Identifying the Impact of User Reviews on App Updates: An Exploratory Study on App Release Notes

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ABSTRACT

Release planning for mobile apps has recently become an area of active research. Prior research concentrated on app analysis based on app release notes in App Store, or tracking user reviews to support app evolution with issue trackers. However, as a platform for development teams to communicate with users, Apple Store has not been studied for detecting the relevance between release notes and user reviews. In this paper, we introduce RoseMatcher, an automatic approach to match relevant user reviews with app release notes, and identify matched pairs with high confidence. We collected 944 release notes and 1,046,862 user reviews from 5 mobile apps in the Apple App Store as research data, and evaluated the effectiveness and accuracy of RoseMatcher. Our evaluation shows that RoseMatcher can reach a hit ratio of 0.718 for identifying relevant matched pairs. We further conducted manual labelling and content analysis on 984 relevant matched pairs, and defined 8 roles user reviews play in app update according to the relationship between release notes and user reviews in the relevant matched pairs. The study results show that release notes tend to respond and solve feature requests, bug reports, and complaints raised in user reviews, while user reviews also tend to give positive, negative, and constructive feedback on app updates. Additionally, in the time dimension, the relevant reviews of release notes tend to be posed in a small period of time before and after the release of release notes. In the matched pairs, the time interval between the post time of release notes and user reviews reaches a maximum of three years and an average of one year. These findings indicate that the development teams do adopt user reviews when updating apps, and users show their interest in app release notes.

1. Introduction

With the rapid progress in mobile techniques and smartphones, the number of mobile applications (apps for short) has risen dramatically in recent years. As of the second quarter of 2022, Android users were able to choose between 3.5 million apps, making Google Play the app store with the biggest number of available apps. The Apple App Store is the second-largest app store with roughly 2.2 million available apps for iOS [1]. App stores now become the primary data source to construct app datasets for the research and practice on app development, evolution, and maintenance [2].

In these app stores, app vendors regularly deliver official release notes with the new releases of their apps to highlight the key or essential updates of its current version, as shown in Figure 1 (a). Meanwhile, users freely post their reviews on the apps they use in the app store, including praises, complaints, feature requests, and recommendations [3], as shown in Figure 1 (b). Several existing studies have reported that it is essential for app vendors to regularly release new versions to fix bugs or introduce new features [4], since user dissatisfaction can quickly lead to the fall of even popular apps [5]. This implies that constantly monitoring and capturing, and proactively meeting user needs could lead to a successful app. For example, as the underlined text in Figure 1 shows, a user complained about the crash when he/she added a new preset or created a tempo change (preset and tempo are terms used in the music field), and this bug was fixed in the subsequent release of this app. This circumstance shows that user reviews could be the potential evolutionary requirements for app development teams to update apps, and write the updating details in release notes for users.

Although lots of user feedback are generated in different platforms, such as Apple App Store [3] or social media [6], only 35.1% user reviews were reported to contain valuable information for app development teams [7]. Manual extraction of the key valuable information from user feedback would inevitably be time-consuming, laborious, and clumsy. In recent years, many researchers studied the filtering of informative user reviews [7], the identification of relevant user feedback [8], and clustering and prioritization of user requirements in user reviews [7, 9]. These studies proposed various methods to extract critical information for app evolution from large amounts of data, but no analysis was conducted on those user reviews from the perspective of app release notes, i.e., to explore the echoing relationship between user reviews and release notes.

To this end, we propose RoseMatcher (Release Note and User Review Matcher), which is a novel approach that matches

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colloquially written user review sentences with formally written release note sentences. With RoseMatcher, we can obtain high-confidence matched pairs of relevant user reviews and release notes, thus significantly reducing the manual annotation effort. Based on these matched pairs, we detect an echo relationship between app release notes and user reviews, and we explore the roles of user reviews in app updates from this mutual response and conduct analysis at the level their posting time.

To the best of our knowledge, seldom research explores the relevance between user reviews and app release notes. Our previous work [10] is the first investigation in this area. Based on the preliminary results, this paper not only expands the research dataset, but optimizes the core matching method and performs deeper manual analysis. Concretely, we focus on those user reviews that are deemed to be relevant to specific release notes. First, we defined eight roles user reviews take in app updates based on the content association between release notes and user reviews. Subsequently, we explored the attention app vendors pay to user reviews and the attention users pay to release notes in terms of the temporal dimension, based on the difference between the release time of release notes and the post time of their relevant user reviews. To our best knowledge, no prior study analyzed release notes and their relevant user reviews in the temporal dimension, and our study fills the gap in this research area.

The main contributions of this study are listed below:

- To detect the relevance between official release notes and informal user reviews, we propose RoseMatcher to mine the most relevant reviews for app release notes by combining semantic-sensitive and keyword-based matching algorithms based on our previous study [10]. RoseMatcher can detect semantically similar and keyword-identical texts and solve the problem of the low relevance rate of high-similarity matched pairs suggested by the single model, which dramatically reduces the overhead and cost of manual annotation.

- To explore the attentiveness of the app development teams to user reviews and users’ attentiveness to app release notes posted in the app market, we analyze and visualize the time interval between the release time of the release notes and the post time of their relevant user reviews. To our best knowledge, no prior study analyzed release notes and their relevant user reviews in the temporal dimension, and our study fills the gap in this research area.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In Section 6, we briefly review the related work on user reviews and app release notes. Section 2 elaborates our proposed methodology for identifying relevant matched pairs between user reviews and app release notes, including overview in Section 2.1, data pre-processing and selection in Section 2.2, algorithms for matched pair identification in Section 2.3, and specific methodology for matched pair analysis in Section 2.4. Section 3 presents the data collection and experimental results. Section 4 elaborates the corresponding discussion derived from the experimental results. Limitations are explicitly given in Section 5. Finally, Section 7 concludes the paper and describes the possible future work of our study.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Overview of our Approach

In our approach, researchers can get high-confidence matched pairs of release note sentences and user review sentences for more in-depth study, this process main contains the following three steps as shown in Figure 2.

(1) Data Selection and Processing focuses on data selection, pre-processing and filtering of the acquired dataset to ensure a high quality of data input for RoseMatcher and thus prevent invalid calculation, which is elaborated in Section 2.2.

(2) Matched Pairs Identification (RoseMatcher) The second step is the core of our entire approach – the RoseMatcher. As described in Section 2.3, we use deep learning models to encode sentence-level release notes and user reviews, in order to get matched pairs by sentence similarity calculation and ranking.
(3) Matched Pairs Analysis The third step is the subsequent analysis of the suggested high-confidence matched pairs. In Section 2.4, we elaborate our specific methodologies for analyzing matched pairs.

2.2. Data Selection and Processing

Due to the huge amount of computation, we need to make sure we have high quality input data, which can heavily reduce unnecessary computational overhead. The data selection, filtering and processing is to ensure the quality of our data as much as possible before they are input to RoseMatcher, thus making our algorithm more efficient.

2.2.1. Selection Criteria of Mobile Apps

As reported in [11], nearly 60% of the mobile apps in app stores are updated in a non-updating pattern, i.e., the same release notes are pushed repeatedly. Meanwhile, we observed that some apps usually release notes in a perfunctory manner with broad and repetitive statements, rather than specific updating details. As shown in Figure 3, for example, the release notes of Facebook and Mcdonald’s are deemed to be low-qualified because they seldom convey specific or valuable information for RE researchers. Therefore, we introduced the following four inclusion criteria (IC) to select mobile apps with high qualified release notes. Note that in this paper, it works as the first round selection for the construction of our research dataset.

IC1.1 The app should be released for at least three years.

