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Beyond Gamification: A Thematic Analysis of Chinese Users' Discourse About English Learning Apps on Xiaohongshu

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Abstract: This exploratory qualitative study examines how Chinese users discuss English learning applications on Xiaohongshu, a popular Chinese social media platform. Drawing on Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory as an analytical framework, the study analyzed 49 user-generated posts discussing five major language learning applications: Duolingo, Baicizhan, HelloTalk, Shanbay English, and Youdao Dictionary. Using thematic analysis of naturalistic online discourse, five major themes emerged: (a) the tension between habit-forming engagement and meaningful learning outcomes, (b) user responses to gamification and monetization strategies, (c) preferences for persistence over perfection, (d) the role of social proof and peer narratives in app adoption, and (e) the practice of combining multiple applications to address functional gaps. Findings suggest that Chinese users actively evaluate, critique, and adapt their use of language learning technologies to meet diverse gratification needs including academic assistance, entertainment, social connection, and convenience. The study contributes to Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) research by providing insight into authentic user perspectives and the social dimensions of app-mediated language acquisition. Implications for app developers, educators, and future research are discussed.

Keywords: Mobile-assisted language learning; English learning apps, Xiaohongshu; Uses and Gratifications theory; Thematic analysis; Chinese social media; Duolingo; Gamification.

1. Introduction

The proliferation of mobile applications has fundamentally transformed how individuals approach foreign language acquisition. In China, where English proficiency is closely linked to educational achievement and socioeconomic mobility, millions of young learners have turned to smartphone-based tools as supplements or alternatives to traditional classroom instruction. This digital shift has generated substantial commercial interest, with applications like Duolingo, Baicizhan, HelloTalk, Shanbay English, and Youdao Dictionary competing for user attention through increasingly sophisticated gamification strategies, social features, and personalized learning pathways. However, the perspectives of actual users—their experiences, frustrations, adaptations, and evaluations—often remain underexplored in academic literature that tends to focus on controlled experimental settings or technology acceptance models.

Xiaohongshu, a Chinese social media platform combining elements of Instagram, Pinterest, and product review sites, has emerged as a significant venue for peer-to-peer discourse about consumer experiences, including educational technology. With over 300 million monthly active users who share detailed reviews, tutorials, and personal narratives (Liu, 2024), the platform offers researchers unprecedented access to naturalistic discussions about how young Chinese users actually engage with language learning applications. Unlike survey-based research or laboratory studies, these organic conversations capture the emotional dimensions, social dynamics, and practical workarounds that characterize real-world technology use.

This study addresses the following research question: How do Chinese users discuss their experiences with English learning applications on Xiaohongshu, and what patterns emerge in their evaluations, practices, and adaptations? By analyzing user-generated content through the lens of Uses and Gratifications theory, this exploratory study aims to illuminate the gap between what app designers intend and what users actually experience, providing actionable insights for educators, developers, and future researchers interested in mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) in Chinese contexts.

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond academic interest. As language learning applications increasingly serve as primary educational resources for millions of users, understanding how learners perceive, adapt, and critique these tools becomes essential for improving educational outcomes. Furthermore, the social dimensions of app-mediated learning—how users share experiences, establish credibility through peer narratives, and collectively develop strategies for maximizing learning value—represent an underexplored aspect of contemporary digital literacy that merits systematic investigation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL)

Mobile-assisted language learning has attracted substantial scholarly attention over the past decade as smartphone penetration has expanded globally. Researchers have documented how mobile applications enable "just-in-time" learning opportunities that integrate with daily routines, offering convenience and accessibility that traditional classroom settings cannot match (Karakaya & Bozkurt, 2022). The shift toward MALL reflects broader trends in educational technology, where learners increasingly expect personalized, on-demand access to content delivered through familiar

digital interfaces (Yuen & Schlote, 2024). Studies have particularly emphasized the role of user experience (UX) design in shaping engagement, noting that millennial and Generation Z users maintain high expectations for interactivity and visual appeal that directly impact their motivation as language learners (Pikhart, 2020).

