between linguistic form, contextual information, and readers’ inferential processing. This point is especially relevant to digitally mediated discourse. As Yus notes, internet-mediated communication requires pragmatic interpretation under conditions where users rely heavily on contextual cues and compensatory textual strategies^[5]. The repeated form “ha” can be understood as one such strategy. Its pragmatic value is not fixed by form itself, but depends on how readers interpret repetition length in relation to context, stance, and communicative intention.

Against this background, the present study investigates the pragmatic functions of “ha” repetition on Weibo from the perspective of Relevance Theory. Based on a small dataset of Weibo posts, this study examines how different repetition lengths tend to correlate with different pragmatic effects in context. The study examines whether shorter and longer forms of “ha” show different functional tendencies in online discourse and to explain these tendencies in terms of contextual effect and inferential processing. By focusing on a frequent but underexplored feature of Chinese online language, this study aims to contribute to the pragmatic study of digital discourse and to offer a more fine-grained account of written laughter in contemporary Chinese communication.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Previous Studies on Repetition and Online Laughter Expressions

Research on repetition in Chinese has shown that reduplication is not a marginal formal feature, but an important linguistic resource related to meaning adjustment and pragmatic effect. Li argues that reduplication is closely connected with the expression of quantity and semantic change in Chinese, which provides a useful background for understanding repeated forms in online discourse^[6]. However, most early discussions of repetition mainly focused on lexical or grammatical patterns in general Chinese rather than on digitally mediated interaction.

With the development of internet communication, written laughter has gradually become a topic of pragmatic and discourse-based research. Tagliamonte and Denis note that forms such as LOL in instant messaging are part of the linguistic and interactional organization of online discourse rather than random signs of language decay^[7]. Research on non-verbal graphic markers in computer-mediated communication has also shown that such signs may contribute to pragmatic meaning and help indicate illocutionary force^[8]. In research on Chinese digital interaction, Yuan shows that “haha” in WeChat conversations can perform different social actions in different sequential environments, which indicates that such forms need to be interpreted in context rather than in isolation^[3]. Taken together, these studies move beyond literal laughter and treat online expressive markers as interactional resources.

Even so, an important issue remains insufficiently examined in the existing literature. Previous studies have discussed written laughter in relation to form, identity, and interactional function, but they have paid relatively little attention to how repetition length affects the pragmatic interpretation of laughter expressions in Chinese social media discourse. In particular, there is still limited discussion of whether shorter and longer repeated forms of “ha” tend to signal different interpersonal meanings on platforms such as Weibo. The present study addresses this gap by focusing on the relationship between repetition length, discourse context, and pragmatic function in Weibo posts.

2.2 Relevance Theory as the Analytical Framework

The present study adopts Relevance Theory as its main analytical framework. According to Sperber and Wilson, human communication is inferential, and utterances create expectations of optimal relevance. This means that meaning is not simply encoded and decoded. Instead, hearers or readers interpret an utterance by combining linguistic form with contextual assumptions in order to achieve adequate contextual effects with reasonable processing effort. This framework is useful for the present study because the repeated form “ha” often carries meanings that go beyond its literal surface value.

This perspective is especially relevant to online discourse. Herring, Stein, and Virtanen point out that pragmatic research on computer-mediated communication needs to take medium-specific factors such as grounding, uptake, and context into account^[9]. Repetition is one such strategy. In a Weibo post, the pragmatic value of “ha” is shaped not only by the repeated character itself, but also by its position, surrounding content, and the broader interactional context. A short form may be read as mitigation or politeness in one context, while a longer form may signal stronger amusement, exaggerated stance, or performative emotional display in another. Relevance Theory therefore offers a useful way to explain why similar forms can lead to different interpretations across different contexts.

For this reason, the present study does not treat “ha” repetition as a purely formal variation. Instead, it approaches different repetition lengths as pragmatic cues that may guide readers toward different inferences. Based on this framework, the analysis in the following sections will examine how repeated “ha” forms on Weibo tend to correlate with different pragmatic functions, and how these functions can be interpreted in terms of contextual effect and inferential processing.

3. Data and Methodology

3.1 Data Source and Selection

The data for this study were collected from Weibo, one of the most widely used social media platforms in China. Weibo was chosen because it provides a large amount of naturally occurring written interaction and contains frequent examples of informal emotional expression in public online discourse. Since the present study focuses on the pragmatic use of repeated “ha” in everyday digital communication, Weibo offers a suitable source of naturally produced data.