IC1.2 The release notes of this app should have less than 80% (suggested) repetition rate after splitting into sentence level.

IC1.3 The app should have a sufficient amount of release notes and user reviews.

2.2.2. Data Processing

Our research dataset consists of app release notes and reviews of the same apps. Generally, the number of user reviews is much greater than that of the release notes. Meanwhile, app release notes are often written in a more regular and structured way. Therefore, our data processing is divided into two parts: user review processing and release note processing.

Task 1: Data Processing for User Reviews which is conducted by the following three steps.

Step 1.1: Sentence Splitting. One user review usually describes user feedback from multiple aspects with several sentences. Taking the user review in Figure 4 as an example, it describes two types of feedback: the first sentence praises the app, while the second sentence requests a new feature. In order to simply the analysis of user reviews, NLTK [12] was adopted to perform stopword removal, punctuation removal, and lemmatization.

Step 1.3: Non-informative review sentences filtering. First, this paper follows the definition of informative reviews and non-informative reviews in [7]: ‘informative’ implies that the review is constructive/helpful to app developers, and "non-informative" means that the review contains no information that is useful for improving apps. To remove non-informative reviews, this paper reused EMNB [13], i.e., the semi-supervised machine learning algorithm adopted in ARMiner [7], as the classifier of user reviews. Compared with supervised algorithms, EMNB fits the case of a small amount of manually-labeled data along with plenty of unlabeled data to achieve better performance. Specifically, we leverage the dataset provided by Chen et al. [7] as the training data to build the classifier for data filtering.

Task 2: Data Processing for Release Notes, which is conducted by the following two steps.

Step 2.1: Sentence splitting. Similar to user reviews, a release note usually contains of several release sentences in a list format. As shown in Figure 1 (a), each piece of information basically starts a new line with a special symbol (e.g., "-", "*", or "."). We observed that some release notes do not end with a period at the end of each line, which may leads to failure in sentence-level splitting using the natural language processing toolkits, like NLTK or SpaCy [14], so we divide the release notes by paragraphs.

Step 2.2: Duplication removal. This step can be used to clean duplicated release note sentences from the following three aspects. First, as mentioned earlier, many apps tend to make ‘perfunctory’ updates in a pattern that does not deliver the content of the updating, for example, "Fixed stability issues (Sporify, 2021-11-11)", "Bug fixes and performance improvements (Google Drive, 2020-10-27)", and "Some bug fixes. (SHEIN, 2017-11-03)". These release note sentences occur frequently but seldom bring any details. Therefore, the removal of this type of release note sentences can greatly increase the quality of release notes to be included in the research dataset. Second, some release notes start or end with a welcome or appreciation statement at the beginning or the end of each update, or for example, "Take collaboration to the next level by connecting over video with Google Meet, part of Google Workspace. (Google Meet, 2021-08-31)", and some release notes also tend to have a general statement before the list of new features, such as "Some recent additions include: (Pandora, 2019-01-31)" and "This release brings enhancements that help you get more out of your inbox: (Gmail, 2018-08-13)". These release note sentences are also often duplicated, and the process can significantly reduce their weight in the update log sentences. Third, release notes often contain major updates and subsequent minor updates, and a small number of apps repeat the content of major updates in minor updates for the purpose of reminding users of their new major features. The de-duplication of keeping only the initial occurrence of the release notes can ensure the removal of such duplicate information.
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Select and Process Research Data (Sec. 4)

1. 1st Round Selection
   - App User Reviews
   - Apple App Store Apps
   - App Release Notes
   - RN Processing
     1. Sentence Splitting
     2. Duplication Removal
   - UR Processing
     1. Sentence Splitting
     2. Text Preprocessing
     3. Non-informative Reviews Filtering

2. 2nd Round Selection
   - Input
     - Set of user review sentences
     - Release note sentence
   - RN Processing
     1. Sentence Splitting
     2. Duplication Removal

Identify Matching Pairs (RoseMatcher) (Sec. 5)

- Embedding
  - Word2Vec
  - POS-Tagger
  - Contextualized Embeddings
  - SentenceBERT

- Sentence Embedding
  - Retain Nouns, Verbs and Adjectives
  - Sentence Embedding

- Review Embeddings
  - Release Note Embedding
  - Cosine Similarity
  - Rank
  - Top N Pairs by Word2Vec

- Review Embeddings
  - Release Note Embedding
  - Cosine Similarity
  - Rank
  - Top N Pairs by SBERT

- High-confidence matching pairs

Analyze Matching Pairs (Sec. 6)

- Further Analysis
  - Manual Labelling
  - User Review Roles Identification
  - Time Difference Calculation

Figure 2: Overview of the data processing and RoseMatcher approach.
2.2.3. Criteria of Release Notes

Due to the aforementioned characteristics of release notes, not all the release notes of selected apps meet the objective of this work. To construct the research dataset of this paper, the following two inclusion criteria are defined to support the second round selection applied in the release notes of the apps, which are the results of implementing the five ICs defined in Section 2.2.1.

IC2.1 The content of the sentence-level release note is understandable.

IC2.2 The sentence-level release note contains valuable updating information.

2.3. RoseMatcher

This section provides the details of RoseMatcher, including text representation, sentence similarity calculation, and high-confidence matched pairs identification.

2.3.1. Text Representation with Word Embeddings

As the prerequisite of compare the similarity between app reviews and release notes, their textual content should be transferred into numerical presentations. Word2Vec [15] and BERT [16] are two landmark models in natural language processing. Both Word2Vec and BERT consider the context of the certain word for word embeddings. Differently, BERT, based on Transformers [17], considers both the context (bidirectional encoder) and word order information to present the embedding of the word, while Word2vec does not consider the word order, and the relevance of all words in the whole sentence is not considered due to the limitation of window size. Moreover, the word vector represented by Word2Vec is static, while BERT represents the dynamic word vector derived from the context of the sentence. According to our requirements, the improvement of BERT compared with Word2Vec is relatively limited for the following reasons: (1) the research data are homogeneous in nature, which are all users’ or developers’ statements of app-related functions, etc, which leads to the low possibility of polysemacy, and the improvement of dynamic representations is not significant. (2) it is the nature of BERT to consider the context of the sentence that leads its ability to identify the difference of opposite meanings well (e.g., synonyms and antonyms and positive and negative sentiments), but user feedback towards app tend to have both positive and negative...
statements, so that the improvement of BERT compared to Word2Vec may conversely become a factor of lower matching rate. Therefore, we use both models in parallel for matching.

Text Representation with SBERT For the SBERT model, we get the representation of sentence embedding using pre-trained SentenceBert model all-MiniLM-L6-v2, which is available on Huggingface [18]. It uses the pretrained model [19] and fine-tuned in on a 1,170,060,424 sentence pairs dataset and maps sentences & paragraphs to a 384 dimensional dense vector space.

Text Representation with Word2Vec For the Word2Vec model, we use 1,082,192 informative original user review sentences collected and processed by ourselves as training data, with the training mode of Skip-gram, to map each word to a 300 dimensional vector space. In our approach, we only include embeddings of nouns, verbs and adjectives, which we can automatically detect with a part-of-speech (POS) tagger. Some previous studies have either retained only nouns [20] or only verbs and nouns [21] when performing similar matching approaches, however, our observation shows that, for example, in the user reviews and release notes concerning dark mode, if we remove the adjective dark in the sentence We need dark mode support, the matching of key information cannot be completed, similarly, the word left in the sentence The bar should be placed to the left side also plays a key role that cannot simply be removed.