Systematic reviews of MALL literature have documented a proliferation of research examining specific applications, with Duolingo receiving particularly extensive attention. Shortt et al. (2023) conducted a comprehensive systematic review of Duolingo-focused studies from the application's 2012 public release through early 2020, identifying 35 studies that employed diverse theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches. Their analysis revealed that most research concentrated on learning outcomes and user motivation, with fewer studies examining the social dimensions of app-mediated learning or the naturalistic contexts in which users engage with these tools. This gap is significant because it suggests that scholarly understandingof MALL may be skewed toward laboratory conditions that do not reflect the complexity of real-world language learning practices.

2.2. Gamification in Language Learning Applications

Gamification—the application of game design elements in non-game contexts—has become a defining feature of contemporary language learning applications. Chen and Zhu (2025) documented how gamified auxiliary learning tools leverage reward incentives, systematic levels, and competitive rankings to sustain user engagement. Amin (2021) specifically examined how Duolingo's gamification strategies influence student motivation, finding that game elements such as experience points, streaks, and leaderboards can effectively foster positive learning habits even among users who struggle with intrinsic motivation. The "addictive" quality of well-designed gamification, however, raises questions about whether engagement translates into meaningful learning outcomes.

Haiying et al. (2025) explored this tension between engagement and learning, examining how gamification influences user perceptions of both experience and educational value. Their findings suggested that while gamified interfaces successfully create "flow" states that keep users returning to applications, the relationship between sustained engagement and language proficiency gains is more complex than simple time-on-task metrics would indicate. This complexity becomes particularly relevant when users themselves begin to question whether their dedicated app use is producing tangible skills—a sentiment that appears frequently in online discussions but has received limited attention in formal research contexts.

The monetization strategies that accompany gamification have also drawn scholarly and user concern. Salehudin and Alpert (2022) investigated mobile game users' unwillingness to pay for in-app purchases, identifying psychological mechanisms that generate resentment when free-to-play models transition toward paywalls. Rahman (2025) extended this analysis to educational contexts, examining the ethical dimensions of persuasive technologies that employ guilt trips and emotional manipulation to encourage premium subscriptions. These studies suggest that monetization strategies can undermine the trust and goodwill that initially attract users to learning applications—a dynamic that may be particularly pronounced when users perceive that their learning progress is being artificially constrained to generate revenue.

2.3. Theoretical Framework: Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory provides a valuable analytical framework for understanding how individuals actively select and use media to satisfy specific needs. Originating in mass communication research during the 1970s (Katz et al., 1973), U&G theory shifts attention from questions of media effects to questions of audience agency, emphasizing that users approach media with diverse motivations and evaluate their experiences based on whether anticipated gratifications are obtained (Rubin, 1994; Ruggiero, 2000). This user-centered orientation makes U&G theory particularly suitable for examining educational technology adoption, where learners exercise considerable autonomy in selecting among competing applications and evaluating their utility.

Recent applications of U&G theory to educational mobile applications have identified multiple gratification dimensions relevant to language learning. Subramaniam et al. (2022) identified seven gratifications driving learners' intention to use educational apps: academic assistance, convenience, entertainment, social influence, novelty, engagement, and activity. Their study found that academic assistance, convenience, and social influence were the most significant predictors of continued use—a finding that aligns with the functional approach users often describe when discussing language learning tools. Similarly, research on smart mobile learning has identified technology gratification, content gratification, social gratification, utilitarian gratification, and hedonic gratification as distinct categories influencing users' continuance intention (Nature Communications, 2023).

The application of U&G theory to language learning contexts illuminates why users may simultaneously express satisfaction with an app's entertainment value while acknowledging its limitations for serious skill development. When users describe selecting Duolingo for habit formation, Baicizhan for vocabulary mastery, and HelloTalk for speaking practice, they are articulating a Uses and Gratifications phenomenon—actively matching specific applications to specific needs rather than expecting any single tool to address all learning objectives. This selective approach represents sophisticated media literacy that formal research has only begun to document systematically.

2.4. Social Media as a Site for Qualitative Research

Social media platforms have emerged as valuable sites for qualitative research, offering access to naturalistic discourse that would be difficult to capture through traditional data collection methods. Snelson (2016) documented trends in qualitative and mixed-methods social media research, identifying content analysis and thematic analysis as predominant analytical approaches. Andreotta et al. (2019) developed frameworks for combining computational and qualitative text analysis when working with large social media datasets, emphasizing the complementary strengths of quantitative pattern identification and qualitative meaning interpretation. These methodological innovations have enabled researchers to investigate how online communities discuss, evaluate, and share experiences across diverse

domains including health, politics, and consumer behavior.