The dataset consists of 109 Weibo posts collected during February 2026. The Chinese character “ha” was used as the search term in data collection. Only original posts containing repeated “ha” forms that could be interpreted as part of the poster’s textual expression were included. Advertisements, reposted content, irrelevant search results, and multiple similar posts from the same user were excluded from the dataset. The analysis focused only on main posts rather than comment-section responses. Usernames, avatars, and posting time were excluded in order to protect privacy and to keep the analysis focused on linguistic content. Images attached to posts were consulted only when they helped clarify the local context of the repeated form.

This study does not aim to build a large-scale corpus or to provide statistical generalization. Instead, it uses a small dataset to explore recurrent pragmatic tendencies in context. The purpose of this design is to provide a focused qualitative account of how repeated “ha” functions in Weibo discourse.

3.2 Categorization of “Ha” Repetition

In order to examine the possible relationship between repetition length and pragmatic function, the collected posts were divided into five groups according to the number of repeated “ha” characters. These groups are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Categories of “Ha” Repetition in the Dataset.

Category	Number of repeated “ha”	Number of posts
A	1	23
B	2-3	21
C	4-5	26
D	6-7	18
E	8 or more	21

The categorization was designed to make comparison across shorter, medium-length, and longer repeated forms possible. It should be noted that these groups are analytical categories used for the present study rather than fixed linguistic classes. Their function is to help identify broad pragmatic tendencies across different repetition lengths.

3.3 Analytical Procedure

The analysis was mainly qualitative. Each post was read in its immediate textual context, and the repeated “ha” form was interpreted in relation to the surrounding utterance, the emotional stance of the poster, and the likely interactional effect produced in context. The analysis focused on whether different repetition lengths tended to correlate with different pragmatic functions, such as tone mitigation, friendliness, amusement, irony, emotional intensification, or exaggerated expression. These pragmatic functions were identified by the researcher on the basis of contextual reading, with attention to the immediate co-text, emotional stance, and likely interactional effect of each post.

Representative examples were then selected from each category for close reading. The aim was not to claim that every repeated form in the same group performs the same function, but to identify recurring patterns of use. Relevance Theory was applied in the interpretive stage of the analysis. Different repeated forms were treated as pragmatic cues that may guide readers toward different inferences depending on contextual information and processing effort.

This method allows the study to remain sensitive to the variability of online discourse while still identifying meaningful regularities. At the same time, the study recognizes its limitations. Because the dataset is relatively small and the interpretation is context-dependent, the findings should be understood as preliminary observations rather than fully generalizable conclusions.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 *Short Repetition: Mitigation and Irony*

One clear tendency in the data concerns short repetition. Forms such as a single “ha” or a very limited repetition tend to perform relatively restrained pragmatic functions in Weibo discourse. In many cases, such forms do not primarily indicate strong laughter. Instead, they often work as a discourse marker that softens tone, reduces the force of an utterance, or presents the speaker as friendly and approachable. In this sense, short repetition functions less as an explicit expression of joy and more as a subtle interpersonal resource.

The data also suggest that short repetition may shift in function when it appears in marked contexts. When the surrounding utterance contains dissatisfaction, confrontation, or emotional tension, a short “ha” may no longer be interpreted as simple friendliness. Instead, it may suggest irony, impatience, or emotional distance. For example, in one post, the writer ended a confrontational statement with a single “ha” after telling those who disliked a performance to leave. In this context, the form did not function as a friendly marker. Rather, it was more likely to be interpreted as ironic and dismissive. This example shows that short repetition may take on a negative interpersonal meaning when it appears in a hostile local context.

This pattern can be understood in terms of the low salience of short repetition. A short form provides only limited explicit information, so readers must depend more on the surrounding context when interpreting it. In neutral or friendly discourse, this low-salience cue is likely to be read as mitigation. In hostile or critical discourse, however, the same cue may support an ironic reading. Short repetition, then, does not carry one stable meaning. Its interpretation depends on context and inference.

4.2 *Medium-Length Repetition: Mild Amusement and Affiliative Interaction*

Another tendency in the data can be seen in medium-length repetition. Compared with very short forms, this type tends to show a clearer association with amusement, light pleasure, and positive social engagement. In the present dataset, forms with several repeated “ha” characters often function as signals of relaxed emotional involvement. They are more expressive than a single “ha” but they do not usually create a sense of excess. This makes them suitable for ordinary online interaction in which users want to show warmth, shared amusement, or a lightly positive stance.

A representative example is a post in which the writer used “hahaha” when describing an unexpected encounter with a teacher on campus. In this case, the repeated form accompanied a friendly and appreciative narrative rather than strong emotional display. Its function was to create a relaxed and positive tone, which supports the view that medium-length repetition often works as an affiliative resource in ordinary online interaction.

