

HOLDING ONTO HERITAGE: THE PRACTICES, BARRIERS, AND BELIEFS OF ASIAN
AMERICAN HERITAGE LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Many Heritage Language Learners (HLLs) struggle to balance speaking their family's native language and English on a regular basis. Particularly in households of Asian descent, the struggle to speak fluently at home can cause HLLs heightened stress. This qualitative study, grounded in Asian Critical Theory (AsianCrit), explored the experiences of five Asian American HLLs: four Vietnamese speakers and one Mandarin speaker. Using semi-structured interviews and reflective journals, the study examined the challenges they face in maintaining their heritage language and the strategies they used to sustain proficiency. Key findings revealed that HLLs relied on family-based reinforcement, social engagement, digital learning tools, and community involvement to maintain their language. However, they also struggled with limited opportunities for practice, societal pressures, generational communication gaps, and difficulties with literacy, leading to language loss and frustration. The study called for greater community support, institutional recognition, and inclusive pedagogical strategies to ensure that heritage languages are preserved and valued in multilingual societies.

Dedicated to those whose kindness, wisdom, and
encouragement lit the path when I needed it the most.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Heritage language learners (HLLs) often navigate complex challenges when trying to maintain their language proficiency. These difficulties are heightened by their need to balance competing cultural and linguistic influences, the expectations and practices of their heritage community, and the wider society they live in. Understanding these challenges is important because the ability to sustain heritage language proficiency is closely linked to cultural identity, social belonging, and educational outcomes (Song & Wu, 2024; Lee et al., 202). Moreover, in an increasingly interconnected world, proficiency in multiple languages is often in high demand in many industries (Darvin & Norton, 2016). Therefore, it is necessary to delve into the specific obstacles HLLs face and evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies they use to preserve their language skills.

In the following study, HLLs are defined as individuals who grew up speaking another language at home but often faced challenges in maintaining proficiency in their heritage language as they encountered the dominant language and culture. These challenges often include limited opportunities to use the heritage language, a lack of formal education in it, or even pressure to prioritize the dominant language over their own (Shih et al., 2019). Despite their unique linguistic background, many HLLs generally find themselves in a constant struggle to balance the demands of both languages, which can influence their sense of identity and connection to their cultural roots (Kwon, 2017).

The purpose of this research was to explore the unique challenges that HLLs of Asian descent encountered while trying to maintain their language proficiency. This work extended to examining their perceptions of the strategies and methods they used to practice their heritage language, such as family-based language practices, community engagement, and formal

educational support. The study was guided by three research questions: (1) What are the maintenance strategies and approaches to maintain their language proficiency used by HLLs?; (2) What challenges do HLLs encounter during their efforts to maintain their proficiency?; and (3) How do HLLs perceive the effectiveness of their maintenance strategies and approaches?

In addition, the study considered broader societal trends in heritage language decline, such as, the decline in intergenerational transmission rates. For example, the Pew Research Center report (2023) found that 68% of second-generation Latino individuals reported being able to speak Spanish “pretty well,” while this figure declined to 34% among third or higher-generation individuals, indicating a significant drop in proficiency across generations. While these statistics pertain to the Latino community, similar generational language shift patterns have been observed in many other immigrant communities in the United States. Compared to earlier findings, this updated data still demonstrates a nearly 50% decrease in language proficiency between the second and third generations (Pew research Center, 2023).

It is important to note that my study was grounded in Asian Critical Theory (Iftikar & Museus, 2018), which emphasized the importance of examining how Asian individuals' identities and experiences were shaped within educational contexts. Asian Critical Theory highlights the influence of systemic structures, cultural contexts, and social dynamics on the language maintenance efforts and outcomes of Asian heritage learners. Through this lens, HLLs' cultural identities are viewed as being influenced by their efforts to maintain their language, which in turn can offer a comprehensive view of the linguistic journeys of HLL. Building on the insights of earlier Asian Critical Theory (Iftikar & Museum, 2018; Museus & Iftikar, 2013; Chui et al., 2023; Qin et al., 2024), I sought to provide valuable insights on HLLs that can inform educators, policymakers, and community leaders about the needs and journey of HLLs. I believe that by

attempting to understand the strategies HLLs use to maintain the language, the challenges they face, and learning about what they think works best, then targeted support programs and initiatives could be developed to support HLLs.

While HLLs of Asian descent were the primary focus of this research, it is important to recognize that these struggles can also extend to other heritage language communities. Thus, comparing the narrative of different HLL groups allows for a more comprehensive understanding of language maintenance across diverse cultural contexts.

Asian Critical Theory (AsianCrit) as a Framework

Origins of Critical Race Theory and the Emergence of AsianCrit

Critical Race Theory (CRT) started in U.S. legal studies as a response to the failure of civil rights laws to fully address racism. It's based on several main ideas: (1) racism is a permanent part of American life, (2) sharing personal stories helps highlight the voices of marginalized groups, (3) racial progress often only happens when it benefits those in power, (4) colorblind thinking and liberal ideas can ignore real inequalities, and (5) the goal is to work toward justice and real change (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). While CRT is a strong tool for examining racism, some scholars have pointed out that it doesn't fully reflect the experiences of Asian Americans. For example, Gee (2009) noted that CRT's focus on Black and White racial dynamics overlooks the stereotypes and challenges Asian Americans face, such as being seen as outsiders or as "model minorities." To address this gap, AsianCrit was developed. It centers the voices of Asian communities and looks at how they are both ignored and stereotyped in mainstream society (Gee, 2009; Iftikar & Museus, 2013). Recent political pushback against CRT has also made it harder to talk about race in schools. Blosser and Cavendish (2024) found that laws limiting CRT in education caused some teachers to stay silent, which shows why

frameworks like AsianCrit are important because they help ensure that diverse voices and stories aren't left out of the classroom.

Grounded in AsianCrit, it emphasized how cultural identity, social dynamics, and systemic structures influenced the educational realities and language maintenance efforts of Asian HLLs. Central to AsianCrit is the notion that stories informed theory and practice, theory guided practice, and practice could uncover stories while utilizing theory to drive positive and transformative change (Iftikar & Museus, 2013; Chui et al., 2023;). This interconnected relationship has brought attention to the value of personal narratives in understanding and addressing the challenges faced by Asian HLLs. Such a relationship also allowed for a deeper exploration of their lived experiences and the systemic barriers they encountered. Recent scholars have expanded this foundation, for example, AsianCrit has been applied in K-12 educational policy and curriculum design to support Asian ethnic studies and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Chui et al., 2023). In heritage language research, scholars have applied AsianCrit to explore how racialized narratives influence immigrant families' parenting practices and language beliefs (Qin et al., 2024). It has also been used to challenge dominant ideologies such as the Model Minority Myth, which hides systemic inequalities and downplays the educational struggles faced by Asian Americans (Poon et al., 2016; Gee, 2009). In a related study, Lee, Her, and De Costa (2024) examined how a Chinese heritage mother negotiated her identity and responded to institutional challenges in a dual language bilingual program, further demonstrating how AsianCrit reveals both the personal and political aspects of heritage language maintenance. Together, these studies show that AsianCrit serves as a powerful framework for addressing systemic barriers and promoting educational equity across a variety of learning environments.

Heritage Language Loss and Its Personal Impact

Research has shown that language loss could lead to cultural disconnection and identity struggles. Wong Fillmore (1991) argued that when children lose the ability to communicate in their heritage language, they could also lose access to intergenerational knowledge, family traditions, and cultural narratives. This disconnection could contribute to feelings of alienation, as HLLs may struggle to fully integrate into either heritage or dominant cultural communities (Wong Fillmore, 1991). More recently, Sung (2024) provided similar insights through her study of Chinese/Taiwanese-American mixed-heritage students, noting that heritage language maintenance is deeply tied to how students construct their mixed-heritage identities. Participants expressed a strong desire to retain their heritage language to affirm both sides of their cultural identity, especially when external validation was lacking (Sung, 2024). Many second-generation Asian Americans faced “heritage language guilt,” where they felt ashamed for not speaking their parents’ language fluently but also felt the pressure to prioritize English for social and professional mobility (Kwon, 2017; Lee & Shin, 2008). Shin (2016) further elaborated on how internalized whiteness and colonial discourses contribute to identity struggles among Korean heritage learners. These discourses often marginalize non-English speakers and frame heritage languages as inferior, which can intensify learners’ emotional conflict with their linguistic identity (Shin, 2016). Additionally, according to Lee (2002), heritage language loss plays an important role in how Asian Americans perceive their racial identity. Those who maintain fluency in their heritage language are most likely to develop a strong ethnic identity, while those who lost proficiency often encounter cultural dissonance and detachment from their racial group. This phenomenon is aligned with AsianCrit’s notion that language is not just a communicative tool but a racialized and political entity shaped by broader social forces.

Policy Decisions and Their Lingering Effects

Furthermore, educational policies in the United States have often reinforced dominant language norms, marginalizing heritage languages and deprioritizing bilingualism. Historically, the English-only policies like Proposition 227 in California (enacted in 1998 and repealed in 2016) mandated English immersion, which meant that there were little to no opportunities for heritage language development in Asian communities (Gandara & Hopkins, 2010). These policies have had long-term effects on whom? since many Asian immigrant families often internalize the belief that prioritizing English would lead to greater academic and economic success, inadvertently contributing to language loss among second and third-generation HLLs. Moreover, even when bilingual programs exist, they disproportionately serve Spanish-speaking populations, while leaving Asian language speakers with few formal resources for language maintenance (García & Wei, 2014). The absence of structured heritage language programs for Asian HLLs reflects a systematic devaluation of Asian linguistic diversity and reinforces the idea that proficiency in English is the sole pathway to academic and professional success. This systematic exclusion further complicates HLLs' ability to maintain their heritage languages, as they are then forced to rely solely on family and community resources rather than institutional support.

Social Influences on Language Use and Attitudes

HLLs also face societal pressures like peer interactions, societal expectations, and stigmas surrounding the use of minority languages. These pressures shaped learners' attitudes toward their heritage language, which often led to diminished usage or confidence. AsianCrit allowed researchers to explore how external factors such as family expectations and peer influences shaped these dynamics (Ifthikar & Museus, 2018). Moreover, language-based

discrimination is generally viewed as a significant barrier for HLLs as accents and non-dominant language use can lead to a negative perception in academic and professional spaces. This discrimination reinforces the English-only movement in the US and equates English with intelligence and capabilities, while simultaneously discouraging heritage language use.

Furthermore, systemic structures, which include both educational and social policies, can also shape the different opportunities and challenges encountered by HLLs (Catama et al., 2017). These structures often operate through institutional norms, curricular decisions, and funding opportunities that collectively reinforce English dominance. Oftentimes, these structures prioritize the dominant language while marginalizing bilingualism or heritage language resources. What this could look like would be heritage language programs that are underfunded, inconsistently supported, or positioned as nonessential electives rather than integrated as part of the curriculum. This bias has resulted in educational systems that have either neglected or provided inadequate heritage language support, which in turn have created barriers to maintenance and exacerbated systemic inequities in language access (Catama et al., 2017).

Alignment Between Framework and Present Study

Building on these developments, this study's focus on participants' perceptions of their HLL maintenance strategies fit well with AsianCrit due to several distinct reasons. First, this framework emphasizes understanding how cultural identity, social dynamics, and systemic factors influenced individuals' experiences, especially those coming from marginalized communities. Second, by examining how HLL participants perceive the effectiveness of their maintenance strategies, this study is aligned with AsianCrit's goal of centering marginalized voices and exploring the impact of societal and educational structures on language maintenance. And third, the intersection of identity and language is a key element of AsianCrit theory. These

themes are reflected in the current study because participants frequently described their heritage language as closely connected to their sense of self, cultural belonging, and ties to their family and community. Challenges related to language maintenance were not solely linguistic, but also emotional and identity based. These challenges were shaped by marginalization, assimilation pressures, and efforts to sustain their culture in a predominantly English-speaking context.

Overall, the key concepts in this framework on cultural identity, social dynamics, and systemic structures were both accessible and relevant to this study. This framework provided practical insights for educators and policymakers. By defining these different concepts in relatable terms and connecting them to real-world challenges, the framework fostered a nuanced understanding of HLLs' linguistic journeys and background. This approach allowed the study to provide practical suggestions that contributed to ongoing discussions about promoting fairness and supporting the maintenance of heritage languages.

Literature Review

Asian Critical Theory in Language Maintenance

In this section, I examine the challenges Asian American HLLs face in maintaining their heritage language proficiency, emphasizing how systemic inequities, cultural identity struggles, and educational barriers shaped their development. AsianCrit was adopted to share the unique narratives of Asian individuals as they navigated complex societal systems and negotiated cultural identities.