Xiaohongshu represents a particularly rich research site due to its emphasis on detailed, text-based reviews and its cultural significance as a trusted source of peer recommendations in Chinese consumer culture. Wu et al. (2024) examined how the platform influences digital well-being and sustainability, documenting the dual effects of social network services on users' psychological states and behavioral patterns. Liu (2024) analyzed value co-creation on Xiaohongshu, highlighting how the platform's community-driven content model fosters authentic engagement that users often trust more than traditional advertising. Unlike platforms optimized for brief, visual content, Xiaohongshu's format encourages substantive posts that include personal narratives, specific recommendations, and nuanced evaluations—qualities that make it suitable for qualitative analysis of user experiences.

2.5. Literature Gap and Study Rationale

Despite extensive research on mobile-assisted language learning, significant gaps remain in scholarly understanding of how learners actually experience and adapt these tools in naturalistic contexts. Most existing studies rely on survey-based methodologies, technology acceptance models, or controlled experimental designs that may not capture the complexity of real-world app use. The social dimensions of online language acquisition—how users share strategies, establish credibility, and collectively develop workarounds—have received limited attention. Furthermore, research examining Chinese users' perspectives on language learning applications remains sparse despite China representing one of the world's largest markets for educational technology.

This study addresses these gaps by analyzing authentic user discourse on Xiaohongshu, documenting naturalistic discussions between users about their language learning experiences, and examining the relationship between engagement and perceived learning outcomes. By applying Uses and Gratifications theory as an analytical framework, the study aims to illuminate how Chinese users actively evaluate and adapt language learning technologies to meet diverse needs—contributing to both theoretical understanding and practical applications in MALL research.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study employed an exploratory qualitative design using thematic analysis of user-generated content from Xiaohongshu. The research approach aligned with passive analysis methods described in social media research literature (Snelson, 2016), involving systematic collection and analysis of publicly available posts without direct researcher participation in the online community. This design was selected because it captures naturalistic discourse that reflects users' authentic experiences, priorities, and concerns—information that may not emerge through structured surveys or interview protocols where participants respond to researcher-defined categories.

The thematic analysis approach followed established qualitative research procedures, moving inductively from raw data to coded segments to broader themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Naeem & Ozuem, 2023). Rather than applying predetermined coding categories, the researcher engaged in iterative readings of the dataset to identify patterns, relationships, and recurring concepts that emerged organically from user discourse. This inductive orientation was appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research question and the relative absence of prior qualitative research on Chinese users' Xiaohongshu discussions about language learning applications.

3.2. Data Collection

Data collection occurred between October 2024 and December 2025, focusing on posts discussing five major English learning applications available to Chinese users: Duolingo, Baicizhan, HelloTalk, Shanbay English, and Youdao Dictionary. These applications were selected because they represent diverse approaches to mobile language learning—gamified casual learning (Duolingo), vocabulary-focused memorization (Baicizhan), social exchange with native speakers (HelloTalk), comprehensive skill development (Shanbay English), and dictionary/translation utilities (Youdao Dictionary). This diversity enabled examination of user responses across different functional categories rather than limiting analysis to a single application type.

Posts were identified using Xiaohongshu's search functionality with Chinese-language keywords for each application name. Selection criteria included: (a) substantive discussion of user experience with the specified application, (b) content in Chinese requiring translation for analysis, (c) publicly accessible posts with visible engagement metrics, and (d) sufficient detail to support thematic coding. Posts consisting only of promotional content, sponsored advertisements, or minimal engagement (fewer than 10 likes) were excluded to focus on content reflecting genuine user discourse rather than commercial messaging.

The final dataset comprised 49 posts distributed relatively evenly across the five applications: Duolingo (n = 9), Baicizhan (n = 10), HelloTalk (n = 10), Shanbay English (n = 10), and Youdao Dictionary (n = 10). This sample size is consistent with exploratory qualitative research designs where the goal is depth of understanding rather than statistical representativeness (Snelson, 2016). Posts ranged in date from approximately May 2024 to November 2025, reflecting approximately 18 months of user discourse during a period of active development and competition among language learning applications.

