

Nick Calo

Design 3

Study date: April 13, 2021

Why a Like Feels Different on Every App

A like button is one of the smallest elements in a social media interface, yet the response it carries can be surprisingly complicated. A heart on a friend's photograph might acknowledge a shared experience, while a heart on an unfamiliar creator's video might simply register interest in the content. The physical action is similar, but the social meaning changes. This makes the like button a useful subject for design analysis. I argue that its meaning develops through the relationship between visual form, audience, and platform context. A designer who studies only the icon risks overlooking the expectations that make the interaction understandable in the first place.

It helps to separate three parts of the experience: the control, the action, and the interpretation. The control is the visible heart or thumb. The action is the selection that changes its state. The interpretation is what the person pressing it, the person receiving it, or another viewer thinks that selection means. Those parts are connected, but they are not interchangeable. A button can register a tap correctly while leaving the intended message uncertain. For me, this distinction explains why technical simplicity does not necessarily produce social simplicity. The interface may have only two states, selected and unselected, while the people using it have many reasons to choose between them.

Research gives some support to that distinction. Hayes, Carr, and Wohn describe single-click responses as paralinguistic digital affordances: tools that communicate without requiring a written message. Their study used focus groups and interviews to examine both giving and receiving these responses. They found that a click could communicate something about a relationship as well as the content itself (171, 176-79). I find that useful because it challenges a narrow reading of the word Like. The label suggests a straightforward positive judgment, but the action may do several jobs. It can acknowledge another person without offering a complete opinion about what that person posted.

Instagram provides an example of how a relationship can shape interpretation. Imagine a friend sharing a photograph from a trip. I might appreciate the lighting, the composition, or the place itself. I might also remember that my friend had been saving for the trip and feel happy that it happened. A single heart would not distinguish those responses. From a visual-design perspective, the photograph is the main object on the screen. From a social

perspective, the person behind the photograph may be more important. I would describe the resulting interaction as an overlap between responding to an image and responding to an event in someone's life.

That overlap also makes silence difficult to interpret. If a friend does not react, the absence of a heart could mean that they did not see the photograph, did not feel like responding, or were occupied with something else. The interface does not explain which possibility applies. I would not conclude that the design causes a particular emotional response, but I can see how visible reactions and invisible reasons create room for assumptions. In a design critique, I would therefore ask what the interface makes noticeable and what it leaves unexplained. A system that displays individual responses clearly can still leave the larger conversation ambiguous.

The same photograph could feel different when posted by a photographer I do not know. In that setting, I might concentrate on the image as a piece of work. Its framing or use of color might be the entire reason for reacting. This comparison matters because it prevents the platform from becoming a stereotype. Instagram does not have one universal meaning for the heart. The app contains friends, strangers, artists, businesses, and public figures. A more careful argument is that the platform creates a setting in which several kinds of relationships exist. The relationship and the post together influence what a familiar control appears to offer.

LinkedIn changes the setting by placing the response inside a professional conversation. A new role, a completed project, or a discussion about work can make the same positive gesture feel like recognition rather than affection. I can imagine responding to a classmate's job announcement because I want to congratulate them, even if the post itself contains no striking visual content. The accomplishment becomes the focus. That example shows why surrounding information matters: a name, a job title, and the topic of a post help establish the tone before the reaction control is used. The icon participates in a context that is already doing considerable communicative work.

LinkedIn's introduction of Reactions makes that relationship between context and labels explicit. In its 2019 announcement, Cissy Chen described Celebrate as a response to accomplishments and Insightful as a response to useful ideas. She also explained that the development process considered the conversations members were already having (Chen). I read those choices as an attempt to make a professional vocabulary available through quick gestures. A designer is not simply choosing attractive symbols here. The words attached to those symbols suggest what kinds of responses belong in the space. Labels can guide interpretation, although they cannot guarantee that every person uses a reaction in precisely the same way.

A more specific label can also create a different kind of uncertainty. If a professional post is personally meaningful and intellectually interesting, should I choose Love or Insightful? There may not be a single correct answer. The important design question is whether the available choices help me communicate comfortably or make a simple response feel like a test. I would want the default interaction to remain easy while allowing more expressive options when they are useful. This is a tradeoff between range and effort. Adding choices creates possibilities, but it also requires people to notice, understand, and select among them.

Facebook presents a particularly clear reason for offering that wider range. Happy announcements, ordinary photographs, and difficult personal updates can appear in the same feed. A basic thumbs-up may feel suitable beneath a birthday message and awkward beneath sad news. In the 2016 announcement of Facebook Reactions, Sammi Krug explained that the expanded choices were intended to let people express more kinds of feelings about posts. The launch offered reactions including Love, Sad, and Angry alongside Like (Krug). This does not resolve every ambiguity, but it gives a response to difficult news a more appropriate visual form than a single undifferentiated positive signal.

What interests me is the difference between an emotional response to an event and a judgment of the person sharing it. A sad reaction can acknowledge an unfortunate situation while supporting the author. An angry reaction could refer to the event described rather than the person describing it. The symbol alone cannot fully identify its target. This means that offering an emotional vocabulary does not remove the need for context. It changes the choices available within that context. For my own work, the lesson is to avoid assuming that more expressive controls automatically create more precise communication. Precision depends on both the available response and the situation being interpreted.