Hence, we defined Formula (1) to represent sentence embeddings \( E_{sentence} \) using Word2Vec model.

\[
E_{sentence} = w_{verb} \sum \frac{E_{verb}}{n_{verb}} + w_{noun} \sum \frac{E_{noun}}{n_{noun}} + w_{adj} \sum \frac{E_{adj}}{n_{adj}}
\]

where \( w_{verb}, w_{noun} \) and \( w_{adj} \) are weights of verbs, nouns and adjectives respectively, and \( w_{verb} + w_{noun} + w_{adj} = 1 \); \( E_{POS} \) denotes the word embedding of a word whose part of speech is \( POS \); \( n_{POS} \) denotes the number of words whose part of speech is \( POS \). Here, we assign \( w_{verb} = w_{noun} = w_{adj} = 1/3 \)

2.3.2. Sentence Similarity

Given the numerical representation of release note sentences and user review sentences, RoseMatcher utilizes sentence similarity to measure the relevance between them. Common methods of calculating sentence similarity, such as edit distance [22], lexical overlap [23], and substring matching [24], can only work in some simple cases [25], and can not capture semantic similarity between texts. Based on the word embedding representation, cosine similarity performs well in capturing semantic features, as a good word embedding model maps similar words to proximate vectors. Hence, the cosine similarity algorithm, as defined in Formula (2), is used to calculate the similarity between release note sentences and user review sentences.

\[
sim(E^{rn}, E^{ur}) = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n} E^{rn}_i E^{ur}_i}{\sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^{n} (E^{rn}_i)^2} \cdot \sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^{n} (E^{ur}_i)^2}}
\]

where \( E^{rn} \) and \( E^{ur} \) denote the sentence embedding representation of the given release note and user review respectively, and \( n \) denotes the dimension of the sentence vectors.

2.3.3. Identifying high-confidence matched pairs

Given any release note sentence, we can calculate its similarity with the user review sentences of the app, and according to the ranking of similarity, we can obtain the top N matched pairs with the highest similarity. However, high similarity is not equivalent to high relevance. Our subsequent results also show that less than 1/3 of the matched pairs with high similarity are relevant ones when using a single model for matching. In order to efficiently filter out the truly relevant matched pairs, we creatively propose the method of intersecting of the top results obtained by two models to get high-confidence matched pairs, as shown in Formula (3). Although this method may drop some relevant matched pairs, it can greatly improve the efficiency of manual labeling to obtain more relevant matched pairs, which is of great value to our empirical study.

\[
\Phi = \{ p \mid p \in topN(P_1) \land p \in topN(P_2) \}
\]

where \( P_1 \) and \( P_2 \) denote the release note and user review pairs of two models respectively, \( topN() \) is the function to get the set of the top N pairs with the highest similarity, and \( \Phi \) denotes the set of high-confidence matched pairs.

2.4. Analyzing Matched Pairs

This section focuses on how we proceed with and from what perspective we analyze the high-confidence matched pairs that RoseMatcher outputs. We first manually label the matched pairs suggested by RoseMatcher to determine the truly relevant matched pairs and evaluate the effectiveness and accuracy of RoseMatcher. Subsequently, we identify the roles that user reviews play according to the relevance between release notes and user reviews based on the relevant matched pairs. Finally, we analyze the relevant matched pairs from the perspective of the release time of user reviews and release notes. These steps are described in detail at the methodological level as follows.

2.4.1. Manual Labelling

Even though RoseMatcher generates high-confidence matched pairs, it is also necessary to label these pairs manually to accurately filter out the truly relevant matched pairs is indispensable.

In this paper, manual labelling of app data is done by the first and third authors. In order to eliminate as much subjectivity as possible in manual labelling, these two coders conduct the labeling process independently. The second author participated to discuss the disagreements and help get consensus on the labels.
Our criteria for the labelling of the relevant matched pairs, which are discussed by the first and third authors after labelling of 300 randomly selected samples, are described as follows: relevant indicates that the content of the review reflects the release note, which means that either the content of the user review matches the release note content, and the user review is likely to be the driver factor of the release note, or the user review provides feedback based of requests or issues brought by the new update. irrelevant indicates that the release note has no apparent relationship to the user review.

After manual labelling, we evaluate the effectiveness and accuracy of our approach. For this purpose, we define Hit Ratio, as described in Formula (4). We leverage the percentage of matched pairs labelled as ‘relevant’ in the top 80 pairs as the measurement standard.

$$\text{Hit Ratio} = \frac{|P_r|}{|P_r| + |P_{ir}|}$$ \hspace{1cm} (4)

where $P_r$ and $P_{ir}$ are the set of relevant and irrelevant matched pairs of a certain app or some apps respectively.

2.4.2. Identifying the Roles of User Reviews

In order to investigate the role that user reviews play in app update from the perspective of release notes, we analyze the content and the relevance of all the matched pairs which are manually marked as "relevant" in Section 2.4.1 with an iterative technique. First, we draw a stratified random sample [26] of the relevant matched pairs. Stratified sampling can divide the data into manually exclusive groups according to the apps. Next, the first and the third authors independently label the random sample to identify the roles user review play in app update. Multiple roles are not allowed since we split both release notes and user reviews into sentences, and a sentence usually takes on only one role.

The labelling process includes two iterations on one single matched pairs. To start with, We create an empty set of role labels. Next, we carefully read the contents of both the release note and user review in each matched pair. When a certain type of roles that the user review play in this app updates is identified, this role will be added in the set of role labels. We repeated this operation in each of the matched pair till no new role could be added in the role set. In this way, the initial list of role types is created and then shared among the first three authors to include new types and dispute duplicated types.

Based on stratified sampling, we can initially define the role types, and the first and third authors labelled all remaining matched pairs independently after reaching agreement on the initially defined role types. During the labeling process, once a new type of matched pair is encountered, it will be immediately proposed and discussed by the first, second and third authors whether the initially defined classification criteria need to be modified.

2.4.3. Time Interval Calculation

For any matched pair, the lengths of time interval ($\Delta t$) between the posting time of a release note ($t_r$) and that of its matched app reviews ($t_{ur}$) are easy to observe and collect, and the time interval between them can reflect, to some extent, the attention the development teams pay to user reviews and the attention users pay to release notes. Therefore, for each matched pair, we calculate the time interval between the release note and user review using the Formula (5).

$$\Delta t = t_r - t_{ur} \hspace{1cm} (5)$$

where $t_r$ and $t_{ur}$ denote the posting time of the release note and that of the review in one matched pair respectively, and $\Delta t$ denotes the time interval value (unit: days).

Note that in this paper, a negative $\Delta t$ means that in this matched pair, the relevant user review was posted before the release note. Whereas, the positive value of $\Delta t$ means that the relevant user review was posted after this release note. Furthermore, if we use $T$ to represent the set of all the $\Delta t$, the following formulas (6) and (7) can be used to calculate the average time interval value (unit: days) between release notes and the reviews posted before and after the release notes, respectively. This indicates the degrees of attention that the development teams pay to user reviews and the degrees of attention users pay to release notes to some extent.

$$T_{before} = \frac{-\sum_{t \in T | t < 0}}{|t \in T | t < 0|} \hspace{1cm} (6)$$

$$T_{after} = \frac{\sum_{t \in T | t > 0}}{|t \in T | t > 0|} \hspace{1cm} (7)$$

3. Experiments and Results

Our work aims to identify the impact of users reviews on app release notes, which is based on the identification and analysis of the one-to-one matched pairs of app reviews and release notes. For this purpose, we designed the following three research questions (RQs):

RQ1: Can RoseMatcher serve to identify the one-to-one matched pairs of user reviews and release notes effectively and accurately?

RQ2: What roles do user reviews play in app updates according to the matched pairs?

RQ3: What is the impact of user reviews on release notes from the perspective of their posting time?