3.3. Dataset Characteristics

The collected posts demonstrated substantial user engagement, indicating that the selected content resonated with the Xiaohongshu community. Across all 49 posts, cumulative engagement included approximately 117,940 likes and 15,563 comments. Average engagement per post was 2,407 likes and 318 comments, with individual posts ranging from 120 to 19,000 likes and from 9 to 1,708 comments. The high engagement levels suggest that topics discussed in these posts—app effectiveness, monetization concerns, learning strategies, and peer recommendations—reflect widespread interest among Xiaohongshu users concerned with language learning. Figure 1 presents the distribution of engagement metrics across applications.

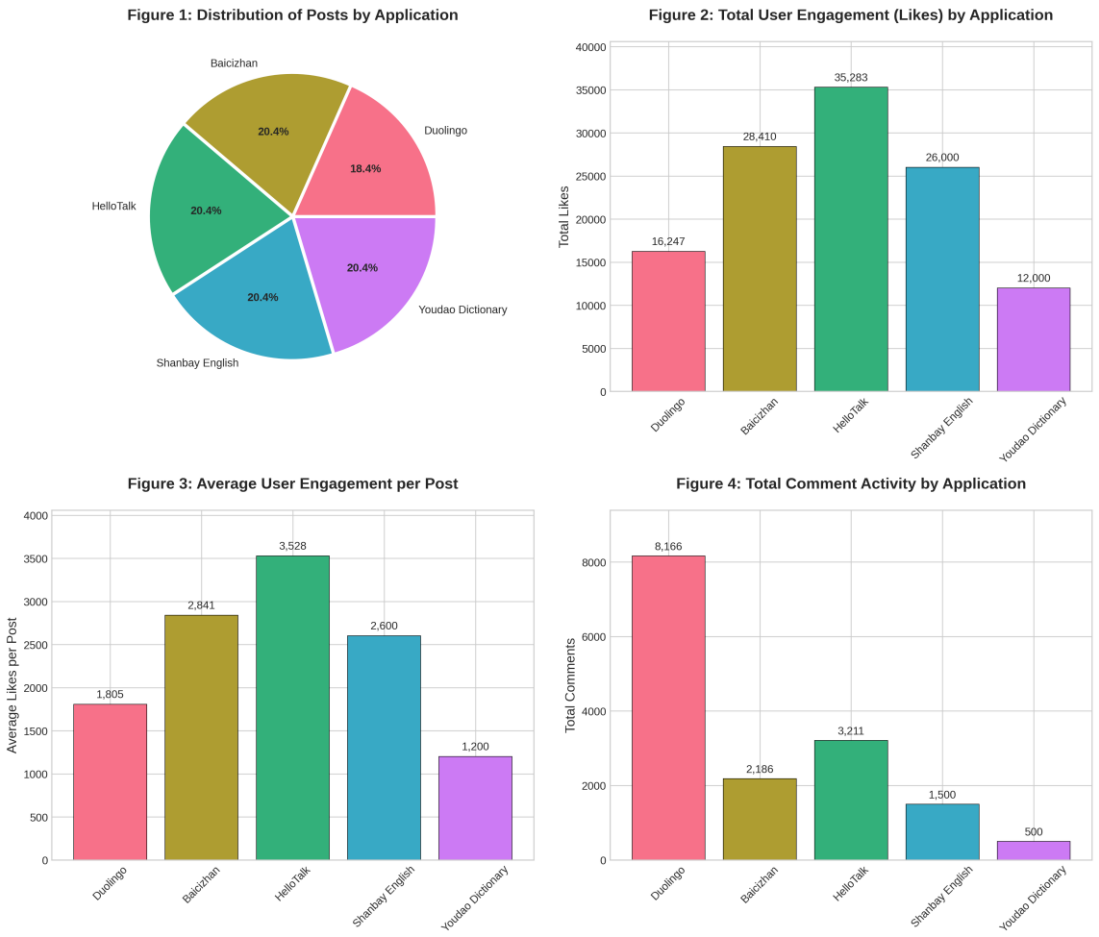


Figure 1. Distribution of user engagement metrics across five English learning applications

3.4. Data Analysis

Analysis followed a six-phase thematic analysis process adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006). The first phase involved familiarization with the data through repeated readings of translated post content and associated researcher notes. Posts originally in Chinese were translated to English by the researcher, who is bilingual in Mandarin Chinese and English. Translation decisions prioritized semantic equivalence and preservation of colloquial expressions that convey emotional tone.

