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Emotional Transition and Resilience in the Online Narratives of Chinese Parents of people with Autism: A Study of Baidu Tieba

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Abstract: Caring for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) places significant psychological and social burdens on Chinese families, who often navigate intense sociocultural pressures such as "face" culture and social stigma. This study explores the genuine emotional transitions and mechanisms of psychological resilience among parents of people with Autism Spectrum Disorder in China within text-based online communities. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study conducted quantitative content analysis on 150 samples of long-form narratives and comments by parents, randomly selected from Baidu Tieba between 2015 and 2026. Based on Systemic Psychological Resilience Theory, a binary coding scheme evaluated the data. Results indicate that caregivers in early diagnostic stages experience highly overt acute psychological trauma, while physical and mental exhaustion functions as a dynamic process accumulating over the caregiving duration. Online peer support significantly activates parents' pragmatic learning behaviors regarding professional intervention skills; however, constrained by deeply ingrained cultural pragmatism, it fails to effectively drive a thorough cognitive restructuring. Notably, there is no significant correlation between parents' unconditional acceptance of their children and the reality of financial burdens and social stigma, highlighting the agency and transcendence of the parenting subject. In summary, while highly anonymous text-based online communities alleviate early caregivers' stress and provide dense information, sound support mechanisms cannot be passively established through virtual networks alone. Therefore, under the premise of safeguarding the personal rights of parents or caregivers of people with ASD against infringement, policymakers and social workers should seize the critical early diagnosis window to build an integrated online-offline social support system combining practical technical guidance with deep psychological reconstruction, rather than relying solely on online communities.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Psychological Resilience, Emotional Transition, Online Narratives, Baidu Tieba, Parental Caregivers

Introduction

Research Background and Literature Review

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a comprehensive term in modern medicine that is widely used to describe a spectrum including "Classical Autism," "Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS)," "Rett Syndrome," and other neurodevelopmental disorders. The developmental disorders within this spectrum are typically characterized by restricted, repetitive behaviors and persistent social and communication difficulties (Joon et al., 2021).

However, although people with ASD have a lower level of social adaptability due to their abilities, which results in a lack of self-care skills in traditional society (Sukardi & Ambarwati, 2025), this does not mean that all people with ASD require some form of lifelong support (Lord et al., 2018). In the practical process of social adaptation, several factors influence the extent to which people with ASD can adapt: the level of their executive functioning; the level of their emotional processing abilities (Dijkhuis et al., 2017); the strength of their family functioning (Sikora et al., 2013); and the degree of social inclusion for special populations within their



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community (Jones et al., 2022).

China, the world's second-most populous developing country, has a population with ASD accounting for 0.7% of its total population (Jiang et al., 2024). This rate significantly exceeds those in East Asia (0.51%), South Asia (0.31%), and West Asia (0.35%) (Qiu et al., 2020). Correspondingly, there is a considerable number of Chinese studies focusing on the stress levels and caregiving experiences of caregivers of people with ASD. However, most of these studies have not excluded the behavior of Chinese respondents—influenced by traditional Confucian thought—to actively conceal information in non-private settings. Constrained by the concept of “face,” some respondents may actively conceal the development of ASD from researchers and provide false feedback. In some cases, this behavior is subconscious (Han et al., 2024; Lei & Kantor, 2025). It has such distinctive cultural characteristics that they are even reflected in certain Chinese immigrant communities (Yang & Crehan, 2023). In the research of some scholars, this type of concealment can be traced back to an issue of identity within a specific cultural context (Liu & Fisher, 2023).