3.1. Dataset

The collection of our dataset strictly follows the app selection criteria proposed in Section 2.2.1. We glanced at Top 2 apps of each of the 26 categories in the Apple App Store [27] except the ‘Game’ category, and finally filtered out 5 suitable apps. The reason to exclude Game apps is that although the ‘Game’ category has the highest percentage of apps in the App Store (21.07%) [28], many games provide their own forums or social media platforms to release new versions, rather than in app repositories. Additionally, the data sourced from the apps in ‘Game’ repository usually
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Table 1
Summary of the collected and processed app data. Release Notes (RN); User Reviews (UR).

| App Name   | Category   | Release Notes | User Reviews |
|------------|------------|---------------|--------------|
|            | No. of RN  | No. of RN Sentences | No. of UR | No. of UR Sentences |
|            | Total      | De-duplicated   | Total      | Informative       |
| Reddit     | News       | 233            | 450        | 218              | 62,598         | 129,545        | 41,110        |
| Spotify    | Music      | 182            | 506        | 50               | 368,243        | 808,441        | 300,478       |
| Pandora    | Music      | 115            | 235        | 116              | 107,241        | 241,497        | 79,906        |
| SHEIN      | Shopping   | 161            | 361        | 88               | 45,516         | 117,529        | 21,271        |
| Instagram  | Photo&Video | 253            | 380        | 77               | 461,264        | 918,729        | 600,299       |

| Total      | 944        | 1,805         | 549        | 1,046,862        | 2,035,741      | 1,043,591      |

Table 2
Performance (hit ratio) of the three models (single model using Word2Vec, single model using SBERT and proposed model combining Word2Vec and SBERT).

| App Name   | Word2Vec | SBERT | Word2Vec ∩ SBERT |
|------------|----------|-------|------------------|
|            | # Hit Num | Hit Ratio | # Hit Num | Hit Ratio | # Hit Num | Hit Ratio |
| Reddit     | 240       | 0.267  | 240          | 0.329     | 47        | 0.617     |
| Spotify    | 240       | 0.500  | 240          | 0.513     | 69        | 0.768     |
| Pandora    | 240       | 0.175  | 240          | 0.183     | 51        | 0.333     |
| SHEIN      | 240       | 0.017  | 240          | 0.033     | 80        | 0.050     |
| Instagram  | 240       | 0.775  | 240          | 0.713     | 54        | 0.963     |

| Total      | 1,200     | 0.347  | 1,200        | 0.354     | 301       | 0.515     |

contain game terminologies in plenty, which may require researchers spending much time experiencing the game to understand the rules, terminology, etc. in order to read the release notes and user reviews.

Finally, app reviews and release notes of five apps, i.e., Reddit, Spotify, Pandora, SHEIN and Instagram in Apple App Store, are included to construct the dataset of this paper (available at xxxx). Data collection was performed in February 2022, and we crawled all the user reviews and release notes of these 5 apps posted from January 1st, 2017 to January 1st, 2022. The raw dataset of this study has been made available online [29]. Subsequently, we process the collected release notes and user reviews respectively according to the steps described in Section 2.2.2. Table 1 summarizes the size of the collected and processed app data of these five apps.

3.2. Answer to RQ1

3.2.1. Research Data for RQ1

As mentioned in Section 3.1, our dataset covers all user reviews and release notes of the five selected apps from 2017 to 2021. Then, for each of these five apps, we randomly selected one release note in 2018, 2019, and 2020 respectively for subsequent matching. This brings a set of 15 (3 years × 5 apps) sentence-level release notes, in order to ensure that any app release note will have at least one year of reviews before and after its release time respectively. For each release note sentence, we set N in Section 2.4.2 as 80 to choose the Top 80 matched pairs generated by RoseMatcher. Since RoseMatcher employed two models, i.e., the final dataset serves to answer RQ1 is 2400 selected matched pairs (15 release notes × 80 matched pairs × 2 models), and these matched pairs will be analyzed manually.

3.2.2. Results for RQ1

Table 2 summarizes the overall results of the evaluation. In the table, we compare the performance of two models, Word2Vec and SBERT, in matching relevant pairs, and we also give the hit ratio of RoseMatcher by taking the intersection of high-similarity matched pairs output by Word2Vec and SBERT. Figure 5 visualizes the hit ratio of leveraging two single models and two models simultaneously by taking the intersection. Figure 6 shows the time that Word2Vec model and SBERT model consume for encoding and similarity calculation.
Figure 6: Time (unit: seconds) consumed for text encoding and similarity calculation (Word2Vec vs SBERT).

Our results show that although the large model (SBERT) trained on a large dataset performs slightly better than the small self-trained model (Word2Vec), SBERT model consumes much more time (nearly 10 time) for encoding and computing similarity than Word2Vec model. In addition, the hit ratios of the two single models are both around 0.35, while combining two models by taking the intersection can achieve the hit ratio of 0.515, although this approach may discard some matched pairs that should be labeled as relevant, but this can greatly improve the efficiency of manual labelling and thus expand the data set to compensate for the discarded samples.

Key Findings: In this section, we manually label a total of 2400 high similarity matched pairs matched by 18 release note sentences, and the results show that, overall, SBERT (0.354) has a slightly higher hit ratio than Word2Vec (0.347) if a single model is used, but SBERT consumes nearly 10 times more time, while taking intersection to combine Word2Vec and SBERT greatly outperforms SBERT and Word2Vec single model, which can reach a hit ratio of 0.515.

3.3. Answer to RQ2
3.3.1. Research Data for RQ2

The results of RQ1 show that high-confidence matched pairs can be obtained by combining Word2Vec and SBERT to take the intersection, which constitutes RoseMatcher. This discards matched pairs that are only matched by a single model, but gives us the ability to expand the investigated release note entries.

For this purpose, we reselect the investigated release note sentences according to the release note selection criteria described in Section 2.2.3. Specifically, we randomly select one release note in each quarter of 2018, 2019 and 2020 respectively as the investigated release note sentences, i.e., a total of 60 (4 quarters × 3 years × 5 apps) release notes. If an release note sentence that meets the selection criteria cannot be picked up within a certain quarter, we will randomly select one within its adjacent quarter to try to ensure an even distribution of the 12 release note sentences collected for each app.

We take 60 release note sentences and their corresponding sets of user review sentences as input to RoseMatcher, and for each release note, we select the top 80 matched pairs with the highest similarity. Eventually, RoseMatcher outputs a total of 984 high-confidence matched pairs. Similar to the evaluation experiment, the authors labeled the matched pairs according to the labeling criteria and methods described in Section 2.4.1. Table 3 summarizes the Number of RoseMatcher outputs, hit numbers and hit ratios of each app.

3.3.2. Results for RQ2

After manual labelling, our results show that the average hit ratio of our proposed RoseMatcher can reach 0.718, after we fourfold the number of investigated release note sentences. The lowest hit ratio is 0.545 and the highest reaches 0.901. In the 984 suggested high-confidence matched pairs, 707 are labelled as relevant matched pairs. Subsequently, we identify the roles that user reviews play in app updates based on the 707 matched pairs, according to the methodology introduced in Section 2.4.2. Table 4 shows the 8 roles, and gives some examples and the frequency for each role.

Role 1: FEATURE REQUESTER (189 matched pairs, 26.7%)

User reviews as feature requester are often written in a requesting tone, expressing the users’ request for certain features that app does not equip with. From the perspective of release notes in the matched pairs, release notes addressed the request user proposed in the user reviews. Role 1 is the most common role played by user reviews. See one example in Table 4, "But please add support for the iPhone X" and "Also I wish the comments can be translated" are the feature requests for iPhone X and "Comment Translation" respectively, which are all introduced in the subsequent release notes. Note that we cannot assert whether these user reviews directly led the development team to make the relevant update, these user reviews can be deemed as one of the important potential evolutionary requirements of the updates introducing new features.