TikTok introduces another dimension because a response can affect the relationship between a person and the feed itself. Its 2020 explanation of recommendations identifies liked videos, along with other interactions, as information used to shape what is recommended. It also describes viewing behavior as a relevant signal (TikTok). A heart can therefore have an operational consequence beyond appearing beneath a video. When I imagine liking an unfamiliar creator's demonstration, I can read the gesture as appreciation and as an indication of interest. Those meanings can coexist without the person making the selection having a detailed understanding of the recommendation process.

This creates a distinction between the intention behind an action and the information a system takes from it. Suppose I respond to a friend's unusual video mainly to encourage them. A recommendation system may treat that action as evidence about the content I want to see. That is a hypothetical example, not a claim about how a particular video would be ranked. It

illustrates why an interface can mediate between two audiences: another person and a computational system. In designing an interaction, I would want to consider both. A friendly visual gesture may participate in a larger process that is not apparent from the symbol itself.

The visual treatment still matters because it communicates whether the action happened. An outline becoming filled, a change in color, or a brief animation can distinguish the selected state from the unselected state. Aurora Harley's explanation of visibility of system status emphasizes feedback that helps people understand the result of their actions (Harley). Applied to a reaction control, that principle would lead me to ask whether the response remains clear after an animation ends. A moment of movement might make a tap feel satisfying, but a stable visual state is what lets someone check the result later without repeating the action.

I would also treat the selected state as more than a decorative color choice. If two states differ only slightly, a person might not know whether the response has been recorded. In a prototype, I would compare changes in fill, shape, and labeling as well as color. I would check keyboard interaction and how the control is announced through assistive technology. These are design questions I would test, rather than claims that one visual treatment solves every accessibility problem. The broader point is that a small control deserves a complete interaction design. It needs an understandable purpose, a usable target, and a result that can be recognized.

A reaction count adds another layer of interpretation. It turns individual acts into a visible total, which can be convenient to scan. However, the number cannot preserve all of the reasons behind those acts. Hayes and colleagues identified motivations including acknowledging a post, offering social support, and using a response for practical purposes such as keeping track of content (178-79). I would therefore be cautious about treating a total as a direct measure of agreement or satisfaction. If a design receives many reactions, I still need to know what people were responding to and what they expected their reactions to communicate.

There is a reasonable counterargument to this analysis: perhaps the value of a like is precisely that it remains loose and easy. Requiring someone to specify their exact intention could make ordinary interaction exhausting. I agree that a lightweight response should not become a questionnaire. The purpose of examining ambiguity is not to eliminate it from social life. It is to distinguish useful flexibility from avoidable confusion. I would preserve room for a gesture to mean different things while making the action itself understandable. People do not need to explain every feeling, but they should have a reasonable understanding of what they are selecting and what happens next.

If I were developing a reaction system, I would begin with the situation rather than a set of icons. I would identify who is responding, who is receiving the response, and what kinds of content appear in the space. Then I would sketch a small number of alternatives and test them

with realistic examples. One version might offer a single positive response; another might separate appreciation from saving. I would ask participants to explain what each option means before using it. That would reveal whether the labels match their expectations before time is spent polishing animations or building a larger collection of symbols.

The evaluation should include interpretation after the action, too. I would show someone a response beneath a post and ask what they think the sender intended. Comparing that answer with the sender's explanation could expose differences that a simple task-completion measure would miss. I would also observe hesitation, accidental selections, and attempts to undo a response. These are proposed research activities, not results I have collected. They would help test the distinctions in this essay and keep the argument connected to actual use. A design can be easy to operate while still failing to communicate in the way its users expect.

Ultimately, the like button demonstrates how much design can be contained in a very small space. Its form helps people find it, its feedback confirms an action, and its setting gives the action social meaning. Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook, and TikTok provide different situations in which those elements come together, but none reduces every response to one intention. The principle I would carry into future projects is to design the action and its interpretation together. A successful control should feel simple because its important decisions have been considered carefully, not because the relationships and consequences surrounding it have been ignored.

Works Cited

- Chen, Cissy. "Introducing LinkedIn Reactions: More Ways to Express Yourself." *LinkedIn Official Blog*, 11 Apr. 2019. <https://www.linkedin.com/blog/member/product/introducing-linkedin-reactions-more-ways-to-express-yourself>.
- Harley, Aurora. "Visibility of System Status (Usability Heuristic #1)." *Nielsen Norman Group*, 3 June 2018. <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/visibility-system-status/>.
- Hayes, Rebecca A., et al. "One Click, Many Meanings: Interpreting Paralinguistic Digital Affordances in Social Media." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 60, no. 1, 2016, pp. 171-87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2015.1127248>.
- Krug, Sammi. "Reactions Now Available Globally." *Facebook Newsroom*, 24 Feb. 2016. <https://about.fb.com/news/2016/02/reactions-now-available-globally/>.
- TikTok. "How TikTok Recommends Videos #ForYou." *TikTok Newsroom*, 18 June 2020. <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/how-tiktok-recommends-videos-for-you>.