The second phase involved generating initial codes by systematically identifying features of interest across the dataset. Codes were applied at the sentence and paragraph level, capturing both manifest content (explicit statements about app features, user behaviors, recommendations) and latent content (underlying attitudes, emotional valences, implicit comparisons). For each post, two types of analytical notes were generated: descriptive summaries of main content and interpretive observations about patterns or insights that might inform theme development.

The third and fourth phases involved searching for themes and reviewing themes against the coded data extracts. Initial candidate themes were identified by clustering related codes and examining their relationships. These candidate themes were then reviewed for internal coherence and distinctiveness, with some themes being combined, subdivided, or discarded based on how well they represented patterns in the data. The fifth phase involved defining and naming themes, specifying what each theme captured and how it related to the research question. The final phase involved producing this report, selecting representative quotations and organizing the analysis to address the research question systematically.

3.5. Researcher Positionality

Transparency about researcher positionality is increasingly expected in qualitative research, as it enables readers to assess how the researcher's background may have shaped data collection and interpretation. The primary researcher is a native Chinese speaker with personal experience using language learning applications and familiarity with Xiaohongshu's cultural context and communication norms. This insider perspective facilitated access to nuanced meanings in user discourse, including colloquial expressions, cultural references, and implicit assumptions that might not be apparent to researchers outside the Chinese digital ecosystem.

At the same time, this positionality may have introduced interpretive biases. Personal experiences with specific applications could influence which user perspectives were perceived as insightful versus routine. The researcher's educational background in American academic contexts may have shaped which analytical frameworks seemed most applicable. To mitigate these potential biases, the researcher maintained reflexive notes throughout the analysis process, documented alternative interpretations for key findings, and sought to represent diverse user perspectives even when they contradicted initial expectations.

4. Findings

Thematic analysis of the 49 Xiaohongshu posts revealed five major themes characterizing how Chinese users discuss English learning applications. These themes represent patterns that emerged across multiple applications and posts,

reflecting shared concerns, strategies, and evaluations within the user community. Each theme is presented below with supporting evidence from the dataset, including representative quotations translated from the original Chinese. Figure 2 presents the prevalence of each theme across the dataset.

Figure 5: Theme Prevalence Across Dataset (N=49 posts)

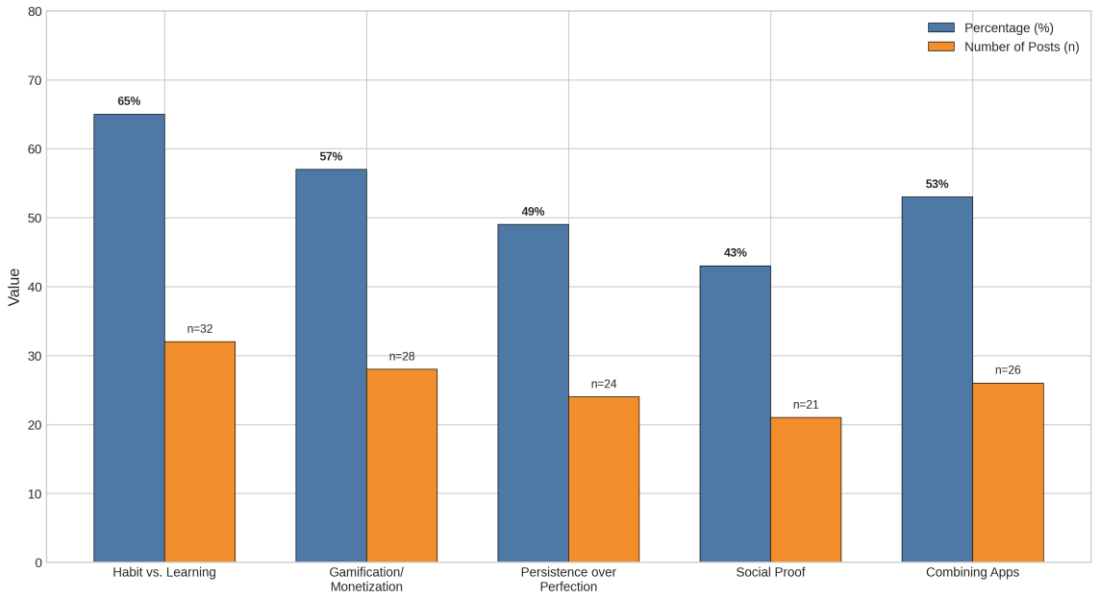


Figure 2. Prevalence of identified themes across the dataset (N = 49 posts). Posts could reflect multiple themes