A notable feature of this range is its affiliative function. Rather than conveying strong emotional intensity, medium-length repetition often helps maintain interactional smoothness. It can mark agreement, support, amusement, or a friendly response without appearing overly dramatic. In this sense, these forms seem to occupy a middle position between minimal textual marking and highly intensified expression. They are neither too weak to be interactionally insignificant nor too strong to appear exaggerated.

This tendency may help explain why medium-length repetition appears relatively frequent in the dataset. It seems to offer a useful balance between expressive force and interpretive ease. Readers can quickly take it as a sign of mild amusement or friendliness, while the form remains simple and economical. For this reason, medium-length repetition appears to be especially functional in everyday online interaction.

4.3 *Extended Repetition: Intensification and Performative Effects*

A third tendency concerns longer repeated forms. Especially when many “ha” characters appear in a row, the form tends to display a different pragmatic profile. Its most noticeable feature is intensification. In many cases, such forms increase the visibility of emotional expression and present a stronger affective stance than shorter forms do. They are more likely to attract attention at the visual level, and this increased salience often contributes to an interpretation of heightened excitement, stronger amusement, or emotionally charged response.

At the same time, the data suggest that the function of longer repetition is not limited to emotional

intensification. In some contexts, very long strings of “ha” seem to do more than simply represent laughter. They may also stylize the speaker’s response, making the expression appear exaggerated, dramatized, or deliberately over-displayed. This tendency can be seen in a post in which the writer repeatedly used long strings of “ha” while complaining about having earned only a very small amount of money in a month. Here, the repeated form did not simply signal amusement. Rather, it contributed to a stylized display of frustration and self-mockery. The effect was both emotional and performative, which suggests that extended repetition may function as a visible stance marker rather than as a straightforward sign of laughter.

What matters here is not only length itself, but also the stronger visual impact created by long repetition. Because these forms are more noticeable, readers are more likely to treat them as marked expressions. As a result, longer repetition may invite interpretations that go beyond simple laughter, including overstatement, playful self-performance, or emotionally marked display. In this way, extended repetition broadens the expressive range of the utterance.

4.4 Repetition Length, Context, and Pragmatic Interpretation

Taken together, the data point to a broad pattern rather than a fixed rule. The pragmatic interpretation of “ha” repetition on Weibo cannot be explained by repetition length alone. Although shorter, medium-length, and longer forms show different functional tendencies, their actual meaning still depends on context. Repetition length provides an important cue, but it does not mechanically determine interpretation. Instead, it interacts with surrounding discourse, stance, and interactional purpose.

More specifically, shorter forms tend to rely more heavily on contextual support because their expressive value is relatively weak and flexible. Medium-length forms tend to function as relatively stable markers of mild amusement and affiliative engagement. Longer forms, by contrast, are more likely to be read as intensified or performative expressions because they are more visually marked. This suggests that repetition length in online discourse should be treated as a gradual pragmatic resource rather than as a simple formal variable.

From this perspective, the repeated form “ha” does not have one fixed pragmatic value independent of use. Its meaning is shaped through contextual interpretation, with different repetition lengths guiding readers toward different kinds of inferences. In this sense, the repetition of “ha” on Weibo shows how small formal differences in digital writing can produce meaningful differences in interpersonal communication. It also shows that online written laughter is not a trivial feature of internet language, but an active part of pragmatic meaning-making in contemporary Chinese discourse.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the pragmatic functions of “ha” repetition on Weibo from the perspective of Relevance Theory. Based on 109 Weibo posts, it has explored how different repetition lengths tend to correlate with different pragmatic effects in online discourse. The findings suggest that shorter forms are more likely to be associated with tone mitigation and, in some contexts, irony. Medium-length forms tend to express mild amusement and affiliative interaction. Longer forms, by contrast, are more likely to intensify emotional display and to create exaggerated or performative effects. These findings indicate that repetition length is an important pragmatic cue in Weibo discourse, although its meaning is always shaped by context.

From a theoretical perspective, the study supports the view that the meaning of online written laughter is not fixed by form alone. Instead, it is constructed through contextual interpretation and inferential processing. In this sense, the repeated form “ha” can be understood as a flexible pragmatic resource rather than a simple written sign of laughter. The study also suggests that small formal differences in digital writing may lead to meaningful differences in stance and interpersonal effect. By focusing on repetition length, this study offers a more fine-grained account of how written laughter functions in contemporary Chinese online communication.

At the same time, the study has several limitations. The dataset is relatively small, and the analysis is mainly qualitative. In addition, the interpretation of pragmatic function depends heavily on local context, which means that some cases may remain open to alternative readings. Future research may therefore draw on larger datasets, compare different social media platforms, or examine other laughter-related forms in Chinese online discourse. Despite these limitations, the present study provides a preliminary account of “ha” repetition on Weibo and contributes to a better understanding of pragmatic variation in

Chinese digital discourse.

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