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The Rise of “Full-Time Children” Phenomenon in China: A Text Analysis of Xiaohongshu Data

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Abstract:

The emergence of “full-time children” in China, referring to young adults who live with and are financially supported by their parents while providing domestic and emotional labor in return, has generated wide public discussion but limited scholarly analysis. This study examines how young people describe this lifestyle and how wider audiences emotionally evaluate it on Xiaohongshu, directly addressing two questions: how the phenomenon is discursively constructed and how it is affectively interpreted online. Using a mixed methods approach that integrates BERTopic modelling, sentiment analysis, and qualitative thematic interpretation, the study analyzes 103 posts and 9,799 comments published between 2022 and 2025.

The findings show that users narrate full-time children through three main lenses: intergenerational expectations, employment strain and career burnout, and emotional adjustment. Posts typically present the lifestyle in light and optimistic ways, whereas comments reveal more ambivalent reactions shaped by admiration, critique, and broader concerns about inequality, responsibility, and adulthood. Although positive sentiment dominates, its fluctuation across time and topics reflects shifting economic pressures and generational tensions.

The study argues that full-time children function not merely as an economic coping strategy but as a cultural and affective practice through which young people negotiate precarity and redefine familial reciprocity and emerging norms around work and independence. These insights contribute to research on youth precarity, intergenerational relations, and digital affect in contemporary China.

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1 Introduction

In recent years, the phenomenon of “full-time children” (全职儿女) in China has sparked heated debate on social media. Full-time children refers to young adults who live with and are financially supported by their parents while offering emotional labor and domestic help in return. As a contemporary expression of *youth precarity*, marked by unstable labor markets and prolonged pathways to adulthood, full-time children echoes patterns observed in other contexts, including young people who are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEETs), Japanese Hikikomori who withdraw from social life, Freeters who rely on unstable and low-wage jobs, and boomerang kids who return to the parental home after a period of independent living. Yet it remains distinct in an important way. Rather than being seen solely as dependents receiving financial support from older generations, full-time children actively contribute domestic labor that sustains the household, challenging conventional notions of youth dependency (Ni & Zhang, 2023).

Existing studies on youth precarity and withdrawal phenomena have predominantly focused on situating these conditions within specific social and cultural contexts. Scholars have examined cultural factors (Bowker et al., 2019; Teo et al., 2013), socioeconomic status (Fabrizi & Rocca, 2024; Sugai, 2016), and clinical features (Martinotti et al., 2021; Nonaka et al., 2022; Uchida & Norasakkunkit, 2015). Despite growing research in the field, little attention has been given to this newly emerging form of youth withdrawal in China, particularly how individuals articulate the choice of becoming a full-time child on social media.

Examining full-time children offers a distinct analytical perspective on youth precarity and withdrawal. Unlike forms of withdrawal characterized by social isolation or disengagement from family life, the full-time child arrangement involves an explicit renegotiation of dependence, contribution, and adulthood within the family. Economic reliance is presented as morally legitimate through emotional and domestic labor, challenging dominant assumptions that equate adulthood with autonomy. This perspective is particularly relevant in the Chinese context, where intergenerational obligation and family-based support remain central to social life. Drawing on large-scale social media data, the study shows how young people narrate their experiences and how these narratives are publicly interpreted and evaluated. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of a mixed-methods digital approach for analyzing emotional dynamics and meaning-making

processes that are often difficult to access through traditional interviews or surveys. The findings also carry practical relevance for those concerned with youth wellbeing and family relations, offering insight into how young people navigate insecurity, burnout, and dependence amid shifting labor markets and evolving family expectations in China.

The aim of this study is to examine how the full-time children phenomenon is constructed, discussed, and emotionally interpreted on Xiaohongshu. Through an analysis of posts and comments, the study investigates how young people narrate their experiences in relation to socioeconomic pressures and intergenerational dynamics, and how wider online audiences evaluate this emerging lifestyle. More broadly, it examines how these dynamics and the emotional expressions surrounding them shape contemporary understandings of adulthood, dependency, and family responsibility in China.