Empirical studies have increasingly adopted AsianCrit to explore these dynamics. For instance, Qin et al. (2024) conducted a qualitative study with Chinese immigrant families, revealing how racialized school environments and exclusionary ideologies inhibited heritage language use. They found that parents responded by developing intentional language practices at

home to resist assimilation and affirm their cultural identity. Similarly, Lee, Her, and De Costa (2024) employed narrative inquiry to trace the experiences of a Chinese heritage mother navigating conflicting discourses within a dual-language program. Their findings highlighted emotional stress caused by internalized ideologies of “ideal” bilingualism and the tension between personal identity and school expectations.

Chui et al. (2023) also conducted an empirical study grounded in AsianCrit, gathering teacher and community voices to explore how Asian ethnic studies could be implemented in PK–12 education. Their research emphasized how heritage language marginalization is structurally embedded in curriculum and policy. Additionally, Pedraza and Guillaume (2023) analyzed interviews with Asian American students to uncover how early experiences of invisibility and microaggressions around language use shaped their self-perception and educational engagement. These stories showed how linguistic shame and silence were socially produced, not simply internal struggles.

Taken together, these empirical studies demonstrate that heritage language maintenance among Asian learners cannot be understood in isolation from the racialized and systemic pressures they face. By centering narrative and lived experience, this body of research affirms the need to examine language through the lenses of power, identity, and resistance which are all a part of the AsianCrit framework.

Language Identity And ideology

Heritage language maintenance is deeply tied to language identity, which refers to how individuals perceive their linguistic abilities and their association with a particular language community (Qin et al., 2024). Language identity is not only shaped by personal histories but also by dominant societal ideologies that framed certain languages as more valuable than others. In

the case of Asian HLLs, language identity is often negotiated due to pressures to assimilate into English-dominant environments while maintaining ties to their cultural heritage.

Darvin and Norton's (2023) concept of language investment frames identity formation as an ongoing negotiation shaped by language ideologies, power structures, and personal investment in language learning. Their framework suggests that a learner's motivation to maintain their heritage language is tied to the perceived benefits of language retention, such as cultural belonging, access to social capital, and economic opportunities (Darvin & Norton, 2023). This perspective shows that identity formation is not static, but rather an ongoing investigation shaped by language ideologies, power structures, and personal investment in language learning (Darvin & Norton, 2023; Block, 2021). It also reinforces the current study's focus on the fluidity of identity and how heritage language learners navigate these shifting dynamics in their efforts to maintain both their language and cultural identity.

Moreover, language ideology, which refers to the set of beliefs about language and its role in society, significantly influences HLLs' language use and proficiency (Darvin & Norton, 2023). In many Western contexts, English was positioned as the language of success, while heritage languages were often perceived as secondary or even as obstacles to social mobility (Gandara & Hopkins, 2010; García & Wei, 2014). This ideological hierarchy has led many Asian HLLs to internalize the belief that maintaining their heritage language is less valuable than attaining fluency in English (Chui et al., 2023; Shin, 2016; Lee et al., 2024). Such ideologies not only discourage active use of the heritage language but also shape self-perceptions of linguistic competence and belonging (Song & Wu, 2024; Qin et al., 2024; Driver & Prada, 2024).

Many institutions promote multilingualism as a positive trait, but learners who speak multiple languages often feel excluded if they do not meet the formal or standardized

expectations of how the majority language should be spoken (García & Wei, 2014; Gandara & Hopkins, 2020; Catama et al., 2017). For Asian HLLs, this can create additional pressure to conform to monolingual norms, making them even more hesitant to use their heritage language. As a result, they may feel discouraged from speaking their heritage language openly, further reinforcing language loss and weakening their cultural connection (Melo-Pfeifer & Tavares, 2024).

Language identity, in addition to being affected by ideologies, is also co-constructed through interaction, meaning that how HLLs perceive their language abilities is influenced by the social recognition (or maybe lack thereof) of their multilingual practices (Bucholz & Hall, 2005). For example, Asian HLLs who received negative feedback about their accent or grammar in their heritage language may have felt disconnected from their linguistic community, thereby reinforcing identity struggles. These findings showed how linguistic confidence was not simply a matter of proficiency but also of external validation from peers, family, and institutions.

Furthermore, language identity is shaped by intergenerational communication where parents and grandparents often play a crucial role in fostering positive attitudes towards heritage language retention. Children from families that actively integrate heritage language use into daily interactions have demonstrated stronger linguistic confidence and self-identification with their heritage culture (Lee et al., 2024; Song & Wu, 2024).

Cultural identity conflicts also impacted language retention. HLLs often struggle with dual cultural identities where they may have felt pressure to conform to mainstream societal expectations while also trying to maintain a connection to their ethnic heritage (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). When societal attitudes devalue their cultural background, HLLs may dissociate from their heritage language as a means of fitting in, which in turn can further accelerate

language loss.

Challenges in Heritage Language Maintenance

Reviewing a previous study on the challenges of heritage language maintenance, a study by Catama et al. (2017) identified several challenges faced by HLLs in maintaining their heritage language. Among the key obstacles for HLLs were limited opportunities for language use, societal pressures favoring the dominant language, and complex family dynamics that could either support or hinder language retention (Catama et al., 2017). This study emphasized how restricted access to heritage language environments, such as community interactions or educational programs, often resulted in reduced fluency and eventual language decline for HLLs.

Structural and Societal Barriers to Heritage Language Maintenance

One of the most significant challenges HLLs face is the limited availability of structured opportunities to engage with their heritage language in both formal and informal settings. Many schools in the United States lack heritage language programs, and even when such programs exist, they are often advertised as extracurricular activities rather than core subjects, reinforcing the English only movement in academic contexts (Gandara & Hopkins, 2010). Additionally, heritage language schools, which are often privately run, require financial investments that some families may not have been able to afford or donate to. This can then lead to disparities in access to learners' language maintenance opportunities (Lee & Shin, 2008).

Beyond academic contexts, media and digital content further reinforce the dominance of the societal language. Studies have shown that younger generations are heavily influenced by digital platforms such as social media, television, and online entertainment where English was the language of communication (García & Wei, 2014). Without regular exposure to their heritage language in digital spaces, HLLs may find it difficult to develop or sustain fluency as their

primary mode of engagement increasingly shifts toward the dominant language.

Community support also plays an important role in language maintenance. However, in many immigrant communities, there are often fewer opportunities to engage in heritage language conversations due to shifting demographic patterns and assimilationist pressures (Catama et al., 2017; Kwon, 2017). Kwon (2017) and Chui et al. (2023) demonstrated that when community institutions such as cultural centers, religious spaces, or heritage groups did not actively promote bilingualism then HLLs were left with limited opportunities for authentic interaction in their heritage language, further contributing to language loss.

Societal pressures, including the perception that proficiency in the dominant language is more valuable for socioeconomic mobility, generally further aggravate this issue. These pressures often lead HLLs to prioritize the dominant language, thereby marginalizing their heritage language in daily use (Wong Fillmore, 1991). Many HLLs are subjected to language-based stigmas, particularly in schools where speaking a non-dominant language is often associated with academic underachievement or social isolation (Qin et al., 2024). These stigmas are reinforced by an educational system that often prioritizes English proficiency by often framing heritage language use as a hindrance rather than an asset (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). Additionally, teachers and administrators may discourage the use of heritage languages in classrooms, either explicitly through English-only policies or implicitly by not incorporating students' linguistic backgrounds into curriculum design (Gandara & Hopkins, 2010). These practices, in turn, create a learning environment where HLLs feel that their bilingual abilities were undervalued, leading many to abandon their heritage language in favor of full assimilation into the dominant linguistic culture.

Beyond the classroom, professional spaces also reflect societal biases against non-

dominant languages. Even in industries like business, where multilingualism could have been a professional advantage, HLLs may feel pressure to prioritize English due to workplace norms that implicitly favored monolingual communication (Museus & Iftikar, 2013). For instance, some professional settings or schools have implemented “English-only” policies that discourage or even penalize the use of other languages (Museus & Iftikar, 2013; Gandara & Hopkins, 2010). This pressure discouraged active use of heritage languages, leading to language loss even among those who had previously maintained fluency.

Intergenerational Language Shift and Family Dynamics

Moreover, heritage language transmission is heavily influenced by parental language beliefs and strategies. While some parents made conscious efforts to create bilingual home environments, others may have shifted towards the dominant language due to concerns about their children's academic performance and social integration (Manosuthikit & De Costa, 2016). Many immigrant parents believe that English proficiency is necessary for economic and social success, leading them to minimize heritage language use at home to prioritize English development (Wong Fillmore, 1991). This shift has often resulted in intergenerational language gaps, where children lose fluency in their heritage language and struggle to communicate with grandparents or extended family members (King, 2024).

Additionally, intergenerational conflict can emerge when younger generations resist heritage language use, perceiving it as outdated or unnecessary for their social lives (Lee, 2002). This resistance is often worsened when children feel that their bilingualism is not valued outside the home, reinforcing their preference for the dominant language (García & Wei, 2014). Even in households where parents attempt to reinforce heritage language use, the surrounding social environment plays a significant role in shaping language retention outcomes. If children do not

see the practical value of their heritage language in school, media, or peer interactions, they are less likely to engage with it actively which can then lead to eventual language shift (García & Wei, 2014).

To counter the abovementioned challenges, some families adopt transnational strategies, such as sending children to their home country for extended visits to strengthen language skills. While this can be effective, studies have indicated that these experiences often provide only temporary reinforcement, as children tend to revert to their dominant language upon returning to their primary environment (Maloney & De Costa, 2017). Without sustained engagement, these strategies may not be sufficient to counterbalance the pressures of assimilation and linguistic shift.

Psychological and Emotional Barriers to Heritage Language Retention

Beyond social and family dynamics, HLLs often encounter psychological and emotional barriers when attempting to maintain their language skills. Many HLLs face "linguistic insecurity," where they felt self-conscious about their proficiency in their heritage language, particularly if they lack fluency or spoke with an accent influenced by the dominant language (Prior, 2018). This insecurity often discourages them from using their heritage language in public or in front of native speakers, contributing to language avoidance and gradual loss of proficiency.

Researching HLL Maintenance and Education: Qualitative Approaches and Interviews

When HLL maintenance, interviews and journaling have proven to be effective qualitative tools. By selecting a specific target group of participants, interviews generally capture the insights of individuals who are directly affected by heritage language maintenance challenges (Prior, 2018). This focused approach allows for a deeper exploration of the unique struggles and strategies employed by a specific subset of HLLs, rather than relying on generalized data from a

broader language-learning population (Friedman, 2020).

Journaling, as a complementary data collection method to interviews, provides participants with the opportunity to engage in deeper self-reflection on their language learning journey. Unlike structured interview responses, journaling allows research participants to document their shifting emotions, personal realizations, and patterns of language use over time. This ongoing reflection helps capture subtle changes in identity, confidence, and motivation that might not have emerged in a single interview session (Wong Fillmore, 1991; King, 2024). Additionally, journaling serves as a reflective tool for participants to recognize their progress, challenges, and evolving attitudes toward their heritage language, thereby further enriching the depth of qualitative analyses (Pew Research Center, 2023).

Prior (2018) emphasized the effectiveness of these methods in generating in-depth insights, as they allow participants to share detailed emotions, perspectives, and personal narratives. Similarly, Friedman (2020) highlighted the interactive nature of interviews, describing them as socializing interactions where meaning is co-constructed between the researcher and participants. This dynamic approach enables researchers to uncover not just individual experiences but also the broader sociocultural and systemic influences that shape heritage language maintenance (García & Wei, 2014). By emphasizing dialogue and interaction, interviews thus provide a platform for participants to articulate their struggles, methods, and aspirations regarding language learning by reinforcing the relational nature of identity formation (King, 2024).

Additionally, interviews provide a space for participants to share their language ideologies, revealing how their personal beliefs about language intersect with societal norms and educational policies. These narratives reflect observations found by Iftikar and Museus (2018),

who argue that dominant ideologies often marginalize Asian languages and uphold English as the norm, contributing to internalized beliefs that devalue their heritage language (Gandara & Hopkins, 2010). Others developed strong linguistic resilience, viewing their heritage language as an essential part of their identity and actively sought opportunities to use it despite systemic barriers (Song & Wu, 2024). The interplay between personal language beliefs and external influences demonstrates the complexity of language maintenance and further underscored the need for qualitative methodologies to examine these perspectives (García & Wei, 2014).

These methodologies are highly relevant to the current study as they align with the goal of eliciting rich, personal narratives from HLLs. Through interviews, participants can reflect on their backgrounds, offering detailed insights into the challenges they encountered, such as societal pressures, limited opportunities for language use, and family dynamics. The target group was selected based on specific criteria, such as language background, educational history, and exposure to heritage language environments. This approach ensured that the data collected were directly relevant to the study's objectives.