Against this unique cultural backdrop, some caregivers of individuals with ASD have begun to seek information in unique ways that are independent of the offline environment. Since 2018, Chinese short-video platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou have become the primary sources of information for parents of people with ASD (Wang et al., 2025; Zhong & Han, 2024). However, since 2026, a large number of discriminatory internet memes related to ASD have appeared on various Chinese short-video platforms, such as “fully insured truck” and “Weirdos Association.” Such discriminatory internet memes have accelerated the stigmatization of the ASD population (Gao et al., 2026). Consequently, since the level of inclusivity on China's short-video platforms has not yet improved (Lai et al., 2025), some Chinese parents of people with ASD have increasingly turned to more traditional text-based communities, such as Baidu Tieba, to share experiences and exchange feelings, thereby forming a unique ASD Tieba ecosystem.

Based on this, there is a valid rationale for exploring the real thought processes and emotional experiences of parents or caregivers of people with ASD. However, most empirical studies rely on traditional in-person questionnaire surveys, and few researchers have accounted for the biases or subconscious influences stemming from the social expectations that caregivers passively accept. Therefore, there is still a lack of sufficient understanding in academic circles regarding how parents, once they have shed the need to conceal things to save “face”, can genuinely experience emotional transitions and cultivate psychological resilience (Chui et al., 2015; Mitter et al., 2019). Furthermore, existing studies often treat special-needs families as passive victims of environmental stress, neglecting their subjective agency and dynamic coping mechanisms within highly anonymous specific environment (Lu et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2020).

To address the aforementioned research gap, the general research question of this study is:

What factors influence the emotional transitions experienced by parents or caregivers of people with ASD in China during the caregiving process, as reflected in online narratives on Baidu Tieba? And do online support and social pressures affect their psychological resilience?

Based on this general question, three specific questions have been raised:

Specific question 1: What emotional transitions do parents or caregivers of people with ASD experience at different stages of caregiving?

Specific question 2: Can the support or influence from Tieba help parents or caregivers of people with ASD learn and reshape their own skills and mindset?

Specific question 3: Is there some kind of pressure of social environment that affects the degree to which parents or caregivers of people with ASD accept their condition?

By addressing these questions, this study aims to uncover the actual mechanisms underlying emotional transitions among parents and caregivers of people with ASD. The following section

outlines the systematic theory of psychological resilience that guides the researchers' empirical analysis.

Theoretical Framework

To systematically analyze the emotional transitions and psychological resilience mechanisms of parents and caregivers of people with ASD, this study adopted the Systemic Psychological Resilience Theory. This theory views resilience not as a fixed individual trait, but as an interactive, socio-ecological process where biological, psychological, organizational, and cultural systems combine to help people navigate and access the resources needed to sustain well-being during adversity (Denckla et al., 2020).

These interactive socio-ecological processes generally take place in either online or offline environments and it has multi-level characteristics (Yan et al., 2026), setting aside the mechanisms that have long been proven to operate in offline settings (Bao et al., 2026), some researchers have confirmed that its online mechanisms also exhibit a high level of activity during natural disasters (Sun et al., 2024; Zhang & Sung, 2023) and periods of emotional distress (Xie et al., 2026). Therefore, in existing theoretical and empirical literature, internet-based digital interventions are often regarded as an effective means of providing psychological support in areas with limited emotional or natural resources (Ang et al., 2022; Schäfer et al., 2024).

Furthermore, Systemic Psychological Resilience Theory also emphasizes that emotional adaptation to illness or disability follows a dynamic temporal trajectory, and that individuals' ability to maintain mental health in the face of adversity stems from a complex and dynamic process of stress adaptation (Kalisch et al., 2019; McKenna et al., 2022). As a group defined as having a disability in the public eye (Yu et al., 2020), people with ASD align closely with this theoretical framework.

Materials and methods

Research Design

Within the framework of mixed research methods, this study employs a quantitative content analysis approach to explore the emotional changes expressed by parents of people with ASD in China in their online narratives, as well as the mechanisms of psychological resilience reflected in these emotional changes. This study used posts by parents on "Baidu Tieba," China's largest text-based online community, as its qualitative data source. Given China's unique "face" culture, this data source minimizes errors caused by active concealment to the greatest extent possible.