To address these aims, the study focuses on the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do young people describe and explain becoming full-time children on social media, and how do these narratives reflect broader dynamics of youth precarity and intergenerational relations in contemporary China?
- RQ2: How do online audiences emotionally interpret and respond to the full-time children phenomenon, and what do these affective reactions indicate about changing expectations of adulthood and family dependency?

Methodologically, this study uses a mixed-methods approach that integrates topic modelling (BERTopic), sentiment analysis, and qualitative interpretation of posts and comments collected from Xiaohongshu. This design provides a layered analytical lens that deepens our understanding of ongoing shifts in family relations and youth precarity in contemporary China.

The structure of this thesis is organized as follows. Chapter 2 outlines the emergence of the full-time children phenomenon in China and introduces Xiaohongshu as the primary digital context through which it is observed. Chapter 3 reviews relevant literature on youth precarity and social withdrawal, intergenerational exchange and family transformation, and theories of emotional expression, and it identifies the research gap addressed in this study. Chapter 4 describes the methodological approach, including data collection, ethical considerations, data description, preprocessing, topic modelling, and sentiment analysis. Chapter 5 presents the empirical results for both posts and comments, integrating

computational outputs with qualitative interpretation. Chapter 6 discusses these findings in relation to the theoretical framework, with attention to socioeconomic conditions, discursive constructions, emotional dynamics, and generational meaning-making. Chapter 7 concludes the thesis by summarizing the main contributions and outlining directions for future research.

2 Context of Full-Time Children Phenomena

2.1 The Rise of Full-Time Children in China

The emergence of full-time children can be traced back to the creation of a corresponding discussion group on Douban in December 2022, a forum-oriented social media platform in China. Since then, the term has quickly spread across mainstream platforms, with thousands of young people sharing their daily routines, frustrations, and reflections. This visibility has pushed the phenomenon into broader public discussions.

The choice among young adults in their 20s and 30s to return home rather than enter the labor market is closely tied to broader socioeconomic instability, growing social pressures, and shifting intergenerational values in contemporary China. Economically, the post-COVID period has been marked by persistent structural challenges: consumption has yet to return to pre-pandemic levels, and key sectors such as real estate, finance, and IT, which traditionally absorbed large numbers of new graduates, are struggling to sustain growth (Song & Zhou, 2024).

Beyond the economic slowdown, this trend is reinforced by mounting uncertainty in the labor market. Higher education, long viewed as a reliable pathway to upward mobility, no longer guarantees stable or well-paid employment. Recent graduates face intense competition, low entry-level wages, and an oversupply of higher education degrees. Youth unemployment has remained high since the end of the pandemic (DiPippo, 2023), and the number of graduates continues to rise, reaching an estimated 12.22 million in 2025 (Xinhua, 2025).

Structural barriers, such as housing affordability, further contribute to the rise of full-time children. Huang et al. (2022) highlight that more young adults are staying in multigenerational households due to financial strains. Rising living costs, along with a strained job market, make it difficult for young people to find a decent job or achieve financial independence. Therefore, for some young people, choosing or accepting a full-time child role, supported by their parents while contributing to domestic labor, becomes a pragmatic way of coping with these circumstances.

The rise of full-time children can also be read as a quiet response to the intense pressure facing young people today. Many who choose to remain at home do not necessarily view their decision as withdrawing from society; instead, they see it as a practical adjustment to

circumstances they find difficult to manage. This mindset is reflected in two widely discussed online terms: “involution” (内卷) and “lying flat” (躺平). The first critiques the exhausting cycle of competition that yields little real progress in work environments, while the second refers to stepping back from relentless striving in favor of a simpler, more sustainable way of living (Deng et al., 2025). Both concepts express dissatisfaction with social expectations that demand constant effort but offer limited reward (Yin et al., 2023). In this context, becoming a full-time child can be understood as an alternative path, one that offers enough breathing room, allows young people to redefine success on their own terms, and gives them space to renegotiate their roles within the family.