Prior research on HLLs often relied on methodologies that fail to fully capture the richness of participants' lived experiences or account for the broader systemic factors influencing their language maintenance. Some studies emphasized broad surveys or rigid interviews, which limited the ability to explore the interconnectedness between cultural identity and language use over time (Gandara & Hopkins, 2010). Traditional survey methods often focused on language proficiency levels rather than exploring the social and emotional dimensions of language loss. This gap was particularly concerning when considering the racialized realities of Asian HLLs, as language maintenance was often intertwined with cultural belonging and systemic barriers in education (Iftikar & Museus, 2018).

Past studies on HLLs have also revealed the importance of addressing the racialized and systemic challenges faced by HLLs within educational and societal contexts. This study aimed to address these gaps by combining semi-structured interviews, journaling, and participant reflection to ensure a more interactive and reflective approach. These methods allowed for richer narratives and a deeper understanding of how HLLs navigate their language journey. By doing so, the findings were aligned with the calls for a more context-sensitive and participant-centered methodologies in HLL research (Catama et al., 2017; Qin et al., 2024).

Existing research on HLLs revealed critical gaps in understanding the societal factors that influenced heritage language maintenance. While studies have examined individual and familial challenges, they often overlook the role of societal influences, such as community attitudes, access to cultural resources, and the impact of societal pressures to assimilate. Additionally, there was limited integration of AsianCrit in exploring how these societal dynamics intersected with cultural identity and heritage language use, particularly for Asian HLLs. As demonstrated by studies guided by AsianCrit, understanding linguistic challenges requires centering racialized conditions, particularly for students who face both systemic barriers in education and cultural expectations from their families (Museus & Iftikar, 2013). Through qualitative interviews, researchers can better assess how racialized identity formation interacts with language maintenance, thereby shedding light on the ways Asian HLLs negotiate multiple pressures (Iftikar & Museus, 2018).

To address these gaps, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the maintenance strategies and approaches to maintain their language proficiency used by heritage language learners (HLLs)?

2. What challenges do heritage language learners (HLLs) encounter during their efforts to maintain their proficiency?
3. How do heritage language learners (HLLs) perceive the effectiveness of their maintenance strategies and approaches?

These questions aimed to uncover the ways societal factors shape the experiences of Asian HLLs and identify effective approaches to support their language maintenance efforts.

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

Participants and Setting

A qualitative case study approach was used to explore the unique stories of five Asian American HLLs: one Mandarin speaker and four Vietnamese speakers. All the participants were second-generation Americans, meaning they were born in the United States to immigrant parents and grew up navigating both their heritage language and the dominant English-speaking environment. Specifically, all the participants were born and raised in or around Grand Rapids, Michigan, a mid-sized city with a growing but still relatively small Asian American population. This context shaped their access to language resources, peer support, and cultural affirmation, which offers important insight into the lived experiences of Asian American HLLs in areas where bilingualism is not yet widely supported. By focusing on a small, purposeful group, the study sought to provide deep insights into how HLLs maintained their language skills amidst cultural and societal pressures. This method aligned with the study's goal of amplifying participants' voices while addressing the nuanced challenges encountered by HLLs and the strategies they adopted to counter these challenges.

Participants were purposefully selected to best fit the study's focus and demographics, ensuring alignment with the research objectives. Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research to ensure that participants' perspectives are representative of the phenomenon under investigation, thereby allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of linguistic identity, cultural belonging, and language maintenance strategies (King, 2024). This method was particularly valuable in capturing the intricacies of heritage language maintenance among Asian American communities, as it allowed for the inclusion of individuals with varying degrees of proficiency and exposure to their heritage language. The selection process prioritized

individuals whose backgrounds reflected the interplay of cultural, linguistic, and societal factors under investigation. Their detailed narratives brought attention to their challenges such as societal pressures, limited opportunities for language use, and family dynamics. The order in Table 1 reflects the sequence in which participants were interviewed, beginning with the first and ending with the last. This order is incidental and does not indicate any prioritization beyond the logistical arrangement of interviews.

Table 1. Participant Information

Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Occupation	Heritage Language	Language Learning Context
Sue	Female	30s	Healthcare	Vietnamese	Intergenerational language transmission within household
Jade	Female	20s	Retail	Mandarin Chinese	Formal Classes & Intergenerational language transmission within household
Talia	Female	20s	Business	Vietnamese	Heritage Language School & Intergenerational language transmission within household
Violet	Female	20s	Student	Vietnamese	Heritage Language School & Intergenerational language transmission within household
Brad	Male	20s	Retail	Vietnamese	Intergenerational language transmission within household

By selecting participants who had actively engaged in heritage language learning in the United States, their social environments could be closely examined to understand how it shaped their linguistic development. Environmental influences, including family interactions, educational institutions, and peer relationships, have been found to play a crucial role in shaping

heritage language proficiency and use (Lee & Shin, 2008). Some participants (Jade, Talia, Violet) had access to formal heritage language programs, while others (Sue and Brad) relied primarily on home-based learning, underscoring the diverse pathways through which HLLs attempt to sustain their language skills in a predominantly English-speaking society (Gandara & Hopkins, 2010).

Participants were chosen based on specific criteria, such as their proficiency level, whether they had access to formal heritage language education, and their participation in community or family-based language maintenance practices (Catama et al., 2017; Kwon, 2017). By including individuals with varying degrees of language exposure, the study aimed to capture a broad spectrum of heritage language learning paths. This highlights the unique challenges and opportunities faced by different groups of HLLs. The diversity among participants offered insights into individual struggles while also uncovering common themes such as the influence of language ideologies, the role of cultural identity in motivation, and the presence (or absence) of institutional support systems for HLLs (Iftikar & Museus, 2018).

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews and reflective journals to support participants in articulating their thoughts. Using two data collection methods allowed for methodological triangulation, strengthening the reliability and validity of the study (Prior, 2018). These data sources were chosen to complement each other, offering both immediate and long-term perspectives on heritage language maintenance. Semi-structured interviews offered rich, conversational insight into the nuanced realities of participants' heritage language development. Reflective journals added another layer of depth, documenting the ongoing challenges and strategies participants employed over time.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews followed a flexible five-step framework (Kallio et al., 2016), creating space for participants to narrate their stories in a conversational yet organized format. This framework was chosen because it enables researchers to maintain consistency across interviews while allowing participants to share their thoughts and reflections, ensuring that the data collected remains both structured and participant-driven (Friedman, 2020). Furthermore, this format offered deeper insight into an HLL's relationship with language and identity, their perceptions of language loss or retention, and the emotional significance of their heritage language. It also provided a more holistic understanding of their linguistic and cultural identities (García& Wei, 2014).

This interview method balanced structure with flexibility, ensuring that while core topics were covered, participants had the freedom to elaborate on their personal experiences, attitudes, and emotions related to language learning (Friedman, 2020). Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, with open-ended questions designed to explore themes such as linguistic identity, cultural belonging, language ideologies, and institutional barriers to language maintenance. For example, participants were asked to describe their comfort level with speaking, reading, and writing in their heritage language, share significant language experiences, and reflect on how family attitudes shaped their motivation to maintain it. These questions addressed the emotional and social aspects of heritage language learning by helping answer how learners experienced and interpreted their linguistic identity. Furthermore, the semi-structured approach allowed for follow-up questions based on participants' responses, ensuring that unique insights were explored in greater depth. This approach was especially useful in uncovering the strategies participants used for language maintenance (e.g., using media, joining programs, or creating personal

routines), and how they evaluated the effectiveness of these strategies. It also helped highlight specific challenges they encountered, such as discomfort in using the language or lack of practice spaces. This adaptability in questioning was particularly important for identifying patterns in how participants conceptualized their linguistic identities and the role of their heritage language in everyday interactions (García & Wei, 2014). This method aligned with the principles of qualitative research that emphasized participant agency in constructing their narratives (García & Wei, 2014). Additionally, the social dynamics within interviews played a critical role, as the interaction between interviewer and participant often shaped how language identity was expressed (Friedman, 2020). These dynamics reflect how language identity is often co-constructed through interaction and self-perception in response to societal influences (Friedman, 2020).

Reflective Journals

In addition to the interviews, reflective journals were maintained over a five-week period, offering participants a space to document their evolving thoughts, challenges, and progress in a manner that was unfiltered and deeply personal. Participants were given two open-ended questions to guide their reflections but were encouraged to write as much or as little as they wished. To guide their reflections, participants were given two open-ended prompts: (1) “Describe a recent conversation in your heritage language where you struggled to express yourself. What made it difficult, and how did you feel during and after?” and (2) “What makes it difficult for you to practice your heritage language regularly? Reflect on a specific situation when this challenge affected your learning.” These questions were designed to elicit specific, emotionally grounded experiences tied to language use and identity. By encouraging participants to reflect on real-life challenges, the journals helped uncover personal and contextual barriers to

heritage language maintenance. This process directly supported the study's focus on the emotional and social challenges HLLs face. They had roughly two and a half weeks to complete the entries, allowing for flexibility to accommodate their varying schedules to respect the demands of their daily lives. This longitudinal approach allowed for the identification of shifting attitudes toward language learning and maintenance, offering insights into the dynamic nature of linguistic identity (Wong Fillmore, 1991). Journals provided participants with a private space to express challenges they may not have been comfortable sharing in an interview setting, thereby capturing a more nuanced picture of their language maintenance journey (García & Wei, 2014).

These journals not only provided a window into participants' day-to-day lives but also revealed patterns and shifts in their attitudes, strategies, and emotional connections to their heritage language over time. The longitudinal nature of this data source enriched the study by capturing how societal pressures, family dynamics, and individual goals influenced their language maintenance efforts across different contexts. Particularly, journal entries revealed recurring themes related to self-confidence in language use, perceived linguistic competence, and emotional responses to language loss or revitalization efforts (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). Furthermore, reflective journaling encouraged participants to engage in self-analysis, deepening their understanding of their own development while simultaneously contributing to the richness of the data. This approach aligned with research on identity formation in HLLs, which suggested that self-reflection fostered a greater awareness of linguistic agency and resilience (Iftikar & Museus, 2018).

There was a focus on Asian Americans who speak Mandarin and Vietnamese due to the researcher's personal familiarity with these languages and their cultural contexts. This helped to facilitate a better connection with participants and enhanced the accuracy of interpreting their

responses due to a deeper understanding of the linguistic and cultural nuances. Furthermore, to recruit participants, a personal network was used by leveraging existing relationships to identify individuals who would be a good fit for the study.

Materials and Procedure

The table below outlines the data sources, their purpose, and how they contributed to the study.

Table 2. Data Source

Data Source	Description	Purpose	Examples in Excerpts
Semi-Structured Interviews	One interview lasting 60 minutes long. Conducted on Zoom.	To gather detailed, personal narratives about participants' challenges, societal influences, and strategies for heritage language maintenance. Aligned Research Questions (RQ): RQ 1 & RQ 2	"I mostly use it at home. I don't really have any like Vietnamese American friends... It's easier to speak in English." - Violet
Reflective Journals	Participants documented their ongoing thoughts, challenges, and progress over a four-week period.	To capture longitudinal insights into participants' evolving language experiences and strategies. Aligned Research Questions (RQ): RQ 1 & RQ 3	"Some of the ideas I wanted to convey felt difficult to translate accurately because the cultural context in which I grew up is quite different from my family member's experience." - Talia

Positionality Statement

As a researcher, my background as a heritage language learner and my personal journey with language acquisition significantly influence my perspective on this study. Growing up bilingual, I faced challenges in balancing a heritage language with English, which gives me a personal understanding of the struggles participants may encounter. My academic journey in studying Mandarin and Vietnamese equipped me with cultural and linguistic insights that

enhance my ability to engage with participants and analyze their lived experiences meaningfully. These shared backgrounds positioned me as an insider, fostering trust and connection with participants and encouraging them to share their narratives openly.

However, as King (2024) emphasized in her discussion of positionality statements, the dual role of being both an insider and a researcher comes with both positives and negatives. While my shared identity with participants allows me to approach the research with empathy and a nuanced understanding of societal pressures and cultural dynamics, it also highlights the importance of a commitment to reflexivity. King (2024) warns that researchers must critically examine how their positionality might shape the research process and potentially introduce bias. Acknowledging this, I aimed to ensure that participants' voices were authentically represented and not overshadowed by my interpretations or assumptions. Throughout the research process, I continuously reflected on my positionality. My goal was to strike a balance between leveraging my insider perspective and maintaining the objectivity necessary to faithfully document participants' perspectives.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure ethical integrity, all participants were provided with informed consent documents outlining the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to protect their identities, and interviews were conducted in private settings to create a comfortable environment for open discussion (Qin et al., 2024). The study adhered to Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines for ethical research involving human subjects, reinforcing the commitment to participant privacy and data security (Gandara & Hopkins, 2010).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to examine the data collected from semi-structured interviews and reflective journals. Thematic analysis is a widely used method in qualitative research that enables researchers to systematically identify patterns, categorize recurring themes, and interpret participants' lived experiences within a structured framework (Prior, 2018). By organizing data into meaningful themes, this approach facilitated a deeper understanding of the challenges, strategies, and emotional dimensions of heritage language maintenance among Asian American HLLs. Thematic analysis was particularly suitable because it allowed for an exploration of how identity, social structures, and institutional factors shape language retention and use among HLLs (García & Wei, 2014).