4.1. Theme 1: Habit-Forming Engagement Versus Meaningful Learning

The most prevalent theme across the dataset involved tension between applications' effectiveness at fostering consistent engagement and their effectiveness at producing genuine language learning outcomes. This theme appeared in 32 of 49 posts (65%) and was particularly prominent in discussions of Duolingo, where users frequently expressed paradoxical evaluations—describing the application as highly engaging while simultaneously questioning its educational value.

Users articulated this tension using vivid metaphors that captured the gap between engagement and learning. One user compared Duolingo to "eating sunflower seeds"—an activity that is compulsively satisfying but ultimately empty: "It's like eating sunflower seeds. You keep doing it, you feel like you're accomplishing something, but when you stop you realize you haven't really gained anything substantial." This metaphor resonated throughout the dataset, with other users sharing similar experiences of sustained engagement coupled with minimal skill retention.

A high-engagement post (6,937 likes, 1,653 comments) offered a particularly incisive critique: "Duolingo sells the illusion of learning, because once users actually learn something, they stop using it. Duolingo's gamified design isn't focused on actual learning, but rather on creating the illusion of learning." This perspective suggests that some users have developed sophisticated awareness of how gamification mechanics may serve business retention goals rather than educational objectives.

Other users provided more nuanced perspectives, acknowledging that habit formation itself has educational value even if discrete skills remain limited. One user observed: "Duolingo has grasped the most important aspect of learning: persistence. Through simple games, Duolingo reinforces this simple yet profound principle." Another noted that Duolingo's approach "doesn't make you feel like you're studying; instead, through gamification, you can spend just a few minutes each day and still feel like you're learning." These perspectives suggest that different users may derive different gratifications from the same application.

4.2. Theme 2: Gamification and Monetization Tensions

A second major theme involved user responses to the intersection of gamification mechanics and monetization strategies. This theme appeared in 28 of 49 posts (57%) and generated particularly strong emotional responses, with users expressing resentment, disappointment, and strategic adaptations in response to perceived manipulation by app developers.

Users demonstrated sophisticated awareness of how gamification elements serve both engagement and revenue objectives. One post observed that "energy mode" limitations function as conversion mechanisms: "Duolingo offers two options: watching ads or paying for a subscription. If you want to learn without restrictions, you need to become a member. If you only complete three lessons a day, there's no need to pay, but currently, Duolingo is not very user-friendly for free users." This post (1,839 likes, 1,352 comments) sparked extensive discussion about whether premium features were worth the cost.

Discussions of Youdao Dictionary highlighted particularly strong negative reactions to advertising. Multiple posts described frustration with ads interrupting basic functionality: "The Youdao Dictionary app has the drawback of having too many ads, making the word lookup process neither fast nor straightforward." Another user noted that "even the most basic translation function requires payment," describing the application as "very difficult-to-use."

4.3. Theme 3: Persistence Over Perfection

A third theme involved user preferences for applications that emphasize sustained engagement over achievement of mastery standards. This theme appeared in 24 of 49 posts

(49%) and reflected a learner orientation that prioritized consistency, confidence-building, and emotional comfort over accuracy or comprehensive skill development.

Streak metrics emerged as significant markers of achievement and identity. Users with high streak counts often referenced these numbers as evidence of personal persistence, with one viral post featuring a photo of a Norwegian girl's 600-plus day Duolingo streak: "While learning on the Duolingo app, I saw the determination of girls from other ethnic groups to learn foreign languages." Such posts function as social proof and inspiration, suggesting that visual evidence of sustained commitment can motivate continued engagement even when learning outcomes remain uncertain.

4.4. Theme 4: Social Proof and Peer Narratives

A fourth theme concerned the role of social proof and peer narratives in shaping app evaluations and adoption decisions. This theme appeared in 21 of 49 posts (43%) and reflected Xiaohongshu's cultural function as a trusted source of peer recommendations distinct from commercial advertising.