Role 2: BUG REPORTER (143 matched pairs, 20.2%)

User reviews as bug reporter articulate the problems that users encounter when using the apps, outlining information about what is wrong and needs fixing. From the perspective of app release notes, the app development teams fix the bug reported by users. For example, the user review – "When

| App Name | No. of Output | Hit Num | Hit Ratio |
|----------|---------------|---------|-----------|
| Reddit   | 222           | 121     | 0.545     |
| Spotify  | 191           | 157     | 0.822     |
| Pandora  | 206           | 172     | 0.835     |
| SHEIN    | 223           | 129     | 0.578     |
| Instagram| 142           | 128     | 0.901     |
| **Total**| **984**       | **707** | **0.718** |

Table 3: Summary of the number of matched pairs and hits for the data of RQ2.
### Table 4
Examples of 8 user review roles and the corresponding percentages.

| #  | Role                  | App          | Release Note                                                                 | User Review                                                                 | %     |
|----|-----------------------|--------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| 1  | Feature Requester     | Reddit       | Mods can now edit post flairs in their communities                          | I'd like to be able to edit my subreddit flair.                             | 26.7% |
|    |                       | Spotify      | We've now added support for the iPhone X                                    | But please add support for the iPhone X.                                    |       |
|    |                       | SHEIN        | Added a translate function for comments, so you can read every comment      | Also I wish the comments can be translated                                   |       |
| 2  | Bug Reporter          | Pandora      | You can ask Siri to play your music on Pandora                              | You say Hey Siri resume Pandora and that idiot will play some random station just on a whim. When I try to click the link, it says can't open link on this device. Please fix this because it's really frustrating to not be able to open any Spotify links. | 20.2% |
|    |                       | Spotify      | Fixed issue when clicking external links                                    | I refuse to use this app until iPhone X support is added                     |       |
| 3  | Complainer            | SHEIN        | Try out the search function on new product page, find products you like more easily | It's very annoying because I have to search all over creation to find the items again | 20.2% |
|    |                       | Pandora      | Introducing support for iPhone X                                           | I refuse to use this app until iPhone X support is added                     |       |
| 4  | Praiser               | Spotify      | Try saying Hey Siri Play music on Spotify or any other voice query of your choice adding on Spotify at the end | The main thing for me is that Spotify has a data saver to help lower the data used when streaming | 11.9% |
|    |                       | Pandora      | Go to Settings and choose the new Change App Icon option                    | I also love the fact that you can change the app icon                       |       |
| 5  | Quality Issue Raiser | Spotify      | Introducing our new standalone Apple Watch app                             | Come on where is the Apple Watch app                                       |       |
|    |                       | Instagram    | Introducing new Messenger features in Instagram                            | Indeed your update is just a lie because there’s no new messenger features on Instagram |       |
| 6  | Dispraiser            | Instagram    | New Settings Menu We ve made it easier to find your settings like notifications and account controls | i don’t like the new way to go to settings                                  | 4.0%  |
|    |                       | Pandora      | Go to Settings and choose the new Change App Icon option                    | Honestly I don’t need the fancy change your icon updates                     |       |
| 7  | Subsequent Feature Requester | Reddit | Drafts are now available                                                   | But one thing I would like to see improved is for a way to draft picture and video instead of discarding it completely |       |
|    |                       | Instagram    | Introducing Voice Messaging                                                | But what about commenting, a voice message you should be able to listen to the voice message before you send it | 3.8%  |
|    |                       | Spotify      | Try saying Hey Siri Play music on Spotify or any other voice query of your choice adding on Spotify at the end | Apple could allow better voice controls for Spotify it would be nice to be able to add songs to playlists or take songs off of playlist by asking Siri |       |
| 8  | Questioner            | Instagram    | Instagram now filters out bullying comments intended to harass or upset people in our community | I feel like restricting bullying comments will just cause more problems within the Instagram community Now filters out bullying comments intended to harass or upset people. How true is this? | 1.7%  |

i try to click the link, it says cant open link on this device reports a bug that was fixed in the release note — "Fixed issue when clicking external links". Similar with user reviews as feature requester, the bugs or terrible experiences raised from these user reviews prospectively can be detected by the development teams, thus helping smooth out software.

**Role 3: Complainer (143 matched pairs, 20.2%)**

User reviews as complainer contain strong negative emotions, complaining about bad experiences when using the app. We tend to view these user reviews as indirect bug reports or feature requests, since negative emotions often source from the terrible experience of using the software, such as annoying bugs and the absence of desired features, and developers tend to address and respond to these specific complaints. See the example in Table 4, "It's very annoying because I have to search all over creation to find the item" complains about the difficulty in finding items, which is solved by introducing the new "search function". Note that such user reviews can often be sideways feature requester or bug reporter, but as long as the review is a complaint with negative sentiment, we consider it a complainer.

**Role 4: Praiser (84 matched pairs, 11.9%)**
User reviews as praiser give positive feedback according to the content of the release notes, expressing love for the app new features or appreciation for bug fixes, etc. From the perspective of app release notes, user reviews as praiser are positive responses from users to app release notes. See the examples in Table 4, "I love the fact that you can change the app icon" directly expressed love for the new features - "Change App Icon", which is introduced in the release note. Such user reviews reflect the level of user satisfaction with app updates, and development teams can learn from these successful updates.

**Role 5: Quality Issue Raiser** (81 matched pairs, 11.4%)

User reviews as Quality Issue Raiser encompasses many categories, and these reviews are usually related to feedback from users about the quality of the update. Unlike praise and dispraise, they often do not simply express affection/commodation or discontent/censure on the updates, but rather propose problems that the updates bring. From the perspective of app release notes, user reviews as quality issue raiser are neutral responses from users to app release notes. For example, the release note introduces the "Siri integration", and the relevant user review "Also asking Siri to play a song on Spotify sometimes doesn’t work" conveys quality feedback from users on the usability aspects of this new feature. These reviews often contain more valid information because their feedback is more specific and the development teams can consider adding instructions or making the new feature more visible in subsequent updates to improve user experiences.

**Role 6: Dispraiser** (28 matched pairs, 4.0%)

User reviews as dispraiser are criticism, censure or dislike on the content of the release notes, expressing dissatisfaction with new updates. From the perspective of app release notes, user reviews as dispraiser are negative responses from users to app release notes. See some examples in Table 4, "Honestly I don’t need the fancy change your icon update" conveys that the user considers the new feature of this update - "Change App Icon" - to be meaningless, expressing his/her displeasure with the update. Such reviews can reflect users' attitudes toward the updates, and development teams can then reduce their input on similar updates rendering users feel discontented.

**Role 7: Subsequent Feature Requester** (27 matched pairs, 3.8%)

User reviews as subsequent feature requester are often constructive suggestions or creative ideas based on the change of new update. In contrast, these user reviews are feature request essentially, but are distinguished from the feature requester defined in Role 1, since from the perspective of app release notes, feature requests are requirements raised by users that are addressed in subsequent release notes, while subsequent feature requests are constructive advice proposed by users based on the update. See the examples in Table 4, after the introduction of "Voice Message", a user came up with the idea to "comment a voice message" and another user requested that "they should be able to listen to the voice message before sending".