Data Sampling and Cleaning

Since there are a large number of "Bars" on Baidu Tieba that share the same topic but have different names, the discussions within them differ only slightly. For instance, consider "Autism Bar" and "ASD Bar." Therefore, even though "Autism" is not equivalent to "ASD" in academy but given that "Autism Bar" was established first, has the highest number of posts and the greatest popularity, and considering that "ASD" has long been equated with "Guduzheng" or "Zibizheng" (The English translation of both terms is Autism) in mainland China (Bie & Tang, 2015). In addition, in the vocabulary of most non-experts and parents of children with ASD, terms like "closed-off kid", "Alien kid" and "high/low functioning" are often equated with ASD (Lao et al., 2024). Based on that, the sample for this study will be drawn from "Autism Bar."

In the early stages of the study, it was impossible to determine when the "Autism Bar" was established through any available channels (literature, Baidu Tieba databases, search engines,

and AI all indicated that this information could no longer be verified). The researchers initially intended to set the starting point for sample selection at the establishment of Baidu Tieba (2003). However, according to statements from some researchers who had previously studied Baidu Tieba, data accessibility issues resulting from platform governance and the cleanup of historical data have made it impossible to retrieve early community discussion records continuously (Lee, 2022), and some posts appear as garbled text. Consequently, the researchers had no choice but to set the starting point to 2015, when the data was relatively complete. Furthermore, following the launch of Douyin in 2016, text-based platforms on the Chinese internet experienced a significant diversion of traffic to short-video platforms. Therefore, to ensure the richness of the sample, the researchers had to set the sample's time frame from 2015 to 2026 to ensure that the data sources were as comprehensive as possible.

In this study, each sample is defined as the collection of an author's original main post and all comments posted by that author under the same post. Through random sampling, the researchers grouped 50 sample posts into a set and conducted a simple semantic analysis of the posts within each group to familiarize themselves with the general meaning of the sample texts. During the process of reviewing the sample texts, advertisements, popular science posts, and other post types unrelated to the research topic were excluded and not included in the sample size.

By the time the third group—comprising 150 sample posts—was collected, no new meaningful content had emerged, and the rate of text duplication had become very high. Therefore, the researchers halted data collection and finalized the sample size at 150. Based on this, this study included a total of 150 long-form texts or related comments posted by parents or caregivers of people with ASD in China.

Coding Framework and Variables

Based on the theory of systemic psychological resilience, this study constructed a binary codebook comprising 10 variables. It consists of four sections:

Demographic characteristics: Whether the poster is a mother (Role Mother); whether the narrative is in the early diagnostic stage or the suspected medical consultation stage (Stage Early).

Emotional Shifts: Whether the post expresses acute psychological shock accompanied by disbelief or denial (Emo Shock); whether it reflects persistent physical and mental exhaustion and severe tiredness (Emo Burnout); and whether the poster has come to accept their child's special life circumstances (Emo Accept).

Psychological Resilience Manifestations: Whether the poster shows proactive behavioral adaptation (Learning); and whether they have achieved cognitive reframing, finding positive meaning in life through suffering (Reframing).

Environmental Stress and Support: Whether there is explicit mention of high intervention costs or the financial burden of reduced income (Finance); whether they have encountered social stigma or exclusion in public places (Stigma); whether they explicitly perceive emotional or informational support from other online community users (Support).

In the actual coding process, researchers conducted a comprehensive, holistic evaluation of these 150 samples. If a particular behavioral or emotional characteristic was explicitly evident in the text, the variable was coded as "1"; if it was not mentioned or manifested at all, it was coded as "0."

Inter-rater Reliability

To ensure the rigor and reproducibility of the coding process, the researchers conducted a rigorous inter-rater reliability test before formally proceeding with the coding of the full sample. The study randomly selected 15 samples (representing 10% of the total dataset) as a

test sample. The researcher and another part-time coder, who was hired for this purpose, independently coded these 15 samples in accordance with the Binary Codebook.