HelloTalk posts particularly emphasized social dimensions, with users sharing experiences of connecting with native speakers: "HelloTalk has very dedicated native English speakers who will teach you English." At the same time, posts also warned about potential risks: "the environment is quite complex, and it's important to protect your personal information from scams." These mixed reviews illustrate how peer discourse provides nuanced evaluations that acknowledge both benefits and limitations.

4.5. Theme 5: Combining Applications to Address Functional Gaps

The final major theme involved users' practice of combining multiple applications to address the functional limitations of any single tool. This theme appeared in 26 of 49 posts (53%) and represents perhaps the most significant Uses and Gratifications finding—demonstrating how users actively construct personalized learning ecosystems by matching specific applications to specific needs.

Users articulated clear awareness of different applications' strengths and limitations. One post summarized this strategic approach: "Duolingo is perfect for maintaining learning consistency and confidence. However, it does not work for serious learning needs or exam preparation. Baicizhan is relatively unintuitive and does not adequately utilize gamification. However, it has an excellent approach to vocabulary mastery." This evaluation demonstrates sophisticated assessment of how different design approaches serve different learning objectives. Figure 3 visualizes the relationship between engagement patterns across different applications.

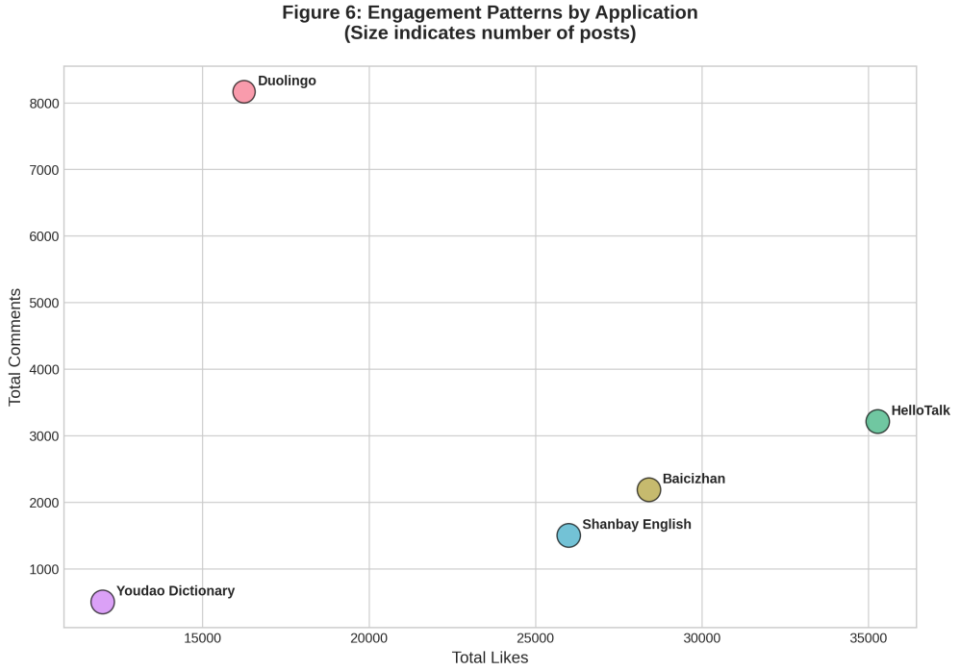


Figure 3. Engagement patterns showing relationship between likes and comments by application

5. Discussion

This exploratory study examined how Chinese users discuss English learning applications on Xiaohongshu, revealing complex patterns of evaluation, adaptation, and critique that extend understanding of mobile-assisted language learning in naturalistic contexts. The five themes that emerged—tensions between engagement and learning, responses to gamification and monetization, preferences for persistence over perfection, reliance on social proof, and practices of combining applications—collectively suggest that users approach language learning technology with considerable sophistication, actively constructing personalized learning strategies rather than passively consuming app-delivered content.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

The findings support and extend Uses and Gratifications theory's application to educational technology contexts. Consistent with U&G principles, users in this study demonstrated active selection and evaluation of media based on anticipated and obtained gratifications. The practice of combining multiple applications illustrates how users construct "gratification portfolios" by matching specific tools to specific needs—using Duolingo for habitual engagement, Baicizhan for vocabulary acquisition, HelloTalk for social connection, and supplementary resources for skills that apps inadequately address. This behavior aligns with

Subramaniam et al.'s (2022) identification of multiple gratification dimensions while demonstrating that individual learners may prioritize different dimensions at different stages.