**Role 8: Questioner** (12 matched pairs, 1.7%)

User reviews as questioner are doubts and questions from users towards app release notes, which mainly contains two main aspects: one is questioning of the effectiveness and the other is questioning of the consequence. Take the following release note as an example: "Instagram now filters out bullying comments intended to harass or upset people in our community". On the one hand, "Now filters out bullying comments intended to harass or upset people. How true is it?" is a question about the effectiveness of the update, since the user does not believe that the new feature is feasible; On the other hand, "I feel like restricting bullying comments will just cause more problems within the instagram community" questions about the consequence that brings by the update, since this new update seems to bring some new bad influence in the user’s opinion. Role 8 is the least common role that user reviews play.

**Key Findings:** In this section, we identify 8 roles of user reviews according to their relevance to app release notes. User reviews dominantly play the roles of feature requester (26.7%), bug reporter (20.2%) and complainer (20.2%) in app updates, which can be deemed as potential evolutionary requirements for development teams to update app and deliver the corresponding release notes to users. Part of user reviews give praise (12.9%) or dispraise (4%) on app updates, and some users also provide feedback on the quality (11.4%) of the updated content, or raise questions (1.7%). Users also submit subsequent feature requests (3.8%) based on the updated content, containing constructive suggestions or creative ideas.

### 3.4. Answer to RQ3

#### 3.4.1. Research Data for RQ3

We reused the 707 relevant matched pairs suggested in Section 3.3 as the research data for answering RQ3.

#### 3.4.2. Results for RQ3

As described in Section 2.4.3, we calculate the time interval value (Δt) for each matched pair of all the investigated apps (except ZOOM). Due to the dispersed Δt, we choose 20 days as an interval and visualized the number of data within each interval with Δt as the x-axis and quantity as the y-axis for quantity statistics, as shown in the top figure with red line in Figure 7.

Figure 7 shows a clear concentration of Δt between -80 and 0, suggesting that for release notes, relevant user reviews have a tendency to be concentrated within a certain time period prior to their release. Also, Δt tends to be evenly distributed among the rest, but in general, the closer to the release notes, the relatively higher the number of relevant reviews is. Our results also show that the time interval value
between a small number of relevant reviews and updated logs is even three to four years (maximum is 1,398 days).

The bottom five sub-figures with blue line in Figure 7 show the time interval value distribution of the relevant matched pairs for each app separately. The results show that Instagram, Pandora and Spotify share similar characteristics, where the time interval value of their relevant matched pairs has a significant concentration around 0. Differently, Reddit and SHEIN have a more even distribution of the time interval value of their relevant matched pairs.

According to the formula (6, 7) mentioned in Section 2.4.3, for the matched pairs that user reviews posted before the corresponding release notes, the average time interval value ($\overline{T_{before}}$) is 365.59 days, while for the matched pairs that user reviews posted after the corresponding release notes, the average time interval value ($\overline{T_{after}}$) 430.33 days.

**Key Findings:** In this section, we visualize the time interval values between the release notes and user reviews in each relevant matched pair to explain the impact of user reviews on release notes on the dimension of their posting times. Our results show that there is a noticeable concentration of relevant reviews a short time before the release notes are posted. On average, for the matched pairs that user reviews posted before the release notes, the time interval value is about 1 year (366 days), while for the matched pairs that user reviews posted after the release notes, the time interval value is about 1 year and 2 months (430 days).

4. Discussion

4.1. Detection of Same Semantics

Development teams and users may use different expressions for the same features. Theoretically, semantic matching can be achieved by calculating the similarity by leveraging word embeddings, which can be well highlighted in our matched pairs. Table 5 lists some examples of the key phrases that are expressed in different ways but have same semantics, which are well detected by RoseMatcher.

To give some concrete examples, the release note – "Our
app now supports Dark Mode in iOS”, in addition to success-
fully matching user reviews that contain the key phrase
Dark Mode, such as “needs a dark mode” and “I wish there
was a dark mode feature”, can also match some user reviews
that express in a different way, such as “You guys should
add a night mode since the screen is too bright even when
I switch it to apple’s night mode” and “Also love the back-
ground displays for each album cover’s artwork and with the
new update for iPhone users when using the dark display.”. Additionally, “Added a translate function for comments” so
now you can read every comment can match not only with
the review – “Also I wish the comments can be translated.”
but also with another review – “A translator button would be
so helpful!”.

RoseMatcher achieves semantic matching to a certain ex-
tent, and this detection of different expressions of the same
semantics is quite valuable. For the development teams, they
can construct a vocabulary of developers and users, so that
developers who want to target a feature for obtaining rele-
vant user feedback can consider the exact matching of key
words or key phrases in the vocabulary to locate correspond-
ing user reviews, which will greatly facilitate developers to
locate and obtain some user feedback relevant to a certain
feature quickly and effectively.

### 4.2. Possible reasons for irrelevant matched pairs

As stated before, the similarity between sentences does
not represent their relevance. Therefore, in this section, we
discuss the matched pairs that the release notes and user
reviews have high similarity, but are not labeled as relevant.

The first and most common reason is partial matching.
In some irrelevant matched pairs, We find that the high simi-
arity is largely due to the fact that partial keywords in the
sentences have overlap, but the absence of another part of
the phrase can lead to a completely different meaning. As
shown in Table 6 where the fifth column is Partial Match-
ing, we extract key information of the release note and ir-
relevant review (#1), the release note conveys Siri support
on Apple Watch and the user review asks for Apple Watch
support, although most of the key information matches (i.e.,
Apple Watch), they describe completely different features.

Second, semantic matching can also lead to mismatches.
In most cases, semantic matching can improve the hit ratio
of the matched pairs, however, semantic matching can lead
to mismatching as well. As shown in Table 6 where the fifth
column is Semantic Matching, Spotlight introduces iPhone X
support in the release note (#4), while the irrelevant review
requires an update to support for iPad Pro. iPhone X and
iPad Pro have similar semantics because they are both Ap-
ple devices, so it is interpretable that our model gives them
a high degree of similarity, but this inevitably leads to the
occurrence of mismatches.

Some mismatches may be due to the special symbols and
numbers. As mentioned in Section 2.2.2, we performed data
preprocessing with special symbols as well as numbers re-
moved, and although this is a basic operation for most natu-
ral processing tasks, this has certain influence on our experi-
mental results. As shown in Table 6, in the release note #6,
Instagram introduces feature related to hashtags, we failed
matching since we noticed that user tend to use #, which was
removed during data preprocessing, to describe hashtags in
reviews. In addition, in the release note #7, the iOS version
number – 12 was also removed during the data preprocess-
ing, which possibly results in the matching failure.

Finally, we focus on suggesting that mismatches may be
unrelated to the algorithm, but caused by some intrinsic fac-
tors. We find that some release notes fail to match relevant
user reviews partially because there are no or not enough
relevant matched pairs. In our experiments, we selected the
top 80 matched pairs with the highest similarity for each
model, but some release notes may have far fewer than 80
relevant reviews or even no relevant reviews. Even though
RoseMatcher can reduce this situation to some extent by tak-
ing the intersection to get high confidence matched pairs,
there are still cases where the mismatches given by the two
models overlap. For example, for the release note #8, both
Word2Vec and SBERT suggest Can you add create a list
for me and for other as the relevant user reviews. We manu-
ally conduct keyword (including synonyms and possibly user
expressions) searching for SHEIN’s user reviews and found
that there are indeed no reviews related to community activ-
ity, which is why the two models matched some user reviews
that requested augmenting other features.

For subsequent researchers, we suggest further improving
hit ratio by modifying the method of data preprocessing,
e.g., converting special symbols to their literal counterparts
(Special Symbols and Numbers), and the algorithm, e.g., the
weight assignment during matching (Partial Matching, Se-
matic Matching). Also, the similarity threshold can be fur-
ther explored in depth (Intrinsic Factors).