Overall, the rise of full-time children shows how young people in China are responding to financial insecurity, social pressure, and shifting ideas about adulthood and family responsibility (Chang & Ng, 2023). Rather than representing simple dependence, the phenomenon reveals how young adults navigate emotional strain and structural constraints while questioning conventional expectations surrounding intergenerational relations (Chin & Ho, 2023). By choosing this lifestyle, they are not only adapting to challenging circumstances but also participating in the ongoing redefinition of family roles in contemporary China.

2.1 Xiaohongshu as a Platform for Understanding the Full-Time Children Phenomenon

Xiaohongshu is a hybrid social media platform that blends user-generated content with e-commerce, focused on lifestyle sharing and everyday experiences. Founded in 2013, it has grown into one of China’s most influential platforms, particularly among young urban users. As of 2025, its user base is predominantly female (around 70%), with 35% belonging to Generation Z and 50% born after 1995. Half of its users live in China’s first- and second-tier cities (OctoPlus Media, 2023).

On Xiaohongshu, users, commonly referred to as “note creators,” share personal stories, reviews, and everyday reflections through posts that integrate text, images, and short videos. Content spans a wide range of topics, including fashion, beauty, travel, fitness, mental health, and emerging social trends. The platform’s algorithm prioritizes experience-based, community-oriented posts over purely commercial material, shaping its reputation for authenticity and relatable content (Hau, 2023).

In recent years, Xiaohongshu has become an important space for discussing social phenomena and shifts in youth lifestyles, making it a valuable resource for understanding contemporary youth cultures, attitudes, and values. The full-time children phenomenon is no exception. As of November 2025, the hashtag “#full-time children” has accumulated 7.4 million views and 41.9 thousand posts. These posts have circulated widely, generating viral stories, personal reflections, and a broad spectrum of opinions and interpretations.

3 Literature Review

This chapter reviews research relevant to understanding the emergence of full-time children in contemporary China. It begins by situating the phenomenon within global research on youth precarity and social withdrawal, highlighting how economic uncertainty and delayed pathways to adulthood shape young people's life choices. The chapter then examines literature on intergenerational exchange and changing family structures, with particular attention to how reciprocity, negotiation, and shifting expectations influence parent-child relationships in the Chinese context. Finally, it turns to research on emotional expression in digital environments, identifying a gap concerning how full-time children are emotionally represented and discussed on platforms such as Xiaohongshu.

3.1 Youth Precarity and Social Withdrawal

Amid rapid socio-economic transformation, scholars have examined how young people cope with growing uncertainty, labor-market fragmentation, and shifting expectations in the transition to adulthood. Existing research suggests that youth withdrawal behaviors, whether labelled NEET, hikikomori, lying flat, boomerang youth, or full-time children, are not simply signs of personal failure or cultural exception, but outcomes shaped by structural precarity and prolonged transitions into adulthood (Zhou, 2023). However, much of this work treats youth withdrawal as a relatively uniform response to instability, overlooking the diverse ways in which young people make sense of and negotiate these pressures in their everyday lives.

Foundational work conceptualizes these emerging patterns of youth withdrawal and delayed adulthood through the lens of youth precarity. Standing (2011) defines the emerging *precarariat* as the precarious status of young people who suffer from unstable labor arrangements, lack of rights, and persistent insecurity in work and life. They face temporary, part-time, and casualized work, are often over-educated for their jobs, and lack a coherent occupational identity or future trajectory. Similarly, Furlong and Cartmel (2006) argue that transitions into adulthood have become longer, individualized, and increasingly uncertain. Drawing on the concepts of *risk society* and *individualization* developed by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001), they argue that although structural inequalities remain, young people are increasingly encouraged to view their situation as a matter of personal responsibility. These arguments provide important foundations, yet

they risk reducing youth withdrawal to a structural inevitability, leaving less room to examine the subjective meanings young people attach to their decisions.

Comparative youth studies extend these arguments across different settings. Kelly (2006) shows that within a risk society marked by social and economic uncertainty, young people are increasingly framed as self-managing and entrepreneurial, responsible for securing their own employment outcomes, wellbeing, and futures. In this framing, unemployment and labor-market challenges are thus interpreted as personal failings rather than structural issues. Importantly, this shift toward individualization and responsabilization is not confined to a single region, but has become a global policy trend, visible in Western liberal democracies as well as in East Asian and Latin American contexts.