The data analysis process followed a structured, multi-step approach to ensure rigor and consistency. First, all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity of participants' narratives, and journal entries were carefully reviewed multiple times for accuracy and familiarization with the data (Friedman, 2020). This initial phase of data immersion was critical in identifying subtle patterns, recurring phrases, and key linguistic expressions that reflected participants' engagement with their heritage language. During this stage, researchers took detailed notes on significant statements related to language identity, family influence, societal pressures, and educational contexts. To ensure validity and reliability, triangulation was employed by cross-referencing data from the interviews and journals. For instance, naturally recurring themes in the interviews were compared with entries in the reflective journals to confirm consistency and deepen understanding.

Following familiarization, the next step involved open coding, where meaningful excerpts from the transcribed interviews and journal entries were assigned descriptive labels.

Open coding helped categorize data into preliminary themes that aligned with the study's research questions, ensuring that participant voices remained central in the interpretation process (King, 2024). Codes were developed inductively, allowing themes to emerge naturally rather than imposing predetermined categories. Some of the initial codes included "linguistic insecurity," "heritage language as cultural capital," "parental reinforcement," "societal stigma toward bilingualism," and "educational barriers." These codes captured various aspects of heritage language maintenance and the diverse ways in which participants navigated their linguistic experiences.

After the open coding phase, axial coding was used to refine and consolidate similar codes into broader thematic categories. This process helped establish relationships between different codes, ensuring that each theme was logically connected to the research objectives (Prior, 2018). For example, individual codes related to "limited exposure to heritage language," "fear of making mistakes," and "avoiding heritage language in social settings" were grouped under the broader category of "Challenges in Heritage Language Maintenance." Similarly, codes such as "using language-learning apps," "speaking with family members," and "watching media in the heritage language" were categorized under "Strategies for Language Retention." This stage helped ensure the themes reflected both the depth of individual perspectives and the shared patterns across HLLs.

Through this iterative process of coding and theme refinement, four major themes emerged:

1. Identity and Cultural Connection – The role of heritage language in shaping self-identity and emotional ties to cultural heritage.

2. Challenges in Heritage Language Maintenance – Barriers such as societal pressure, limited exposure, and lack of formal instruction.
3. Family Influence and Expectations – The impact of parental encouragement, intergenerational communication, and familial expectations on language use.
4. Strategies for Language Retention – Adaptive methods employed by HLLs to sustain their language skills, including self-directed learning and digital resources.

To enhance credibility and reliability, data from interviews and journal entries were cross-referenced through methodological triangulation (García & Wei, 2014). Triangulation ensured that themes were consistently supported by multiple data sources, reinforcing the validity of the findings. Additionally, peer debriefing sessions were conducted to review coding decisions and minimize potential biases in interpretation (Friedman, 2020). This approach helped verify that the themes were not solely based on subjective researcher assumptions but rather grounded in the participants' actual narratives and lived experiences.

Moreover, to further validate the findings, negative case analysis was used to identify responses that deviated from dominant patterns. Including outlier perspectives helped capture the diversity within the HLL population and reduce the risk of overgeneralization. Highlighting this need, recent study emphasizes the importance of accounting for emotional and contextual variability in heritage language research, particularly when examining cases that challenge prevailing narratives (Driver & Prada, 2024). For instance, while most participants reported experiencing linguistic insecurity in social settings, one participant expressed confidence in their bilingual ability, attributing it to strong parental reinforcement and community support. Such variations underscored the multifaceted nature of heritage language maintenance and paid close

attention to the influence of individual backgrounds, family dynamics, and personal motivation on language retention (Lee & Shin, 2008).

CHAPTER 3: FINDINGS

Research Question 1: What are the maintenance strategies and approaches of HL learners?

Strategies employed by HLLs to maintain their linguistic proficiency in an English-dominant environment were examined. Based on a thorough analysis of data collected from multiple sources, several key subthemes emerged regarding the participants' language maintenance efforts. These sub-themes included self-directed learning, community engagement, family reinforcement, and media consumption, all of which contributed to varying degrees of success in heritage language retention.

Many participants actively engaged in self-directed learning, utilizing tools such as language-learning apps, journaling, and self-study exercises to reinforce their skills. Family reinforcement was a crucial factor, with some participants benefiting from structured home-based language use, while others struggled with inconsistent parental expectations or generational communication gaps. Community engagement also played a significant role, as some learners sought opportunities to interact with native speakers through cultural organizations and religious groups. Finally, media consumption through television, listening to music, and reading books in their heritage language served as an accessible and enjoyable way to maintain exposure to their linguistic heritage.

These findings noted the adaptive and resourceful approaches that HLLs employ to sustain their heritage language skills. While some strategies were structured and intentional, others were more informal and socially embedded, reflecting the diverse ways in which learners navigate language retention in their daily lives.

Family Based Language Reinforcement

One of the most common strategies reported by participants was maintaining their

heritage language through daily interactions with family members. Many participants noted that their parents and grandparents primarily communicated in their heritage language, which created a home environment that reinforced language retention. In many cases, families implemented language policies that required the use of the heritage language at home to prevent language loss. Sue, a female in her 30s who grew up in a Vietnamese immigrant family, emphasized the significant role her family played in her language maintenance:

Their role is the main role in encouraging and supporting me to maintain my language.

They very much instilled the importance of knowing our heritage language, so that we can continue to communicate with not only our elders but also younger generations.

Making sure that we're not losing that is a very big part of our culture and heritage.

Her statement illustrates how language is not just a tool for communication but also a means of preserving intergenerational relationships and cultural continuity.

Similarly, Brad, a male in his 20s who grew up in a Vietnamese immigrant family, described how his parents took a more structured approach by enforcing a strict language-use policy at home, ensuring that Vietnamese remained an essential part of his upbringing:

At home, it would be only Vietnamese because our parents wanted us to learn it. It's our culture, and they didn't want us to lose it. Ever since I could remember, I always knew it because that's just how we communicated at home.

This strict policy mirrors the experiences of many HLLs, where parental enforcement serves as an intentional strategy to combat language shift and encourage long-term fluency (Lee et al., 2024).

However, not all participants viewed parental language reinforcement as entirely positive. For some, family-imposed expectations created pressure or feelings of frustration, particularly

when their personal language preferences clashed with parental insistence on heritage language use. Violet, a female in her 20s who grew up in a Vietnamese immigrant family, expressed a sense of resistance toward her mother's requirement that she respond in Vietnamese by saying, "She knew I understood her, but she still wanted me to respond in Vietnamese. It's not like I was going to suddenly forget Vietnamese just because I spoke English."

Violet's story reflects a common internal conflict among HLLs, where familial language expectations may feel rigid, causing a tension between linguistic identity and personal autonomy. While her mother viewed strict heritage language use as a necessity for fluency and cultural preservation, Violet's perspective suggests that forced adherence may sometimes backfire, leading to resistance rather than engagement. Song and Wu (2024) similarly observed how emotional dynamics between parents and children can shape language use, revealing that feelings such as guilt, obligation, and resistance often come up in intergenerational language transmission. These tensions are not only personal but also shaped by broader ideologies around what it means to be a "good" heritage speaker (Song & Wu, 2024). Darwin and Norton (2016) further emphasize that learners' emotional investment in a language is influenced by how they perceive its value and how power operates within family and social contexts. In such cases, language becomes entangled with identity and power, where communication is no longer about connection but about compliance.

Moreover, such tensions can contribute to code-switching behaviors, where HLLs understand and process their heritage language but instinctively default to English in conversations (García & Wei, 2014). This dynamic can create frustration on both sides where parents feel like their language policies are being ignored and the children feel like their linguistic choices are being restricted.

Social Engagement

Outside of the family environment, social interactions with heritage speakers played a significant role in reinforcing language proficiency. However, participants shared varying levels of success in leveraging social networks for language retention. While some actively sought out conversations in their heritage language, others found limited opportunities or encountered social barriers that prevented them from fully engaging in meaningful linguistic exchanges.

For some participants, friendships with other heritage speakers served as a natural reinforcement mechanism, providing opportunities for informal language use in daily conversations. Brad, for example, said, “With friends, I have a lot of Vietnamese friends that we use Vietnamese with. It’s also the same, but also, you know, it’s something we have in common.” This highlights that having Vietnamese-speaking friends was crucial to maintaining his proficiency, as their shared linguistic background fostered an environment where Vietnamese was used freely. Furthermore, Brad’s statement illustrates how language can act as both a communicative tool and a unifying cultural factor within peer groups. Speaking Vietnamese was not just about practicing the language, it was also about affirming cultural identity and creating a sense of belonging. By integrating Vietnamese into his social interactions, Brad was able to maintain consistent exposure to the language in a way that extended beyond family obligations.

Similarly, heritage language proficiency can be valuable in professional settings, where the ability to communicate in multiple languages provides practical benefits. Sue, who works in the medical field, shared how her Vietnamese skills allowed her to assist patients more effectively, reducing the need for external interpreters. She commented, “I work in the medical field, so we get people who speak all different languages. One specific case, this patient spoke Vietnamese, and instead of using a translator line, I felt comfortable enough to translate for

them.” This illustrates how heritage language skills extend beyond social or familial interactions and can serve as an asset in professional environments. In high-stakes settings like healthcare, where accurate communication is crucial, bilingual professionals can bridge language gaps for patients who may otherwise struggle to express their medical concerns. Unlike casual conversations with friends or family, using a heritage language in a professional context requires a higher degree of confidence and linguistic precision.

However, even among heritage speakers, the extent to which the language is used varies significantly depending on the social context. Some heritage speakers may still default to English, particularly if their proficiency in the heritage language is weaker or if English has become the dominant mode of communication in their peer circles. This variance can impact how frequently and effectively heritage learners engage in their language outside of familial spaces.

Barriers To Heritage Language Use in Social Spaces

While Brad found success in maintaining Vietnamese through friendships, other participants faced challenges in integrating their heritage language into social spaces, despite seeking out opportunities to do so. Violet, for instance, attempted to engage with her heritage language through a university-based cultural organization but found that her experience did not align with her expectations by saying, “I was a part of the Vietnamese Student Association for a very short time on campus, but I just felt really disconnected from them.” This underscores an important limitation of relying on cultural organizations for language reinforcement. While these groups often celebrate their cultural heritage, they do not always function as active spaces for language practice. It can then be assumed that many university-level cultural associations operate primarily in English, catering to members who may have varying levels of fluency in their

heritage language. As a result, participants like Violet may enter these spaces expecting to use their heritage language, only to find that English remains the default means of communication.

This reality raises a broader question about the effectiveness of heritage language learning within communities. While cultural organizations provide exposure to traditions, events, and community networks, they do not always foster an immersive linguistic environment. This suggests that HLLs may need to seek more targeted opportunities, such as language exchange groups, conversation partners, or immersion experiences to truly enhance their proficiency.

Digital And Self-Directed Learning

In addition to direct social interactions, technology and media emerged as vital tools for HLLs wanting to sustain their language skills. My participants frequently cited digital platforms as essential resources for maintaining engagement with their heritage language. These platforms included streaming services, social media, language learning apps, and online forums. They were particularly valuable in the absence of immersive linguistic environments. For many, these tools provided a convenient and personalized approach to language learning that supplemented traditional exposure through family or formal education.

Several participants noted that exposure to heritage language media, including dramas, music, and online content, significantly enhanced their comprehension and engagement with their language. This aligns with research suggesting that entertainment-based learning fosters subconscious language acquisition by increasing exposure to natural speech patterns, cultural expressions, and idiomatic usage (García & Wei, 2014). For example, Jade, a female in her 20s who grew up in a Chinese immigrant family, described how her enthusiasm for watching Chinese dramas and variety shows enhanced her interest in learning Mandarin. She later comments during the interview, “I think what really helped me learn more was finding a

hobby... when I started watching dramas, I became more interested in the language.” Jade’s statement reflects a key factor in effective heritage language retention: personal motivation. Unlike structured language classes, which may sometimes feel like an obligation, self-directed exposure to media fosters voluntary engagement, making language learning feel more authentic and enjoyable. This kind of passive learning also often reinforces listening comprehension, expands vocabulary, and improves recognition of native speech patterns.