### 4.3. Inspiration from Empirical Studies

Essentially, our study is an empirical study in which we
use RoseMatcher to match out the relevant matched pairs of
release note and user reviews, thus defining the roles played
by user reviews in the app update. It is interesting and ex-
citing to detect mutual responses between release notes and
user reviews, and our empirical study enlightens us in the
following ways:

The performance of BERT based LM (large model) is only slightly better than Word2Vec, and LM consumes
much more time (100 times). Theoretically, compared with
Word2Vec, BERT, as a pre-trained LM based on millions

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**Table 5**

Examples of the semantically similar key phrases detected by
RoseMatcher.

| Key phrase in release notes | Key phrase in user reviews |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| voice                       | Siri                      |
| Siri                        | voice command             |
| dark mode                   | night mode, dark display  |
| translate function          | translator button         |
| freeze                      | get stuck, crush          |
| edit flairs                 | change flair              |

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**Identifying the Impact of User Reviews on App Updates: An Exploratory Study on App Release Notes**

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of corpora, has much higher parameters and should be able to encode natural language with better performance, including user reviews. However, in our given specific task, as shown in Table 2, for four of the five apps, the hit rate of the Bert based model is only slightly higher than that of the Word2Vec based model (with 0.007 on average). Additionally, as shown in Figure 6, the running time is nearly 100 times longer but the hit ratio is not effectively improved, which is the loss outweighs the gain. For this phenomenon, we think it is reasonable to explain that the Bert model is sentiment-sensitive, and given the fact that the release notes often do not contain positive or negative sentiments, while the user reviews are highly emotional, it may lead to a certain deviation in the calculation of similarity between the two different sourced natural language.

The intersection of the relevant matched pairs given by two models is small. Based on the experiments in Section 3.2, we find that the intersection size of the matched pairs given by the two models is much smaller than the size of the union set (only about 20%). This shows that although the two models have matched a similar number of relevant matched pairs, there is not much overlap between them, which also indicates that the two models have different emphasis and attentions in similarity matching. It is worth mentioning that this also proves that the many matched pairs that are only hit by a single model are simply discarded. However, considering the cost and efficiency of manual annotation and the nature of our research is empirical research, we believe that this discarding is a reasonable and efficient way to expand the number of researched release notes.

Development teams adopt user reviews in app updating to some extent according to the release notes. Although, no researchers, other than the development teams, can fully prove that the development teams refer to user reviews for updates, for most of the release notes, RoseMatcher more or less successfully matches a small number of user reviews with corresponding requests, bug reports or complaints. These matched pairs show that the response to user reviews, which can greatly reflect the level of attention given to user reviews by the development teams, which also proves the significance of software requirements engineering research on user reviews.

Users show solicitude for app release notes. Many user reviews are direct feedback on the app release notes. Nevertheless, many apps tend to write release notes in a perfunctory style, which leads to a lack of communication between the development teams and users. Direct feedback from users on release notes is often targeted and of great value to software iterations, so developers are obligated to and should try to write and push detailed and easy-to-understand release notes to let users quickly digest the features or bug fixes brought by new updates, which can also lead to high-quality follow-up user feedback.

Other sources of drivers for software updates exist. Our results show that some release notes failed matching relevant user reviews, which indicates that user reviews may
not be the only source of software update drivers. Software updates may come from the joint decision of internal development teams, project managers and specialized decision or strategy making departments, or from competitors, etc. Therefore, subsequent studies may consider other data sources other than user reviews as a starting point to explore more drivers of software updates.

4.4. Enhancing App Update with User Feedback

In Section 3.3, we found that users tend to give feedback on app updates. With the exception of praise and dispraise, which may only reflect user preferences for app updates, Quality Aspect, Question and Subsequent Feature Request are all highly targeted and valuable user feedback.

In this way, development teams can leverage RoseMatcher to obtain feedback automatically from users about a specific update, including but not limited to, what bugs this update brings, what is worth improving in this update, etc. Also, some of the matched user feedback can bring inspiration to the development teams, since we found that many users expressed their novel and creative ideas about the follow-up possibilities of the update in user reviews, which may enlighten the developers on the follow-up new features that users are looking forward to, thus indicating the direction of feature expansion.

5. Threat to Validity

In this section, we elaborate on the threats to the validity of this study, including construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and conclusion validity, by following the guidelines in [30].

5.1. Construct Validity

Construct validity denotes whether the theoretical and conceptual constructs are correctly measured and interpreted. We raise the following two aspects concerning this validity:

First, the relevance between user reviews and release notes does not completely mean that the updates of the development teams come from these reviews or the users give feedback after reading the release notes, since we cannot give full assurance only from the semantic similarity and time level. Therefore, this article does not assert that the relationship between the two can represent the communication between developers and users, but we are happy and excited to detect the mutual response between them, and conduct further analysis of these matched pairs.

Second, the sources of the app updating by development teams are diverse. Apart from user reviews in app store, they may originate within the app company, since product manager in mature organizations are mainly responsible to find out what the reasons for the feature requests are, where the user needs and pain points are, and companies often set up special testing departments for bug detection and fixing. Additionally, some social media, such as twitter, and questionnaires, may also become sources of updates. While some minor updates may not attract users’ attention at the same time, those who are willing to give feedback are even less.

From this point of view, some matching studies on release notes may become meaningless, which is also the reason for the low hit ratio of the approach, since there may be no relevant user reviews at all.

5.2. Internal Validity

Internal validity refers to the degree to which a conclusion concerning the causal effect of one variable (independent or treatment variable) on another variable (dependent variable) based on an experimental study is warranted.

First, release notes and user reviews are two different natural languages, where large differences can be detected in their expression methods, tone and sentiment. Even if the word embedding models try to eliminate the language gap, it will be difficult to avoid the errors brought by the algorithm and the calculation deviation caused by the sentiment difference between them.

Second, we considered verbs, nouns and adjectives (giving the same weight) when calculating sentence-level similarity, but we observed that release notes, being natural language, have a lot of interference information, which may lead to inaccurate matching of user reviews. The research of how to identify these interfering information and automatically remove them, or giving higher weight to key information in the sentence vector may improve the accuracy of matching algorithm.

5.3. External Validity

External validity concerns the extent to which the results of a study can be generalized to and across other situations, people, settings, and measures. The main external threat to validity is concerned with the generalizability [31] of our findings. Our study focuses on analyzing the 6 apps in the Apple App Store over a period of five years. Furthermore, our study focuses on the apps that are the most popular in the App Store. Our findings may not hold for non-popular apps. Similarly, although we looked at all 26 categories to select 6 apps, the studied 6 apps cannot cover enough categories, so it is worthwhile to look at other types of apps as well. Further studies should investigate more apps in a more extended period to understand how our findings apply to other types of apps, such as apps in Google Play Store and non-free apps.

5.4. Conclusion Validity

Threats to conclusion validity are concerned with the relationship between the treatment and the outcome. In our study, a relevant threat concerns that the update version which users post reviews for. It is possible that the reviews posted by users are not for the latest version, because it is highly likely that users will have a lag in version updates: since using older versions of apps will not affect experience, for those who do not have automatic updates enabled, their reviews will have a certain lag. In this way, the following extreme case may exist, where the user is using 1st version of the app, but he does not update the apps timely, the reviews he posted are between the 4th and the 5th version, which will cause some bias to our result analysis.
6. Related Work

6.1. Extracting User Requirements from User Reviews

Data-driven requirements engineering (RE) is increasingly active in RE research, which usually take different types of user feedback of software as the most important data source. In these studies, user reviews are reported as the most popular data source, since user reviews contain unique insights from users based on their experience, such as problem reports and inquiries [32], which results in user feedback having significant value to software engineers and requirements managers [33].