At this stage, the researcher used IBM SPSS Statistics software to calculate Cohen's Kappa coefficients for eight variables, excluding demographic variables, to assess the level of consistency between the researcher and the hired coder. The results of the analysis are as follows:

Table 1. Cohen's Kappa coefficient of variables

Value	Cohen's Kappa	Value	Cohen's Kappa
Emo Shock	.583	Reframing	.762
Emo Burnout	.667	Finance	.732
Emo Accept	.526	Stigma	.857
Learning	.815	Support	.727

Since the consistency levels for all variables in the test sample exceeded expectations (Kappa > 0.5), these values met the minimum analytical requirements. However, to ensure the reliability of the data, the research team subsequently held a focused discussion regarding variables on which the researchers and hired coders disagreed during the testing phase, further clarifying the definitional boundaries of the relevant concepts in the text. After reaching a consensus, the remaining 140 samples were coded independently by the researchers.

Statistical Analysis

After completing the digital coding of the entire sample (N=150), the resulting 150 × 10 data matrix was imported into IBM SPSS Statistics for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were used by the researchers to analyze the basic characteristics of emotional states and resilience behaviors. In addition, the researchers used chi-square tests to assess the statistical correlations among different variables.

Hypotheses

This study posits four hypotheses:

1. H1: There is a strong positive correlation between the variable "Stage Early" and the variable "Emo Shock." This hypothesis assumes that parents or caregivers of people with ASD will experience a stressful reaction upon diagnosis.
 2. H2: There is a strong negative correlation between the variable "Stage Early" and the variable "Emo Burnout." This hypothesis assumes that the causes of physical and emotional exhaustion among parents or caregivers of people with ASD are related to the duration of their caregiving.
 3. H3: The variable "Support" is positively correlated with the variables "Learning" and "Reframing," respectively. This hypothesis assumes that parents or caregivers who perceive support from peers are more likely to be motivated to learn professional intervention skills such as ABA and structured teaching independently. Ultimately, this leads to a reframing of their own life situation. In H3 hypothesis, the relationship between the variable "support" and "Learning" was called H3a. The relationship between the variable "support" and "Reframing" was called H3b.
 4. H4: The variables "Finance" and "Stigma" are negatively correlated with the variable "Accept." This hypothesis assumes that the high cost of rehabilitation interventions and the resulting financial burden will reduce parents' or caregivers' acceptance of people with ASD. In H4 hypothesis, the relationship between the variable "Finance" and "Accept" was called H4a. The relationship between the variable "Stigma" and "Accept" was called H4b.
- H1 and H2 correspond to emotional transitions in parents or caregivers. H3 (H3a & H3b) corresponds to the mechanisms underlying psychological resilience. H4 (H4a & H4b)

corresponds to environmental stressors and support.

Ethical Considerations

Since the text data extracted for this study were all sourced from open online forums freely accessible to the public, the traditional informed consent requirements of an Institutional Review Board (IRB) were unnecessary. However, this study strictly adhered to ethical guidelines for online research and protected user privacy. All personally identifiable information such as account nicknames, specific geographic locations, and the names of specific hospitals or intervention institutions has been fully anonymized. Furthermore, the parents' original statements cited as qualitative data in the subsequent results section have been reordered and rewritten during the translation into English to ensure that readers cannot trace the original Tieba webpages through search engines.

Results

This section systematically presents the statistical results of a quantitative content analysis of 150 online narrative samples (N=150) from the "Autism Bar" community on Baidu Tieba. First, this section uses descriptive statistics to outline the demographic characteristics of parents or caregivers of people with ASD in China. Subsequently, this section uses chi-square tests and the Phi coefficient to conduct a cross-correlation analysis of the four core hypotheses (subdivided into six specific variable relationships) proposed in the study, with the aim of providing an in-depth understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying ASD caregivers' behavior once they cease actively concealing their children's condition.