Furthermore, media consumption creates opportunities for emotional and cultural immersion, which can deepen a heritage learner’s connection to the language. Watching dramas or listening to music in a heritage language not only enhances linguistic skills but also helps learners absorb cultural nuances, humor, and regional dialect variations that textbooks or classroom instruction may not always cover (Charalambous & Yerosimou, 2015). However, it is also important to keep in mind that while entertainment serves as an engaging and accessible method for heritage language exposure, it does not always provide the structured reinforcement needed to develop well-rounded skills in speaking and writing. Passive learning through media may enhance comprehension, but without active engagement, for example, speaking or writing practice, HLLs may still struggle with expressive language production.

Beyond entertainment, participants also leveraged digital tools such as translation apps, language-learning software, and online forums to reinforce their heritage language proficiency. These tools were particularly valuable for maintaining vocabulary and bridging linguistic gaps that come up due to infrequent language use. Talia, a female in her 20s who grew up in a Vietnamese immigrant family, described how she relied on Google Translate and online language forums to help her recall Vietnamese words she did not often use in everyday conversations. She said, “I use Google Translate sometimes to double-check words I forget... it

helps me keep up with Vietnamese, especially when I don't use certain words often." From this, she was able to note a common challenge among HLLs: the gradual erosion of less frequently used vocabulary. While conversational fluency may remain intact through interactions with family, heritage speakers often struggle with specialized vocabulary. Academic, professional, and abstract terms tend to fade over time due to lack of use (Block, 2021). Digital tools offer a practical and immediate solution, allowing learners to quickly verify, recall, and reinforce forgotten words.

Additionally, language-learning apps and online communities provide interactive ways for heritage learners to engage with their language. Some participants used apps like Duolingo for structured vocabulary practice, while others joined online forums and social media groups where heritage speakers shared linguistic tips and cultural discussions. However, while translation tools and self-directed language apps serve as effective supplementary aids, they are not a substitute for immersive, conversational practice. Many digital platforms focus on individual word recall rather than holistic language development. This suggests that heritage learners who rely solely on these tools may still struggle with grammar, sentence structure, and natural phrasing in real-world conversations.

Research Question 2: What challenges do heritage language learners encounter during their efforts to maintain their proficiency?

This study examined the challenges faced by HLLs as they attempted to maintain proficiency in their heritage language while navigating an English-dominant environment. Through an in-depth analysis of participant interviews and reflective journals, several key sub-themes emerged regarding the difficulties encountered by HLLs. These sub-themes included limited opportunities for practice, societal pressures and stigma, generational communication gaps, and difficulties

with literacy, all of which contributed to varying levels of language loss and emotional frustration.

Many participants reported limited opportunities for meaningful practice, particularly outside the home. While some had access to heritage-speaking family members, others struggled to find real-world situations in which to use their language skills. Additionally, societal pressures and language-related stigma influenced participants' willingness to use their heritage language. Some learners feared being judged for making mistakes, leading them to avoid speaking in social settings altogether. Another common challenge was generational communication gaps, which made it difficult for HLLs to fully connect with older family members. While many participants could understand their elders, they struggled with fluency when responding, leading to a sense of cultural and linguistic disconnection. In some cases, these communication barriers reinforced a preference for English, making it even more challenging to sustain heritage language use over time. Finally, difficulties with literacy were a significant barrier to language proficiency. Many participants had little to no formal instruction in reading and writing in their heritage language, limiting their ability to engage with written materials, such as books, news articles, or text-based communication. While speaking skills were often reinforced through family interactions, the absence of structured education in the heritage language resulted in gaps in overall language proficiency.

The complex and multifaceted challenges HLLs encounter emerged from the findings when trying to maintain their proficiency. While some obstacles, such as limited practice opportunities and societal pressures were external in nature, other obstacles, such as literacy struggles and generational gaps, were deeply personal. The insights shared by these participants emphasize the need for structured support systems, greater community engagement, and

increased opportunities for practical language use to help HLLs sustain their proficiency over time.

Limited Opportunities For Practice

Many participants expressed difficulty finding spaces to consistently practice their heritage language outside of family interactions. Unlike second-language learners, who may have access to structured classroom instruction or immersion programs, HLLs often find themselves without similar opportunities, leading to gradual language loss. Without structured environments or frequent use, data showed that their fluency and confidence diminished over time. Sue, for example, described how she primarily used Vietnamese with family members, but beyond that, opportunities were limited:

It is very difficult for me to find opportunities to practice my heritage language outside of communicating with my own family members. There are not a lot of places that I would use my heritage language.

Importantly, Sue shares a common struggle among HLLs: the lack of public or social spaces that encourage the use of their heritage language. While family settings provide foundational exposure, external reinforcement is often missing, making it challenging to sustain and develop language proficiency over time. This lack of exposure can lead to a restricted vocabulary, difficulty engaging in more complex discussions, and a reliance on English in settings where heritage language use would otherwise be beneficial. Even within ethnic communities, interactions often default to English, further reducing the likelihood of regular practice.

Jade also noted how available resources did not always align with her level of proficiency, making independent practice difficult by commenting, “I feel like I could seek online resources, but a lot of times, they’re not at the level that I’m at. So, it’s difficult to find

something that actually helps me improve.” This demonstrates a gap in accessible materials for intermediate or advanced heritage speakers. Many online tools cater to complete beginners or fluent speakers, leaving those in between without structured guidance for improvement. For heritage learners who already possess foundational skills but struggle with higher-level comprehension, grammar, or writing, the lack of tailored resources creates a plateau effect, where progress becomes stagnant due to the absence of structured support. Additionally, the lack of available tutors or instructors familiar with the specific needs of heritage speakers means that even when learners seek formal instruction, the methods used may not be suitable for their unique linguistic background.

Similarly, Violet voiced frustration about the lack of informal, welcoming spaces where she could comfortably practice Vietnamese by saying, “I feel like, outside of an academic setting, I don’t think there is really an informal or comfortable space where I would be willing to practice my Vietnamese.” She reflects how many heritage speakers may feel hesitant to use their language in unfamiliar settings, especially if they lack confidence in their skills. The absence of casual, low-pressure environments discourages practice, reinforcing language loss over time.

Societal Pressures And Stigma

For many HLLs, anxiety over making mistakes or being judged by fluent speakers created a significant barrier to using their heritage language. This fear often led them to avoid speaking altogether, reinforcing language loss. Unlike second-language learners, who are often encouraged to practice despite making errors, heritage learners face a unique pressure where they are expected to already possess a certain level of fluency. This then leads to heightened self-consciousness when they fall short. For example, Brad recounted feeling embarrassed when he struggled to respond to Vietnamese-speaking customers at work by saying, “I go up and say

something, and they're happy to know that someone speaks Vietnamese. But then they respond, and I just don't know how to answer. It's kind of embarrassing, and I feel like I failed." This account underscores the weight of expectation placed on HLLs in real-world interactions. When others assume fluency based on appearance, ethnicity, or prior knowledge of the language, HLLs may feel pressured to meet native-speaker standards. Failing to do so can lead to feelings of inadequacy, which reinforces the need to withdraw from situations.

Avoiding the language creates a cycle on without practice, confidence decreases, and without confidence, heritage learners are even less likely to speak in public. Over time, this hesitation can cause them to forget words and struggle with conversation, making it harder to move from understanding to speaking. Jade, for example, shared a similar experience when attempting to order food in Chinese, only to revert to English due to self-consciousness. She noted: "When I try to order food in Chinese, and the waitress doesn't understand me, I just feel like I should use English instead." This incident at the restaurant shows that even basic interactions, like ordering food or making small talk, can cause anxiety for HLLs. In structured learning settings, mistakes are expected and corrected, but real-world conversations often feel more stressful. As a result, many heritage learners switch to English to avoid embarrassment.

Additionally, the fear of mispronouncing words, using incorrect grammar, or not being understood can cause heritage speakers to second-guess their abilities. Rather than risk an awkward or failed interaction, many HLLs opt for the "safer" choice by switching to English. However, this instinctive code-switching, while providing short-term relief from embarrassment, in the end limits their opportunities to maintain their current skills. Talia also described how societal expectations influenced her comfort level with speaking Vietnamese outside of her home: "For people that are not my family, the impact is that it makes me a lot more conscious

and nervous about speaking in Vietnamese." This acknowledgement reflects a broader trend among heritage speakers: while they may feel at ease using their language in private, external pressures make them more hesitant in public settings. This contrast suggests that much of their anxiety is not rooted in their actual language ability but rather in the perceived judgment of others. Furthermore, this pressure is often reinforced by interactions with fluent speakers who may correct mistakes in ways that feel discouraging rather than supportive. If HLLs are met with criticism rather than encouragement, they may internalize a belief that their language skills are inadequate, further reinforcing their reluctance to speak.

Generational Communication Gaps

Another significant challenge for HLLs is difficulty communicating with older family members due to differences in fluency, dialect, or cultural perspectives. Many participants felt frustrated that they could not fully engage in meaningful conversations with parents or grandparents. These generational language barriers often led to feelings of disconnect, discouragement, and even a weakened sense of cultural identity. For example, Sue observed that younger generations often struggled with pronunciation, making conversations with elders more difficult: "The younger generation, if they do speak Vietnamese, they don't have the correct accent. That makes it difficult for elders to understand them." Pronunciation shifts over generations which in turn lead to misunderstandings often further discourage heritage speakers from using their language. Younger heritage speakers, particularly those raised in English-dominant environments, may unknowingly adopt pronunciation patterns influenced by English phonetics. As a result, this can make their speech sound different from that of native-speaking elders. These subtle differences in intonation, stress, and articulation can lead to misunderstandings, frustration, and a lack of confidence in speaking.

Additionally, heritage learners who primarily engage with their language in informal, home-based settings may develop speech patterns that differ from formal or traditional usage. Over time, these generational phonetic variations can lead to language fragmentation within families, where older and younger members struggle to fully understand each other despite speaking the "same" language. For example, Brad recalled how, as a child, he would freeze when spoken to in Vietnamese at family gatherings: "If someone upstairs asked me something in Vietnamese, I would just freeze. I didn't know what to say, so I only spoke in English."

This anecdote demonstrates how limited exposure affects language use. Without regular practice, conversational skills decline, making it more difficult to communicate with family. For many heritage speakers, the inability to respond fluently in their heritage language can feel like a public failure, reinforcing a preference for English as the safer, more familiar option. The discomfort of being put on the spot in family settings, combined with the fear of making mistakes, creates a cycle in which heritage learners increasingly rely on English, further widening the generational language gap.

Relatedly, Violet shared when a family member corrected her mixed-language use, making her hesitant to continue speaking Vietnamese: "I was using Vietnamese and English in the same sentence, and my cousin corrected me. I just kind of felt embarrassed and stopped trying." This incident reflects a common issue among HLLs, where code-switching is perceived as an imperfect or "incorrect" way of speaking, despite being a widely recognized linguistic phenomenon. For many heritage learners, blending languages is not a sign of deficiency but rather a practical adaptation that allows them to express themselves more fluidly.

In short, when family members view code-switching as a weakness rather than a valid communication strategy, it can discourage HLLs from using their heritage language altogether.

Instead of fostering a supportive space for language practice, these corrections may create additional pressure, reinforcing the belief that their language abilities are inadequate. This, in turn, may lead to decreased confidence and reduced willingness to engage in bilingual communication.

Difficulties With Literacy

Many participants reported struggling with reading and writing in their heritage language, even if they were comfortable speaking it. For most, the lack of formal instruction in literacy created significant barriers to engaging with written materials, such as books, newspapers, or text-based conversations. Unlike speaking, which can be reinforced through family interactions, literacy skills require structured learning and consistent practice, making them more susceptible to decline over time. On this issue, Jade reflected on how technology contributed to her declining writing skills: "When I was younger, we wrote everything by hand. But in middle and high school, we started typing everything. Now, I've lost a lot of my writing skills in Chinese." This quote demonstrates how changes in communication methods can accelerate language loss, particularly in literacy. As digital communication replaces traditional writing, heritage learners may lose familiarity with character formation, stroke order, or spelling accuracy. This is particularly relevant for logographic languages like Chinese, where writing proficiency requires memorization and repeated practice.

Crucially, the increased reliance on digital tools, such as predictive text and autocorrect, can further contribute to literacy decline. Many heritage speakers use typing shortcuts, romanization, or phonetic input methods rather than writing characters or words by hand, which reduces opportunities for active engagement with written language. Over time, this passive approach weakens spelling retention and grammatical accuracy, making it harder to write

independently without assistance. Talia, for example, discussed how she discontinued formal literacy instruction, leading to a decline in her ability to read and write Vietnamese; She noted: "I used to go to a class every Sunday to learn how to read and write Vietnamese, but I stopped. Now, I don't really spend my time looking into ways to maintain my literacy skills." This decision to stop attending formal Vietnamese lessons reflects how early exposure to structured instruction can be beneficial, but without ongoing reinforcement, those skills may deteriorate over time. Importantly, Talia's case is a common pattern among heritage learners which is early exposure to literacy instruction, followed by disengagement during adolescence or adulthood. Many HLLs attend weekend language schools as children, but without continued motivation or necessity, they gradually lose the ability to read and write fluently. This suggests that heritage literacy development requires long-term strategies rather than short-term exposure to maintain proficiency.