In recent years, many researchers focused on requirements extraction from a large number of user reviews for app evolution. For example, Chen et al. proposed AR-Miner [7] to extract informative user reviews by filtering noisy and irrelevant ones, group the informative reviews automatically using topic modeling, prioritize the informative reviews by an effective review ranking scheme, and finally present the groups of most ‘informative’ reviews via an intuitive visualization approach. Casper [34] was presented by Guo et al. as a method to extract and synthesize user-reported mini stories regarding app problems from reviews. Miroslav et al. [35] applied domain-specific analysis and keyword-assisted approach to extract useful information from app user reviews. These studies reported that their proposed keyword-assisted topic modeling approach was able to significantly outperform LDA on both intrinsic and extrinsic measures of topic cohesiveness.

In addition, several studies have explored in depth the types of user reviews based on their content, while also factoring in user ratings into the analysis. For instance, Pagano and Maalej [3] reported 17 topics from app reviews. They found that 96.4% of reviews with one-star ratings include the topics of shortcoming or bug report, and these reviews can be further mined to get requirements. To alleviate app developers’ effort to identify the user reviews that matter to be addressed for receiving higher star ratings, Noei et al. [36] considered the key topics of user reviews. It was found that considering the key topics in the next version shares a significant correlation with the increase in star-ratings. Sorbo et al. [37] combined the usage of app rating and user reviews. They found that user comments reporting bugs are negatively correlated with the rating, while reviews reporting feature requests do not.

These studies aimed to provide multifaceted approaches for requirements extraction, category classification and requirement prioritization based on user reviews. However, little is known whether these user requirements or bug reports are adopted or resolved by the development teams and written in the app release notes, that is, the value and role of user reviews in app updates remain unclear. Compared to these studies, our study first introduces RoseMatcher to detect the relevance between user reviews and app release notes to fill the gap. Subsequently, by analyzing the relevance, we delve into the roles that user reviews play in app updates.

6.2. Analyzing app evolution with release notes

Release note provides valuable and important changes of an app to the users. Descriptive and effective release notes will help app vendors re-engage users, build excitement around the entire product, and extend app vendors’ reach to new audiences [38].

Prior research on app release notes focuses on the content and the evolution principles. For example, Wang et al. [39] analyzed release notes pertaining to 120 apps in the Apple App Store from the perspectives of FR (Functional Requirement) and NFR (Non-Functional Requirements). They found that the majority of the changes in fact refer to NFR and developers seem to be busy with improving the quality aspects of their apps, and relative fewer changes refer to FR. Hassan et al. [40, 41] studied the characteristics of the emergency updates and bad updates, which shows that release notes are essential tools for app development teams to announce the resolution of emergency issues and the implementation of the requested features. The survey research by Nayebi et al. [42] focused on the ways in which mobile app developers organize their releases and the release strategies they employ. The authors found that half of the developers participating in the survey had a clear strategy for their app releases. Yang et al. [11] conducted an in-depth analysis of the release notes practice in the Google Play Store and identified six patterns of release notes. They also noticed that the shifting of patterns mainly occur when developers shift from short to long, and rarely updated to frequently updated release notes.

Some researchers explored the impact of the contents of the release notes or the frequency of app updates on user ratings. For instance, McIlroy et al. [4] explored the update frequency of the top 10,713 mobile apps across 30 mobile app categories. Their results indicate that 14% of the apps are updated frequently, while 45% of these frequently-updated apps do not provide the users with any information about the rationale for the new updates. Plus, frequently-updated apps are highly ranked by users.

Different from these existent work, this paper takes an in-depth analysis on the combination and relevance of two different natural languages, i.e., user reviews and release notes.

6.3. Tracking User Reviews to Support App Evolution

Some researchers have tried to match user reviews with bug reports in issue trackers of some open-sourced mobile applications.

For example, Häring et al. [43] proposed an automatic approach DeepMatcher to extract problem reports from app reviews submitted by users, and then identify matching bug reports in an issue tracker used by the development team, which can help developers identify bugs earlier, enhance bug reports with user feedback, and eventually lead to more precise ways to detect duplicate or similar bugs. Palomba et al. proposed an approach named CRISTAL [44] to trace informative crowd reviews into code changes, in order to monitor the extent to which developers accommodate crowd re-
quests and follow-up user reactions as reflected in their ratings. Their results indicate that developers implementing user reviews are rewarded in terms of ratings. Our study differs from them in the following aspects. On the one hand, they narrowed down their exploration to bug reports in issues trackers and source code changes from a few open-source projects. However, the bug fixes and code changes made by developers are invisible to the vast majority of users, while the release notes serve as a bridge for app vendors to notify users of app newest updates. The mutual pushing of app release notes and user reviews makes the app store an interactive platform, which indicates that our match will be double-oriented. On the other hand, our paper empirically studies the roles of user reviews in app updates according to their relevance with release notes, instead of providing developers with the functionality to identify bug reports or new feature requests.

Moreover, several studies have also attempted to explore the relationship between release notes and user reviews. Vilarroel et al. [9] proposed an approach called CLAP (Crowd Listener for release Planning) to categorize user reviews, cluster together related reviews and prioritize the clusters of reviews to suggest app release planning. In a follow-up study, Scalabrino et al. [45] improved CLAP for app developers to plan for the next release by selecting the most important raised complaints in a particular issue type. For evaluation, they used release notes as the basis, aiming to verify whether the issues clustered and prioritized by CLAP were resolved by the developers in subsequent updates. Unlike these authors' studies [9, 45], our work is based on the release notes, trying to identify the most relevant user reviews to determine the role of user reviews in app evolution and updates.

In addition, Saidani et al. [46] proposed AppTracker, a novel approach to automatically track bad release updates in Android applications. They judge whether an update is good or not from the level of positive and negative reviews given by users. While their work focused on the degree to which users respond positively or negatively to developers, our study does not only focus on the sentiment of user reviews responding to release updates, but we also analyze the roles played by users reviews on the release notes, including but not limited to whether user reviews may be a trigger for the delivering of new release notes, and whether the new release notes may lead to new reports of quality problems or new related feature request.

7. Conclusions

In this paper, we introduce RoseMatcher, an approach to automatically match colloquially-written user reviews with technically-written release notes, and identify the relevant matched pairs, which can not only address the language gap between the two natural languages, but also greatly improve the hit ratio of the matched pairs. Leveraging RoseMatcher on 72 release notes from 6 different apps, we explored these relevant matched pairs in depth: from the perspective of the content, we defined eight roles of user reviews in app update. We found that the feature requests, bug reports and complaints raised by users will be adopted by the development teams and solved in the update according to the release notes pushed regularly. Meanwhile, users will also give feedback to the app release notes, including praise, criticism, bug reports, questions and novel ideas related to the update. From the perspective of time, we found that the relevant reviews of release notes tend to concentrate on a shoot time before and after the release notes are released, but there are also plenty of matched pair cases with long intervals, some even as long as three years, with an average interval of one year. In the next step, we plan to expand the dataset to improve its generalizability, and incorporate app ratings as an attribute of user reviews to make the analysis deeper and more convincing, and improve the accuracy of proposed algorithms to obtain higher hit ratio.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Tianyang Liu: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data Curation, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing. Chong Wang: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing - Review & Editing, Visualization. Chong Wang: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing - Review & Editing, Supervision. Kung Huang: Validation, Data Curation, Visualization. Peng Liang: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing - Review & Editing, Supervision. Beiqi Zhang: Formal analysis, Writing - Review & Editing. Maya Daneva: Formal analysis, Writing - Review & Editing. Marten van Sinderen: Formal analysis, Writing - Review & Editing.

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