Table2. Gender ratio distribution

		Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Valid	Male	66	44.0
	Female	84	56.0
	Total	150	100.0

According to the data in Table 2, the gender distribution of the sample collected for this study is balanced. Female accounted for 56% of the posters, compared to 44% for male. This relatively balanced gender distribution indicates that the sample collection process for this study did not show any significant gender bias.

Table 3. Narrative period ratio distribution

		Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Valid	Early stage	80	53.3
	non-early stage	70	46.7
	Total	150	100.0

According to the data in Table 3, the narrative samples collected in this study are evenly distributed. The proportion of posters in the early stage was 53.3%, which is higher than the 46.7% in non-early stages. This means that, during the data analysis phase, the narrative stages of the samples will not lead to data imbalance.

Table 4. Hypothesis Test

Variables	χ^2	df	Sig (p)	Phi (ϕ)	Supported/Not supported
Stage Early + Emo Shock (H1)	95.760	1	< .001	.799	Supported

Stage Early + Emo Burnout (H2)	65.853	1	< .001	-.663	Supported
Support + Learning (H3a)	35.180	1	< .001	.484	Supported
Support + Reframing (H3b)	3.611	1	.057	.155	Not supported
Accept + Finance (H4a)	.558	1	.455	-.061	Not supported
Accept + Stigma (H4b)	1.799	1	.180	-.110	Not supported

Cross-tabulation analyses using Pearson's chi-square test (χ^2) and Phi coefficients (ϕ) were conducted to evaluate the four overarching hypotheses (subdivided into six specific variable relationships). The results of the hypothesis testing are summarized in Table 4.

Emotional Transitions Across Caregiving Stages (H1 & H2):

H1 posited a positive relationship between early diagnostic stages (Stage Early) and acute emotional trauma (Emo Shock). The chi-square test revealed an extremely significant positive correlation ($\chi^2 = 95.760, p < .001, \phi = .799$), indicating that caregivers in the early diagnosis phase experience profound psychological shock. Thus, H1 is supported.

H2 posited a negative relationship between early diagnostic stages (Stage Early) and long-term physical/mental exhaustion (Emo Burnout). A significant negative correlation was found ($\chi^2 = 65.853, p < .001, \phi = -.663$), confirming that emotional burnout is an accumulative process that intensifies over prolonged caregiving rather than peaking in the early stage. Thus, H2 is supported.

Peer Support and Adaptive Mechanisms (H3a & H3b):

H3a proposed that online peer support (Support) positively correlates with practical skill acquisition (Learning). The analysis showed a strong positive association ($\chi^2 = 35.180, p < .001, \phi = .484$). Thus, H3a is supported.

H3b proposed that peer support (Support) correlates with cognitive reframing (Reframing). However, the association did not reach statistical significance ($\chi^2 = 3.611, p = .057, \phi = .155$). Thus, H3b is not supported.

Environmental Stressors and Subjective Acceptance (H4a & H4b):

H4a and H4b assumed that financial strain (Finance) and social stigma (Stigma) would negatively correlate with parental acceptance (Accept). Contrary to this assumption, neither financial burden ($\chi^2 = .558, p = .455, \phi = -.061$) nor social stigma ($\chi^2 = 1.799, p = .180, \phi = -.110$) demonstrated a statistically significant relationship with parental acceptance. Thus, H4a is not supported and H4b is not supported.

Discussions

Demographic Characteristics

Based on the data in the "Results" section, the demographic characteristics of the sample in this study do not show significant differences. In the dataset shown in Table 2, the proportion of females (56%) remains higher than that of males (44%), but the difference is only 12%, and the data itself does not reveal a distinct gender distribution pattern.

There may be multiple reasons for this. Looking at the source of the data itself, although many international studies have shown that females (typically mothers of people with ASD) play a dominant role in the care of people with autism (Herrero et al., 2024; Li et al., 2022; Wu, 2026;

Zhao et al., 2024), but all of these data are based on voluntary self-reports from offline caregivers. As a text-based online community, Baidu Tieba significantly lowers the cost of participation for its users. Furthermore, according to studies on the gender distribution of Tieba users, the number of male users on Tieba actually significantly outweighs that of female users (Zhang & Tang, 2025). Nevertheless, in this study, the proportion of female users remains higher than that of male users. These findings confirm that the caregiving population for individuals with ASD in China still shows distinct gender characteristics, with female caregivers continuing to far exceed male caregivers in number.