The study also contributes to understanding the relationship between gratifications sought and gratifications obtained. The persistent theme of dissatisfaction with learning outcomes—despite positive evaluations of engagement and convenience—suggests systematic gaps between what users hope to gain from language apps and what they actually receive. Users who describe Duolingo as "selling the illusion of learning" are articulating a mismatch between anticipated academic assistance gratifications and perceived reality. This gap may explain why users develop combining strategies: rather than abandoning apps that fail to deliver expected learning outcomes, they supplement with additional tools that address specific limitations.

5.2. Practical Implications

The findings suggest several implications for stakeholders in language learning technology, though the exploratory nature of this study warrants caution in drawing strong conclusions. For application developers, user discourse highlights tensions between business models and educational value that may affect long-term sustainability. Aggressive monetization strategies that constrain free user experiences generated substantial resentment, with users describing strategies to avoid payment and expectations of "ditching" apps when ads become unbearable.

For educators, the findings suggest that students may already be engaging with language learning apps in ways that classroom instruction could acknowledge and potentially integrate. The practice of combining multiple apps demonstrates learner initiative that could inform pedagogical discussions about effective study strategies and media literacy. Rather than dismissing app-based learning as superficial, educators might help students evaluate which applications serve which purposes, when supplementary resources are needed, and how to assess their own progress beyond gamified metrics.

5.3. Limitations

This study has several limitations that constrain interpretation and generalizability. The sample of 49 posts from a single platform limits the breadth of perspectives captured. While high engagement metrics suggest that selected posts resonated with the Xiaohongshu community, posts with high likes and comments may not represent typical user experiences—users with particularly strong positive or negative reactions are more likely to post and engage than those with moderate views. This selection bias means that the themes identified may overrepresent extreme positions.

Platform-specific limitations also apply. Xiaohongshu's algorithm surfaces content based on engagement and relevance factors that may systematically exclude certain perspectives. The platform's demographic profile—predominantly young, urban, female users with relatively high socioeconomic status—may not reflect the broader population of Chinese language learners. Additionally, users who share experiences on social media may differ systematically from those who do not, potentially overrepresenting individuals with stronger opinions or greater digital fluency. Methodological limitations include the absence of demographic data about post authors beyond publicly shared information and the reliance on researcher translation and interpretation.

5.4. Future Research

Several directions for future research emerge from this study. Longitudinal designs could track how individual users' app use and evaluations evolve over time, potentially revealing patterns in how the engagement-versus-learning tension develops and resolves. Comparative studies across multiple platforms (Weibo, Douyin, Western platforms) could examine how platform affordances shape discourse about language learning technology. Larger-scale content analysis combining computational and qualitative methods could test the generalizability of themes identified here while identifying additional patterns.

The role of AI features in shaping user experiences represents an emerging area that this study only briefly touched upon. As language learning apps increasingly incorporate artificial intelligence for personalization, feedback, and conversation practice, understanding how users perceive and adapt these features will become increasingly important. Future research might specifically examine how AI capabilities affect the themes identified here—whether they address the engagement-versus-learning gap, how they interact with monetization strategies, and whether they enable more comprehensive single-app solutions that reduce the need for combining multiple tools.

6. Conclusion

This exploratory qualitative study examined how Chinese users discuss English learning applications on Xiaohongshu, revealing patterns of evaluation, adaptation, and critique that demonstrate sophisticated engagement with mobile-assisted language learning technologies. Through thematic analysis of 49 user-generated posts, five major themes emerged: tensions between habit-forming engagement and meaningful learning outcomes, user responses to gamification and monetization strategies, preferences for persistence over perfection, reliance on social proof and peer narratives, and practices of combining multiple applications to address functional gaps.

These findings suggest that Chinese users approach language learning apps as active consumers who evaluate, adapt, and critique technology based on diverse gratification needs. The Uses and Gratifications framework proved valuable for understanding how users select and combine applications to construct personalized learning ecosystems. The study contributes to MALL research by documenting authentic user perspectives captured through naturalistic social media discourse rather than controlled research settings. While the exploratory nature and sample limitations warrant caution in drawing strong conclusions, the patterns identified warrant further investigation as mobile applications continue to play central roles in language education worldwide.

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