Relatedly, Violet, who shared specific challenges with Vietnamese literacy, particularly the complexities of accent marks and pronunciation, revealed: "I can read, but I still get confused about accents and pronunciation. One word can have three or four different meanings, and I still struggle with that." Written proficiency for languages with complex writing systems like Vietnamese or Mandarin demand more than just conversational fluency, presenting extra challenges for heritage learners. They must learn not only to recognize characters or letters but also to use tone marks, diacritics, and proper grammar. In Vietnamese, the presence of multiple diacritics changes both pronunciation and meaning, making reading comprehension more difficult for learners who are not regularly exposed to written texts. For many HLLs, this results in an overreliance on phonetic recognition rather than true reading comprehension, leading to errors in pronunciation and misinterpretation of written words. Similarly, in logographic

languages like Mandarin, reading fluency requires recognition of thousands of characters, many of which share similar components but have different meanings. Without frequent exposure, heritage learners may struggle with character retention, leading to gaps in literacy even if they can understand spoken Mandarin proficiently.

Emotional Barriers To Language Use

Thus far, I have presented data from interviews with my focal participants. However, their reflective journals also provided valuable insight into the participants' personal journeys, challenges, and strategies for maintaining their heritage language. These journals offered a deeper insight into their struggles and successes, highlighting the emotional and cognitive aspects of heritage language retention. Through this analysis, several key sub-themes emerged, including emotional barriers to language use, struggles with translation and expression, and balancing priorities. Each of these themes reveals the complexities of maintaining heritage language proficiency in an English-dominant society.

Many participants described experiencing emotional discomfort or hesitation when using their heritage language, especially in sensitive or personal conversations. The inability to fully articulate thoughts and emotions in their heritage language often led to frustration and feelings of disconnection from their families. Sue, for example, described a frustrating time where she struggled to communicate personal feelings to her family due to a lack of vocabulary:

I found it frustrating not being able to express the seriousness of how I felt simply because I didn't know the correct words. I felt misunderstood most of the conversation and by the end of our conversation, I felt the purpose of me having that conversation was not received.

One of the most emotionally challenging aspects of heritage language use is seen through this statement. When words fall short in expressing deep emotions, it can create a sense of disconnection from family and culture. Unlike everyday conversations that rely on familiar phrases and predictable topics, personal discussions demand greater linguistic nuance and emotional accuracy.

When HLLs struggle to articulate complex emotions, it can lead to misunderstandings, frustration, and even strained relationships. This can be particularly distressing when discussing topics such as mental health, personal aspirations, or conflicts, where certain vocabulary is important for being understood. In these moments, heritage speakers may feel stuck between two linguistic identities. They may lack the fluency to fully express themselves in their heritage language while also struggling with the cultural context needed to convey meaning effectively.

These emotional tensions reflect broader patterns observed in heritage language research. Song and Wu (2024) emphasized that emotions like guilt, pride, and shame are central to heritage language experiences and often shape learners' long-term engagement with their language. Their intergenerational autoethnography showed how language loss is not just linguistic but deeply emotional (Song & Wu, 2024).

Similarly, Brad shared a moment when speaking to his grandmother, where he realized he lacked the necessary vocabulary to fully answer her questions:

She asked me a lot of questions about what was happening at home but I couldn't answer a lot of them clearly because there's a lot of words I do not know, and I thought to myself that I need to do better and learn my culture and language more.

His reflection illustrates the emotional weight that language proficiency carries in family relationships. When heritage speakers struggle to communicate with older family members, they

may feel a sense of guilt or inadequacy, believing that they are failing to uphold their cultural heritage. This feeling of linguistic deficiency is often compounded by the generational gap between heritage learners and their elders. Older family members may expect a level of fluency that younger heritage speakers do not possess, leading to moments of awkwardness or disappointment on both sides. For HLLs, these situations reinforce the notion that their language skills are "not enough," discouraging further attempts to engage in meaningful conversations

Additionally, this lack of fluency can create missed opportunities for deeper family connections. When heritage learners struggle to express themselves fully, they may default to simpler responses, avoid certain topics, or switch to English, further widening the language gap between generations. This, in turn, can contribute to a growing sense of cultural disconnection, where heritage speakers feel alienated from their linguistic and familial roots.

These reflections highlighted how limited vocabulary and cultural differences can create communication barriers, making it difficult for heritage speakers to fully express their thoughts and emotions.

Struggles With Translation And Expression

A recurring challenge mentioned in the journals was the difficulty in translating complex thoughts or emotions from English into their heritage language. Some participants noted that while they could understand their heritage language when spoken to, they often struggled to produce grammatically correct or contextually appropriate responses. This struggle was especially evident in formal or emotionally charged conversations, where the nuances of meaning were difficult to convey. Heritage speakers frequently found themselves modifying their speech, simplifying ideas, or even avoiding certain discussions altogether due to linguistic

limitations. Jade, for example, described an interaction with a coworker in which she struggled to express a work-related concept:

After constantly struggling to find the correct phrase in Chinese, I decided to describe it with simpler words that were closely related to what I wanted to express. Although my coworker was successfully able to understand what I was asking at the end, I was still a bit frustrated with myself that I couldn't think of the word.

Her experience is a common coping strategy used by heritage speakers where when they cannot recall a precise term they will attempt to "work around" the missing word by describing it in simpler terms. While this method often allows for successful communication, it can also lead to frustration, as speakers feel that they are not fully expressing themselves at the level they desire.

Similarly, Talia reflected on a conversation with her father where she struggled not only with vocabulary but also with translating cultural concepts:

It wasn't just about vocabulary; it was also a little bit about cultural nuances. Some of the ideas I wanted to convey felt difficult to translate accurately because the cultural context in which I grew up is quite different from my family member's experience.

This challenge is one of the most complex aspects of heritage language use: the translation of culturally embedded ideas. Many heritage speakers grow up in bilingual and bicultural environments where certain concepts, values, or expressions do not have direct equivalents in their heritage language. For instance, American-born heritage speakers may struggle to explain Western cultural references, slang, or workplace norms in their heritage language, as these concepts may not exist in their family's cultural framework. Additionally, some words or phrases may carry different connotations in each language, making direct translation difficult or even inappropriate. These challenges are further compounded by a lack of exposure to formal registers

in the heritage language, which limits learners' ability to discuss complex or abstract topics and express themselves fully.

In sum, these difficulties can create moments of disconnection between heritage speakers and their families, as certain thoughts and emotions may not be easily translatable across cultural contexts. This struggle reinforces the idea that language is not just a tool for communication but also a bridge between different cultural identities.

Balancing Priorities

Another prominent theme was the difficulty of prioritizing heritage language learning amidst other responsibilities. Many participants mentioned that school, work, and other commitments often took importance over language maintenance, leaving them with little time or energy to engage in active learning. Some expressed regret over not dedicating more time to practicing their heritage language but acknowledged the challenges of balancing language retention with their daily lives. Talia explained how a lack of exposure to the language made it easy to deprioritize learning: "Despite knowing the value of keeping my heritage language alive, work and other goals often distract me, leaving me with little energy or focus to dedicate to learning it." Her story shows a common pattern among heritage learners where language maintenance is often perceived as an additional task rather than an integrated part of daily life. Unlike work or school, heritage language learning lacks an immediate external motivator which makes it easier to push aside.

Similarly, Jade described how her motivation to formally improve her Mandarin faded when the available courses did not meet her expectations: "Because of that occurrence, it made me feel unmotivated, and to this day I still have yet to find a Mandarin course, both online and in-person, to learn from that is at my level." When heritage learners enroll in courses that are

either too basic or too advanced, they may quickly become disengaged, leading to frustration and loss of motivation. This mismatch between learning materials and individual proficiency can reinforce a cycle where heritage speakers feel there is no effective way to improve, which then causes them to deprioritize language learning altogether.

Research Question 3: How do heritage language learners perceive the effectiveness of their maintenance strategies and approaches?

Perception Of Maintenance Strategies And Approaches

The effectiveness of heritage language maintenance strategies varies among learners depending on personal motivation, access to resources, and external support systems. My participants held diverse perspectives on their language learning efforts, with some expressing confidence in their approaches while others acknowledged limitations and ongoing struggles. Several key themes emerged in analyzing participants' reflections on their maintenance strategies: effectiveness of passive exposure, structured learning vs. informal learning, reliance on technology, and long-term sustainability of maintenance strategies. These themes underscore the complexities of language retention, and how HLLs evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their approaches.

For many participants, family-based reinforcement was the most accessible and influential strategy for heritage language retention. Those who consistently engaged in conversations with family members in their heritage language perceived this method as highly effective in maintaining fluency. For instance, Talia shared that growing up in a Vietnamese-speaking household where “not only my parents, but also I had grandparents that were living with us” helped her develop fluency early on. She emphasized that daily use at home was key to her comfort with the language. However, some participants noted that familial expectations could be both beneficial and restrictive, particularly when they felt pressured to use their heritage

language rather than naturally integrating it into daily communication. Violet recalled feeling annoyed when her mother insisted she respond in Vietnamese even though she clearly understood, explaining, “She knew I understood her, but she still wanted me to respond in Vietnamese.” This pressure made the experience feel more like an obligation than a natural practice.

Overall, participants' perceptions of their maintenance strategies revealed a complex interplay between personal agency, environmental factors, and available resources. While some strategies were perceived as highly effective in reinforcing language proficiency, others highlighted the challenges of sustaining progress without consistent support and engagement.

Effectiveness of Passive Exposure

My focal HLL participants found that passive exposure, such as listening to conversations at home, watching media, or being surrounded by native speakers, played a significant role in maintaining their comprehension skills. Even in the absence of frequent active practice, continuous auditory input helped reinforce their understanding of the language, allowing them to recognize words, sentence structures, and pronunciation patterns more effectively. For example, Brad emphasized that continuous exposure was essential to his language retention, explaining that simply hearing the language on a regular basis helped him sustain his proficiency:

Oh, I mean, that's the only reason I can maintain my language is because I'm always listening to it. I'm always speaking, and I'm always thinking in my head. That's the only reason I can maintain my language for me.

Brad's experience highlights the importance of frequent auditory exposure, reinforcing the idea that passive listening contributes significantly to language maintenance. Even when active speaking practice is limited, consistently hearing the language strengthens comprehension and

recognition over time. In addition, even when structured speaking practice is limited, passive listening strengthens comprehension by reinforcing linguistic patterns and maintaining familiarity with pronunciation, intonation, and syntax.

Crucially, hearing a language consistently can help heritage speakers retain subconscious fluency, where they may not actively recall grammatical rules but can intuitively recognize correct sentence structures and word usage. This allows heritage speakers to maintain a level of comprehension that might otherwise deteriorate with disuse. For example, Sue described how listening to Vietnamese daily, even indirectly through videos, allowed her to retain familiarity with the language despite no longer living with her family:

Now, not living with them and watching videos where they speak Vietnamese, it continually makes my ears hear a familiar language where it could subconsciously get filed in my brain. [...] It makes me feel like I'm listening to them talk for however many minutes or hours.

This observation suggests that passive exposure through media can simulate real-life interactions, reinforcing comprehension skills without active engagement. Even when direct conversations are not available, consistent listening exposure can help prevent language loss. For HLLs who no longer live in a linguistically immersive household, watching content in their heritage language serves to maintain auditory familiarity and can help to prevent complete language loss. In short, passive media exposure helps heritage learners pick up natural speech patterns that structured language classes might not cover. By listening to native speakers in everyday settings through TV shows, YouTube videos, or podcasts, they can absorb conversational norms, slang, and cultural references. This exposure helps them understand and use the language more naturally.

However, passive listening alone may not be sufficient for developing speaking skills, as it does not require active recall or verbal articulation. This suggests that while passive exposure is highly beneficial for comprehension and retention, it must be paired with active practice for full language proficiency to be maintained. This view is reinforced by Talia, who shared how growing up in a Vietnamese-speaking household provided her with a strong foundation in the language. Talia credited her ability to understand and speak Vietnamese to the immersive environment created by her family:

My parents did not speak any English to me, and not only my parents, but also I had grandparents that were living with us at this time. So just all the family members spoke Vietnamese to me, and that's just how I learned

The important role of early immersion and continuous exposure in shaping language retention thus becomes clear from this data. Being surrounded by fluent speakers from a young age helped solidify her comprehension skills, making it easier for her to maintain the language as she grew older. In sum, these examples demonstrate that passive exposure plays a critical role in heritage language maintenance. Whether through conversations at home, media consumption, or environmental immersion, regular auditory input helps reinforce comprehension and sustain proficiency, even when direct speaking practice is limited.