Apart from the gender ratio, the narrative context of the sample is also an important variable influencing the specificity of the data. According to the data shown in Table 3, caregivers of people with ASD in this sample are still more likely to post on Tieba early in their children's diagnostic journey (53.3%). Their primary motivations are often to alleviate psychological stress or seek advice on behavioral patterns associated with autism. However, the data does not show significant bias, as a large proportion of caregivers (46.7%) continue to share their experiences and feelings even after the initial diagnosis.

Emotional Transitions and Dynamic Resilience

Regarding the hypotheses of this study, based on the data in Table 4, the two variables related to H1: Stage Early and Emo Shock exhibit a strong positive correlation ($\chi^2 = 95.760, df = 1, p < .001, \phi = .799$). This suggests that in the early stages, when people with ASD have just been diagnosed or have not yet been diagnosed, parents exhibit acute emotional breakdown and shock. This emotional breakdown and shock are highly evident in the text content on Tieba and are relatively easy to identify. The chi-square value ($\chi^2 = 95.760$) also indirectly supports the view that, regardless of the caregiver's personal psychological characteristics, they are almost unable to remain calm when they suspect or confirm that their child has ASD. This phenomenon shares similarities with the findings of some researchers and has been confirmed on multiple occasions (Chen et al., 2026; Lu et al., 2026).

Following this emotional impact, another characteristic of caregivers of people with ASD was confirmed in Hypothesis H2. Specifically, caregivers retained high levels of willpower and capacity for action during the early stages of the people with ASD's treatment, and had not yet experienced psychological exhaustion ($\chi^2 = 65.853, df = 1, p < .001, \phi = -.663$). Thus, in this study or in studies with similar backgrounds, exhaustion can be defined as a dynamic process that accumulates actively or passively over time.

Learning Ability and Cognitive Reframing

Hypothesis H3 was partially confirmed: Support from Tieba was positively correlated with caregivers' learning ability ($\chi^2 = 35.180, df = 1, p < .001, \phi = .484$). Counterintuitively, however, support from Tieba was not significantly associated with caregivers' restructuring of personal identity ($p = .057$). This actually reflects the pragmatic mindset prevalent in Chinese culture (Hall, 1998; Wu, 1973): although caregivers can receive support from Tieba users, which enhances their ability to learn intervention methods, this does not enable them to completely reframe the hardship of "Their child being a people with ASD" into a positive life meaning in their minds. This indirectly suggests that a healthy psychological comfort mechanism for caregivers of people with ASD cannot be achieved solely through textual information from Tieba users.

The findings of this study conflict with those of some researchers who have examined the psychological dimensions of parents or caregivers of people with ASD (Li et al., 2026). This may be because, in an anonymous environment, the influence of "face" culture is eliminated, leading some parents or caregivers of people with ASD to exhibit certain compensatory behaviors. That is, some caregivers of people with ASD feel compelled to present a positive

image to the outside world in offline settings (Ji et al., 2026), leading to an accumulation of negative emotions. Consequently, when they share their thoughts on online text-based platforms such as Tieba, they are more inclined to reveal the vulnerable aspects of their self-construction.

Subjective Agency and Transcendence under Socio-Economic Stress

In H4, the researchers analyzed the correlation between caregivers and “Finance/Stigma”; the data revealed counterintuitive results, with neither showing a significant correlation ($p = .455/.180$). In previous studies based on traditional scales, researchers often concluded that “the greater the external pressure, the more negative the parents’ parenting attitudes.” However, based on the findings of this study, Chinese caregivers demonstrate a certain level of transcendence in their “acceptance” of people with ASD. For example, some caregivers accept their children while simultaneously recounting the discrimination and heavy financial pressures their children face. These findings challenge the past tendency to view families of children with special needs as mere “passive victims of environmental pressures,” (Gao & Drani, 2025; Zhao et al., 2023) highlighting the active agency of the narrators in this dataset.

Integration with Systemic Psychological Resilience Theory

To comprehensively interpret the empirical findings, this study anchors its discussion in Systemic Psychological Resilience Theory, which conceptualizes resilience not as an isolated, static personality trait, but as a dynamic, multi-layered socio-ecological process.

First, the Systemic Psychological Resilience Theory posits that adaptation to adversity unfolds along a dynamic temporal trajectory rather than through static coping mechanisms. The empirical validation of H1 ($\chi^2 = 95.760, p < .001, \phi = .799$) and H2 ($\chi^2 = 65.853, p < .001, \phi = -.663$) directly reflects this dynamic temporal structure in the caregiving process. When a child is initially diagnosed with or suspected of having ASD, the parents’ psychological system experiences acute, systemic disruption, manifesting as pronounced trauma and disbelief. In contrast, long-term caregiving burnout does not peak during the initial shock but is a cumulative process that develops over time as emotional and physical resources are gradually depleted. By distinguishing between acute trauma and caregiving burnout, the findings confirm the theory’s contention that psychological resilience is time-specific and requires the establishment of different ecological support mechanisms at different stages of the caregiving life cycle.

In addition, the empirical findings in H3 and H4 also reflect key concepts of the Systemic Psychological Resilience Theory. For example, this theory emphasizes the role of external environmental systems in providing social, informational, and emotional resources to enhance resilience. The “partially supported” result for H3 (H3a is supported; H3b is not supported) clarifies the functional boundaries of the digital social environment provided by internet platforms within the Chinese cultural context. Virtual communities can effectively leverage digital resources, such as enabling parents or caregivers of people with ASD to acquire Applied Behavior Analysis skills and behavioral intervention strategies. However, contrary to intuition, due to the constraints of China’s pragmatic culture, peer support did not significantly promote cognitive restructuring, reflecting the unique manifestation of the core ideas of the Systemic Psychological Resilience Theory within the Chinese cultural context.

Finally, Systemic Psychological Resilience Theory offers an important theoretical perspective for reevaluating the relationship between social or resource-related pressures and the agency of parents or caregivers. Traditional deficit-oriented frameworks typically assume that external environmental stressors linearly inhibit family functioning and parental coping abilities. However, the non-significant relationships observed in H4a ($p = .455$) and H4b ($p = .180$) challenge this linear deterministic view. In Systemic Psychological Resilience Theory,

subsystems possess structural autonomy and buffering capacity against external macro-systemic pressures. This is evidenced by the extraordinary agency and transcendence demonstrated by Chinese caregivers on Baidu Tieba, reflecting the transformative agency of parents and caregivers of children with ASD within the broader social ecosystem.

Practical and Policy Implications

In this study, researchers affirmed the role of Baidu Tieba, a well-established online text-based platform, in supporting the psychological resilience of parents or caregivers of people with ASD. On the one hand, due to Tieba's high level of anonymity and convenience, gender differences among caregivers are minimized. On the other hand, as a longstanding internet community, Baidu Tieba is instinctively distinguished by caregivers from short-video platforms or new social media platforms. Consequently, it attracts caregivers of people with ASD who are in the early stages of diagnosis or remain undiagnosed; as a result, its online community has a higher information density than short-video platforms or new social media platforms.

Through the support of online communities with a high density of information, caregivers are able to systematically access intervention methods and other resources. As a result, Baidu Tieba effectively shoulders part of the emotional burden for caregivers of people with ASD who have just been diagnosed or have not yet received a diagnosis. However, it is important to note that persistent exhaustion also depletes caregivers' energy and willpower, and the closed online environment indirectly exacerbates caregivers' prejudices toward people with ASD (such as viewing ASD as a disease). Nevertheless, caregivers continue to show a high degree of acceptance toward their children and are not driven by financial pressures or social stigma. But given the influence of China's pragmatic social philosophy, Tieba's role in facilitating the reconstruction of caregivers' identity remains insufficient. A healthy support mechanism for caregivers cannot rely solely on the passive development of online communities.