Structured Learning vs. Informal Practice

A key distinction in heritage language maintenance lies in whether learners engage in structured learning environments, such as language classes and tutoring, or prefer informal, self-guided practice. Furthermore, the difference in heritage language maintenance is whether learners participate in structured learning, like language classes and tutoring, or rely on informal, self-guided practice. Structured learning helps with grammar and literacy, while informal immersive

experiences strengthen practical language skills more effectively for many heritage learners based on the data. Jade, for example, shared how attending Chinese school every Saturday as a child did not significantly improve her language skills due to a lack of engagement:

I went to Chinese school... but I think for that part, I didn't really learn much of the language, because at that time I felt like I didn't. Because I was forced to learn, I wasn't learning. It was just dreadful for me.

This candid revelation reflects a common struggle among heritage learners who are placed in formal language programs that do not align with their existing language proficiency. Many heritage speakers enter language classes with varying degrees of fluency, making it difficult for standardized curriculums to accommodate their unique needs. When classes focus on repetitive drills or rote memorization without meaningful engagement, learners may become disengaged, viewing language learning as an obligation rather than a personally fulfilling experience.

However, Jade found that informal exposure through entertainment was much more effective in improving her language abilities. She described how engaging with Chinese-language variety shows helped her develop a stronger understanding of idioms and vocabulary in a way that felt natural and enjoyable:

Like in the shows, it was like I started playing games like guess the idiom [...] eventually, I would start playing the game with them while watching the show. In certain cases like that, it has helped me develop my Chinese learning more.

As seen in the above comment, interactive and engaging language exposure through entertainment can be a powerful tool for heritage learners. Unlike structured classes, which often feel rigid and academic, informal exposure through media provides real-world language use, cultural context, and natural speech patterns that are essential for conversational fluency.

Additionally, informal learning methods allow heritage speakers to engage with the language at their own pace, focusing on topics and content that interest them. This type of voluntary engagement is more likely to sustain long-term language retention than compulsory classroom instruction, which can feel disconnected from daily life. For example, Brad echoed similar feelings, emphasizing that formal learning environments were not appealing to him: "I don't like using any of those [formal programs]. I prefer just watching TV and reading books." In sum, the examples in this subsection illustrate that while structured learning may provide foundational knowledge, many heritage speakers find informal, immersive contexts to be more engaging and effective for long-term retention.

Reliance On Technology

With the rise of digital tools, many HLLs rely on technology to reinforce their learning, particularly when they encounter vocabulary gaps or pronunciation challenges. Online dictionaries, translation apps, and language-learning platforms provide convenient access to linguistic support, allowing heritage speakers to quickly verify unfamiliar words or phrases. However, while technology serves as a valuable supplement, participants acknowledged its limitations and the ways in which it can sometimes hinder rather than enhance language retention. Brad, for example, explained that he frequently turned to online resources but encountered difficulties with dialectal differences: "If I look it up on Google, it most likely gives me the Northern [Vietnamese] accent... that kind of messes with what I usually know". This revelation underscores one of the major challenges of using digital resources for heritage language learning: the lack of dialectal specificity. Many translation tools and language-learning applications provide standardized versions of a language, which may not align with the dialect or pronunciation that a heritage speaker is familiar with. Put differently, for languages like

Vietnamese and Mandarin that have multiple regional variations, heritage learners may struggle to find resources that accurately reflect their family's linguistic background. This mismatch can create confusion and can cause heritage speakers to question their own pronunciation and vocabulary choices, further complicating their language retention efforts.

Additionally, digital tools often emphasize formal or textbook-style language, which can limit access to colloquial expressions and make it challenging for heritage speakers to find translations that reflect everyday spoken usage. As a result, learners may feel disconnected from the digital resources available to them and reinforce their reliance on oral communication from family members rather than online tools. Sue also found technology helpful for translating words she was unfamiliar with, but she admitted that digital tools were not always reliable: "When I use the translator app, it is more difficult to retain that information mostly because it's not practiced every day." Her narrated experience highlights the passive nature of translation-based learning, where information is often accessed momentarily but not reinforced through active use. Unlike direct conversational practice, which strengthens recall through repeated use, translation apps provide only short-term solutions where users retrieve words without internalizing them. The lack of reinforcement can lead to a superficial understanding of vocabulary, where heritage speakers recognize words when they see them but struggle to recall or use them in spontaneous conversations.

Violet, on the other hand, used technology selectively to help with forgotten words and phrases: "Sometimes I forget words or phrases when I'm speaking... I would just ask my mom, or sometimes I look it up." Thus, while technology serves as a valuable supplement for language learning, participants acknowledged that it could not fully replace conversational practice or exposure to native speakers. One key limitation of technology is that it lacks the social and

emotional dimensions of language learning. Heritage language is deeply tied to cultural identity, familial relationships, and generational connections, elements that cannot be replicated through translation apps or online courses alone. Real-world practice, whether through conversations with family, community engagement, or media consumption, remains essential for meaningful language maintenance. That said, technology still plays an important role in bridging accessibility gaps for heritage learners who lack daily exposure to their language. For those who no longer live in linguistically immersive households, online tools provide a way to reconnect with their heritage language, offering resources that would otherwise be unavailable.

Long-Term Sustainability Of Maintenance Strategies

One of the major concerns expressed by HLLs was whether their current maintenance strategies will be effective in the long run. While some participants felt confident in their ability to retain their language skills, others worried about gradual loss due to limited opportunities for consistent practice. As heritage learners transition into different life stages such as moving away from family, entering the workforce, or losing access to academic resources, sustaining proficiency becomes increasingly challenging. For example, Sue commented that while she could communicate in Vietnamese, she was concerned about her ability to sustain proficiency in more formal settings by commenting, “There are very specific ways to greet other people that you don’t know in Vietnamese, and sometimes I do find myself struggling with that... my Vietnamese may not be easily understood as somebody else’s Vietnamese.” A common issue faced by heritage learners is where their proficiency in everyday, conversational language does not always translate to competence in formal or professional interactions. Heritage speakers often develop language skills suited for home environments, but they may lack exposure to formal vocabulary, honorifics, and context-specific expressions required for broader social

engagement.

The gap in formal linguistic competence can lead to self-doubt and reluctance to use the language in public settings, reinforcing the cycle of language loss. Without structured opportunities to expand their linguistic repertoire, heritage speakers may find that their ability to use the language weakens in professional, academic, or cross-generational interactions. For example, Jade expressed uncertainty about the future of her Chinese proficiency, recognizing that her reliance on informal methods might not be enough to sustain her language abilities: "Now, I don't really use as much informal activities other than reading [...] I feel like I might not be keeping it up as much as I used to." The lack of formal HL learning opportunities is thus a key challenge in heritage language maintenance. While passive exposure and informal learning can help sustain proficiency, they may not be enough for long-term retention. As HLLs grow older and have fewer opportunities for immersive exposure, their language abilities may gradually decline, especially in skills that require active recall such as speaking and writing. Jade's experience also reflects a common turning point for many heritage learners: as their daily engagement with the language decreases, they begin to question whether their current strategies are enough to prevent long-term loss. This suggests that while informal methods such as reading and media consumption are helpful, they need to be complemented with active, structured engagement to sustain language proficiency over time. This reality was borne out by Talia's acknowledgement that without structured learning opportunities or a community of speakers, her Vietnamese proficiency deteriorated over time. She shared:

Now that I don't really live with my family, and that I don't go to that Vietnamese church as often anymore, I don't really speak Vietnamese as much. And so the comfort level is a lot lower in all aspects.

In other words, while formal education provides structured learning, many heritage learners struggle to find informal, low-pressure spaces where they can comfortably practice their language without fear of judgment. Crucially, the lack of community support can speed up language loss, making heritage speakers feel isolated in their efforts to maintain proficiency. Without a network of speakers through family, cultural organizations, or peer groups, heritage learners may struggle to stay motivated and confident in using their language. In sum, these reflections emphasize the challenge of sustaining heritage language proficiency over time, emphasizing the need for continued exposure, practice, and community engagement.

The findings of this study revealed a complex and nuanced understanding of how heritage language learners (HLLs) navigate their language maintenance journey in an English-dominant environment. In response to Research Question 1, participants reported a range of maintenance strategies including family-based language reinforcement, social engagement, media consumption, and the use of digital tools. These approaches reflected both structured and informal efforts, highlighting learners' agency and adaptability. Research Question 2 uncovered the multifaceted challenges HLLs face, such as limited opportunities for practice, societal stigma, generational communication gaps, literacy struggles, and emotional barriers to language use. These challenges often created feelings of inadequacy or frustration, leading to reduced confidence and diminished language use over time. Finally, Research Question 3 focused on how participants perceived the effectiveness of their strategies. While many found passive exposure and informal learning enjoyable and beneficial, they also acknowledged limitations in sustaining long-term proficiency without consistent, structured support. Together, these findings suggest that heritage language maintenance is shaped by a dynamic interplay of personal motivation, emotional experience, social context, and access to resources.

CHAPTER 4: IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

I start this chapter with a discussion of the various implications of my work. I then underscore the significance of my research before addressing some its limitations. I close the chapter with some concluding comments.

Theoretical Implications

While AsianCrit served as a useful framework for examining the racialized and cultural experiences of Asian American HLLs, there were several limitations that came about through this study. Although AsianCrit addresses issues of marginalization and identity, it does not always account for the emotional and linguistic complexities that come from lack of fluency, dialect variations, or language loss. Participants in this study expressed feelings of shame, inadequacy, and pressure tied to their perceived language ability, which are not yet fully addressed within the current scope of AsianCrit. Additionally, the framework is known to focus on formal educational spaces, yet much of heritage language learning happens in informal spaces like within their home, their community, or online platforms. These informal contexts play an important role in language maintenance and identity development but remain underexplored in AsianCrit. Future expansions of this framework could benefit from integrating sociolinguistic perspectives and a closer examination of language ideologies, which are central to many of the challenges participants faced when navigating their linguistic and cultural identities.

Pedagogical Implications

Educators in language classrooms play an important role in addressing the unique needs of HLLs by drawing on specific challenges and experiences shared by learners. For example, Sue's frustration in not being able to express serious emotions to her family due to limited vocabulary, and Brad's realization of his linguistic gap when speaking with his grandmother,

both underscore how emotional barriers can impact language confidence and connection. Since language and identity are deeply intertwined, classrooms should provide space to process these emotional and identity-based experiences. This can include reflecting on their own language challenges or discussing how they communicate within their families. Participants like Talia and Jade also revealed the difficulty of balancing heritage language learning with academic and professional demands, and how mismatched resources or lack of culturally relevant instruction contributed to demotivation. These findings emphasize the importance of creating an inclusive environment that validates students' linguistic and cultural identities. This validation should come not only through representation but also through curriculum design that responds to and reflects students' lived experiences (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). When educators acknowledge the emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of heritage language learning, they are better equipped to support HLLs. This approach helps students build their language skills while also developing a stronger sense of identity and belonging, especially in spaces where they might otherwise feel unseen.

To achieve this, educators can adopt differentiated strategies tailored to the specific challenges HLLs face. For example, incorporating culturally relevant materials, such as literature, music, or history from the learners' heritage cultures can enhance their connection to their linguistic roots. Research suggests that when students see their own cultural narratives reflected in classroom materials, they are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward their heritage language and maintain motivation for language learning (Lee & Shin, 2008).

Additionally, peer collaboration activities where students share their linguistic and cultural backgrounds can normalize bilingualism and counteract feelings of isolation or embarrassment. Creating opportunities for students to engage in translanguageing, using their full linguistic

repertoire without restrictions, can further support their language development and identity negotiation (García & Wei, 2014).

Another important finding was that most participants relied on digital tools such as language learning apps (e.g. pleco, duolingo, etc.), YouTube, and social media as part of their efforts to maintain their heritage languages. This suggests that educators should consider integrating or recommending accessible digital resources that reflect students' lived experiences and autonomous learning strategies. Incorporating technology-based tools into heritage language instruction could support learners outside the classroom, especially in contexts where formal HL programs are limited or unavailable. However, it is important to recognize that these tools often present only one dialect of a language. For example, Duolingo's Vietnamese course primarily uses Northern Vietnamese, which may not reflect the Southern or Central dialects spoken by some heritage learners. Additionally, educators can encourage critical engagement with these tools by prompting students to reflect on what they learned, how they used the language, and the cultural content embedded within digital media. Doing this not only supports language development but also affirms students' identities and autonomy as language learners.