Based on this, a hybrid support system integrating Tieba (online) and grassroots community governance organizations (offline) should be established. This hybrid support system can use online platforms to collect information on caregivers' negative emotions during the early intervention stage, rely on professional community service workers to guide them to offline settings, and leverage China's network of grassroots governance organizations to provide psychological intervention or further behavioral intervention. Thanks to China's highly digitized grassroots governance capabilities (Chen & Greitens, 2022; Zhou, 2025), the offline network of grassroots governance organizations can break through the closed environment of online text-based platforms and guide parents or caregivers of people with ASD to improve the lives of people with autism through various channels, thereby fostering offline mutual-aid organizations and building early ASD-friendly communities. Given that people with ASD in China have not yet established truly ASD-friendly communities (Liu et al., 2024), this proposal holds significant practical value.

However, a critical consideration of this proposal is the need to be vigilant against humanitarian crises of varying degrees resulting from the expansion of public authority. During the implementation of this proposal, community members may harass or coerce parents or caregivers of people with ASD in order to boost their own performance records—a phenomenon that has been confirmed by various researchers in studies involving other non-governmental partners (Chen, 2017; Ong, 2018). Given the “top-down” mindset inherent in China's governance tradition (Liu & James, 2022), the occurrence of such inhumane situations is a distinct possibility. Therefore, when grassroots community governance organizations direct caregivers to offline settings, they must ensure that caregivers are not subjected to coercion or inducement from any quarter. However, given that grassroots governance organizations in

China already wield significant public authority, this initiative must be implemented with caution to prevent local authorities from using the pretext of maintaining order to infringe upon the individual rights of parents or caregivers of people with ASD.

Conclusions

This study focuses on the online narratives of parents or caregivers of people with ASD in Baidu Tieba, a text-based online community. Through quantitative content analysis and chi-square tests of 150 long-form samples, it uncovers the emotional shifts and mechanisms of psychological resilience among caregivers after they cease actively concealing their children's condition.

Research indicates that caregivers of people with ASD who have been diagnosed at an early stage or have not yet received a diagnosis generally experience highly externalized acute psychological trauma (H1 supported) and that their physical and mental exhaustion accumulates both actively and passively as the duration of care increases (H2 supported). Furthermore, while support from other Tieba users significantly activates caregivers' learning abilities (H3 partially supported), its role in promoting deep cognitive restructuring remains limited due to the influence of Chinese pragmatic thinking.

The greatest theoretical contribution of this study lies in challenging the stereotype, prevalent in previous research, that families of children with special needs are simply "passive victims of environmental stress." Empirical results indicate that the psychological acceptance of children with autism among Chinese caregivers on Tieba is not significantly correlated with the economic pressures and social stigma they face in real life. On a practical level, the findings suggest to policymakers and social workers that psychological comfort and support mechanisms for caregivers of people with ASD should not rely solely on the passive establishment of online communities. Instead, they should seize the opportunity to provide early diagnosis while ensuring the individual rights of parents or caregivers of people with ASD, and offer a blended online and offline social support system that combines practical skills with psychological restructuring.

Although this study has certain practical significance, it still has the following limitations: First, the sample data was sourced entirely from Baidu Tieba, which may not fully cover caregivers who are accustomed to expressing themselves on short-video platforms or who are not comfortable using the internet; second, this study employed a binary codebook, which ensured data reliability but resulted in the researchers simplifying certain subtle emotional shifts in online narratives to some extent during the coding process. Other researchers may build upon the data from this study to conduct further analyses in subsequent research.

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Conflict of interests

The researchers declare that there are no conflicts of interest of any kind in this study.

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