Schools and community programs should also provide opportunities for HLLs to practice their language in meaningful, low-stakes environments. This directly responds to participants who described a lack of informal, welcoming spaces where they felt comfortable using their language. After-school programs, language clubs, or partnerships with local cultural organizations can help learners strengthen their skills while building confidence and pride in their heritage. Particularly, mentorship programs that connect younger HLLs with older, more proficient speakers in their community could serve as a valuable support system. These programs would not only reinforce language maintenance but also create opportunities for

intergenerational cultural exchange, which participants valued but often found difficult to access (Chui et al., 2023). On a pedagogical level, teacher training programs should include professional development focused on the specific emotional and academic needs of HLLs. Participants like Talia and Jade highlighted how mismatched instruction and a lack of culturally responsive teaching discouraged them from continued learning. Educators should be trained to support diverse learner backgrounds, promote culturally sustaining practices, and respond sensitively to emotional barriers such as shame, guilt, and linguistic insecurity (Driver & Prada, 2024).

Policy Implications

At the policy level, systemic changes are needed to promote and sustain bilingualism and cultural identity in an English-dominant society. These recommendations are directly informed by participants' reported challenges, particularly their feelings of language loss, cultural disconnection, and limited opportunities for meaningful practice. Policies should explicitly recognize the value of heritage languages by funding programs that support their maintenance and celebrating multilingualism as an asset rather than a liability. This aligns with national frameworks such as the ACTFL World-Readiness Standards, particularly the 5Cs (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities), which promotes culturally responsive language education. For instance, participants like Violet shared that cultural organizations often failed to support real language engagement, pointing to the need for intentional policy support that ensures these spaces include both cultural and linguistic elements. Recognizing these dual needs could also strengthen the implementation of initiatives like the Seal of Biliteracy, which honors multilingual proficiency and could even offer other pathways for heritage speakers to be acknowledged and celebrated within schools. Schools could benefit

from increased access to bilingual resources, such as heritage language classes, workshops for staff, and community partnerships that encourage family engagement in language learning. These efforts also reflect ACTFL's call for aligning instruction with community needs and honoring diverse language experiences, especially those developed outside formal classrooms. This aligns with data from participants like Brad and Sue, who emphasized that intergenerational support at home was essential but often lacked reinforcement in educational settings. Moreover, standardized assessments and curricula should consider the linguistic diversity of heritage speakers, avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach that may marginalize students who do not conform to traditional language proficiency metrics.

Methodological Implications

The study's methodology highlights the importance of using qualitative approaches to understand the complexities of heritage language learning. Semi-structured interviews and reflective journals allowed participants to share personal narratives, offering rich insights into their challenges and strategies. These methods provide depth and context that quantitative studies might overlook, especially those tied to identity, family dynamics, and internalized language anxieties.

Future research should continue to prioritize qualitative methods to capture the lived experiences of HLLs. For example, the emotional hesitation participants described when speaking with elders or in professional settings highlights the importance of using reflective journaling to assess internal struggles that are not always visible in interviews. Using triangulation, such as comparing data from interviews, journals, surveys, or participant observations, can enhance the reliability of research findings. This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding by cross-verifying information from multiple sources. For

example, integrating family perspectives or analyzing participants' interactions within community settings could provide additional layers of understanding.

Furthermore, researchers should consider longitudinal studies to observe how heritage language maintenance efforts evolve over time. Several participants voiced concerns about sustaining their heritage language without ongoing support or structured exposure, especially after leaving family homes or formal learning environments. Tracking these concerns longitudinally would allow researchers to assess the long-term impact of informal strategies like media use and self-study, and evaluate whether these methods are truly sustainable in the absence of community and institutional support.

Significance Of The Study

This study provided critical insights into the lives of Asian American HLLs, shedding light on the broader implications of heritage language maintenance for cultural identity, linguistic diversity, and intergenerational communication. As heritage languages continued to decline due to assimilation pressures in English-dominant societies, understanding the factors that influenced language retention became increasingly important for preserving cultural heritage and fostering multilingualism (Gandara & Hopkins, 2010). The personal, familial, and societal significance of sustaining heritage languages and the consequences of language loss was highlighted by focusing on the lived experiences of HLLs.

A key contribution of this research is that it provides participant-centered insight into how language maintenance strategies are experienced not only as linguistic tools but as emotional and cultural connections. For many heritage speakers, language is more than a means of communication; it is a fundamental part of their self-concept, community belonging, and cultural continuity (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). While prior studies have emphasized the

relationship between language and cultural identity, this study builds on that work by highlighting how HLLs personally interpret this connection in their daily lives. Participants expressed how maintaining their heritage language allowed them to connect with older generations, engage with cultural traditions, and navigate their dual identities in an English-dominant society. For Talia, she recalled how attending a Vietnamese church exposed her to cultural and religious traditions conducted entirely in Vietnamese, reinforcing both her language use and cultural identity. Jade shared that using Mandarin at work, particularly when helping coworkers who were more comfortable in Chinese, helped her move fluidly between both languages and emphasized how she balanced her bilingual identity in everyday situations. Conversely, language loss often led to feelings of disconnection from family members and a diminished sense of cultural belonging. For example, Sue described a conversation with her parents in which she struggled to express how she truly felt, saying, “I felt misunderstood most of the conversation and by the end... the purpose of me having that conversation was not received.” This moment left her feeling isolated, highlighting how limited language proficiency can create emotional distance even in close relationships. By capturing these perspectives, it was emphasized that heritage language retention was not solely about linguistic proficiency, but also about affirming cultural ties and fostering resilience among heritage speakers (Lee & Shin, 2008).

Beyond individual identity, broader societal significance of heritage language maintenance was highlighted. Heritage languages serve as reservoirs of historical knowledge, traditions, and values, contributing to the richness of multicultural societies (Lee, 2002). The loss of these languages not only affected individual speakers but also weakened cultural transmission across generations, leading to the erosion of ancestral knowledge and traditions. By examining

the challenges faced by HLLs, this research called for the need for continued support in sustaining linguistic diversity, ensuring that heritage languages remained a vital part of communities rather than becoming remnants of the past (García & Wei, 2014).

Limitations Of The Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the lives of Asian American HLLs, several limitations must be acknowledged. These limitations include the small sample size, linguistic scope, recruitment methods, reliance on self-reported data, limited longitudinal perspective, and the absence of an institutional and policy analysis. Recognizing these constraints helps contextualize the findings and provides direction for future research.

Another limitation is the linguistic scope of the study, which focused exclusively on Mandarin and Vietnamese HLLs. While this focus provided depth in analyzing these specific linguistic communities, it did not account for the varied experiences of HLLs who speak other Asian languages, such as Korean, Tagalog, or Hindi. HLLs from different linguistic backgrounds may face unique challenges influenced by factors such as community support, access to formal instruction, and cultural attitudes toward language retention (Lee & Shin, 2008). Expanding future research to include a wider range of heritage languages could help identify both common and language-specific challenges in heritage language maintenance.

The recruitment process and potential bias in participant selection present another limitation. Participants were recruited through personal networks and referrals, which may have led to a selection bias that favored individuals who already had strong connections to their heritage language and culture. Those who faced significant language loss or disengagement may have been less likely to participate, potentially skewing the findings. Future studies could employ broader recruitment methods, such as outreach through heritage language programs,

community organizations, or educational institutions, to ensure a more diverse participant pool.

This study also relied on self-reported data, collected through semi-structured interviews and reflective journals. While these methods provided rich, personal insights into participants' language journey, self-reported data can be subject to recall bias and social desirability bias (Prior, 2018). Participants may have unintentionally omitted or altered details about their language learning journeys based on their memory constraints or their desire to present themselves in a certain way. For example, Brad initially claimed to be fluent in Vietnamese, but later admitted he didn't know the proper term for "bathroom" and used English words with a Vietnamese accent. This inconsistency suggests that his self-assessment of proficiency may have been inflated to appear more fluent than he actually felt. To enhance the validity of findings, future research could integrate observational methods, linguistic proficiency assessments, or interviews with family members and educators to triangulate self-reported data (Friedman, 2020).

Another limitation is its limited longitudinal perspective. While reflective journals helped capture participants' evolving attitudes and strategies over a five-week period, this timeframe may not have been sufficient to observe long-term patterns in heritage language maintenance. Heritage language learning is an ongoing process influenced by major life transitions, such as starting college, entering the workforce, or raising bilingual children (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). An extended longitudinal study, spanning several months or years, could provide deeper insights into how heritage language maintenance evolves over time and how external factors continue to shape the linguistic and cultural development of HLLs.

Lastly, the study focused on individual and family-based strategies for heritage language maintenance was primarily focused on, with limited analysis of institutional influences and

language policies. Educational policies, bilingual education programs, and broader governmental language initiatives play a crucial role in shaping the accessibility and visibility of heritage languages in the United States. The marginalization of heritage languages in mainstream education and the impact of restrictive language policies were not the primary focus, but they remain critical factors shaping heritage language learning among students (Gandara & Hopkins, 2010). Future research could incorporate a policy analysis component to better understand the structural barriers and institutional supports available to HLLs.

Despite these limitations, the findings contribute to the growing body of research on heritage language maintenance by providing a nuanced look at the narratives of Asian American HLLs. The findings highlight the role of identity, societal pressures, and personal agency in language retention, offering insights that can inform educators, policymakers, and community leaders. Future research can build upon these insights by incorporating larger, more diverse samples, expanding the range of heritage languages studied, and employing additional research methods to further explore the complexities of heritage language maintenance.

Conclusion

This study explored the strategies, challenges, and self-perception faced by HLLs in maintaining proficiency, with a focus on learners of Asian descent. My findings revealed that cultural identity, family dynamics, and societal pressures significantly influenced the language maintenance efforts of my focal participants who identified a variety of challenges such as limited opportunities for meaningful practice, feelings of embarrassment or self-consciousness about their language skills, and the impact of competing priorities such as academic or professional demands. Strategies that proved effective included regular exposure to the heritage language through media, community engagement, and deliberate efforts to converse with family

members.

By stressing the nuanced struggles and strategies of HLLs, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how language maintenance shapes and is shaped by an individual's cultural experiences. These insights, in turn, can inform educators, policymakers, and community organizations seeking to support heritage language preservation. In many ways, my participants' experiences echoed my own. I also navigated feelings of self-doubt, had limited chances to speak my heritage language growing up, and turned to media and community spaces for support. At the same time, hearing their stories revealed challenges I hadn't faced and strategies I hadn't considered, reminding me of the wide range of heritage learner experience. Future directions should also explore the role of technology in supporting language maintenance, particularly for younger generations. Investigating the impact of virtual communities, language-learning apps, and social media on heritage language proficiency could provide innovative solutions to some of the challenges identified. Such a proposed line of future research is in keeping with the study's broader goal to highlight the importance of fostering environments where heritage languages are valued and celebrated.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Background Questions:

1. Can you describe your personal experience as a heritage language learner?
2. How did you start learning your heritage language, and at what age?
3. How do you use your heritage language in daily life?
 - a. In what situations do you use it (e.g., at home, school, or with friends)?
4. How would you describe your comfort level with speaking, reading, and writing in your heritage language compared to English?
5. Can you share a significant language experience you had as a heritage language learner and explain why it was meaningful to you?
6. How has your family's attitude toward your heritage language influenced your motivation to maintain or improve it?

What are the maintenance strategies and approaches of HL learners? (RQ1):

1. What activities or methods do you use to maintain your heritage language?
2. How do you find opportunities to use your heritage language, and what strategies have been the most helpful for you in maintaining it?
3. Do you look for formal ways to keep your skills up, like language programs, tutoring, or online resources?
4. What role do informal activities, such as watching media, reading books, or talking with family, play in your language maintenance?
5. What personal habits or routines have you developed to maintain your heritage language, and how do they fit into your everyday life?

How do heritage language learners perceive the effectiveness of their maintenance strategies and approaches? (RQ2):

1. How effective do you feel your current maintenance strategies are in helping you retain your heritage language? Why?
2. Can you share any specific examples of when you felt successful in maintaining your heritage language?
 - a. What strategies contributed to that success?
3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the methods you use to maintain your heritage language?
4. How do you think your heritage language maintenance could be improved?
 - a. What additional support or resources would you find helpful?

What challenges do heritage language learners encounter during their efforts to maintain their proficiency? (RQ3):

1. Have you experienced situations where you felt uncomfortable or reluctant to use your heritage language?
 - a. If so, can you describe those situations?
2. What difficulties do you encounter when trying to use your heritage language in daily conversations?
3. What challenges do you encounter when trying to find opportunities or spaces to practice your heritage language?
4. Can you describe a specific situation where you struggled to use your heritage language, and what impact that had on you?
5. How do you deal with the challenges you face in maintaining your heritage language?

- a. Have you developed any strategies to overcome these obstacles?

Next steps

1. What are your future goals for maintaining and improving your heritage language proficiency?

APPENDIX B: JOURNAL PROMPTS

Journal #1

1. Describe a recent conversation in your heritage language where you struggled to express yourself. What made it difficult, and how did you feel during and after?

Journal #2

1. What makes it difficult for you to practice your heritage language regularly? Reflect on a specific situation when this challenge affected your learning.