Drawing on this framework, researchers have identified a range of social phenomena that reflect how young people cope with precarious transitions into adulthood. Across Europe and other advanced economies, the category NEET describes individuals aged roughly 16–24 who are not in education, employment, or training, a growing group associated with unstable labor markets and reduced welfare support (Maguire, 2015). In Japan, similar pressures have contributed to the rise of Freeters—young people working temporary or flexible jobs while relying on family support (Inui, 2005). These patterns indicate that youth disengagement is not isolated or idiosyncratic but rooted in broader changes to labor markets and welfare systems.

A more extreme form of withdrawal is Hikikomori, in which young people retreat from education, work, and social life for over six months (Kato et al., 2019). Once seen as unique to Japan, it has since been identified in many other countries. In China, He (2025) shows that hikikomori youth often describe their withdrawal as a reaction to a lack of social recognition and feelings of moral shame, rather than as a purely psychological issue. Their accounts highlight how expectations around productivity and filial duty can intensify withdrawal and make re-engagement more difficult. Examples outside East Asia reveal similar dynamics. Drawing on online discussions about the hikikomori phenomenon in Finland, Vainikka (2020) shows how withdrawal can emerge as a response to a precarious labor market, unmet expectations, and feelings of social failure. Together, these studies show that withdrawal is multifaceted, but the relational and emotional aspects of how youth navigate precarity remain underexplored.

Beyond full withdrawal, milder forms of dependency and continued financial support from parents also appear across different contexts. The rise of boomerang kids, where young adults return to the parental home after attempting independent living, has been widely documented. Research finds that such arrangements reshape family dynamics and challenge generational expectations, especially when driven by debt, unemployment, or unstable work (Tosi, 2020). In line with this, Côté and Bynner (2008) argue that delayed adulthood increasingly involves “yo-yo” transitions, understood as non-linear movements back and forth between dependence and independence, requiring ongoing negotiation of autonomy and interdependence. In China, similar patterns emerge, though shaped by local cultural norms. The well-documented *ken lao* phenomenon—adult children relying heavily on parental support—reflects ambivalent intergenerational negotiations. Liu (2017) shows that *ken lao* does not necessarily disrupt family cohesion; instead, it represents a negotiated interdependence shaped by traditional family expectations, rising living costs, and insecure labor markets. Such arrangements illustrate how the boundaries between youth and adulthood have become increasingly flexible and negotiated. This development aligns with the theory of *emerging adulthood* (Arnett, 2000), which conceptualizes the period between adolescence and full adulthood as one marked by exploration, instability, and deferred commitments. These insights underscore that contemporary adulthood is no longer a linear trajectory but a site of continuous bargaining, an angle that becomes crucial for understanding the logic behind full-time children.

Within this broader context, the recent rise of full-time children in China represents another way in which young people attempt to cope with instability and reorient themselves in an unpredictable future. While related to NEETs, hikikomori, or *ken lao*, full-time children differ in that they perform paid domestic and emotional work within the family. This challenges existing typologies of youth withdrawal, which rarely consider domestic labor and intergenerational reciprocity as defining features. For many young adults, this arrangement offers temporary relief from burnout and time to reconsider future plans. Rather than a permanent withdrawal, it may operate as a temporary strategy shaped by shifting intergenerational expectations and economic pressures. To understand how such arrangements are negotiated and sustained, it is useful to consider research on intergenerational exchange and family relationships.

3.2 Studies on Intergenerational Exchange and Family Transformation

3.2.1 Social Exchange

Researchers suggest that family transfers operate within an exchange framework in which reciprocity, either contemporaneous or over the life course, plays an important role (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997). *Social exchange theory* helps explain how relationships are maintained through emotional, material, or practical forms of giving and receiving. Although such exchanges may not appear equal in the short term, they often achieve a sense of balance over time.

A key concept in social exchange theory is that individuals evaluate the costs and benefits when making decisions about relationships and life choices (Homans, 1958). Closely related to this is the principle of reciprocity, which ensures the continuity and perceived fairness of social interactions (Homans, 1958). In East Asian family contexts, research further shows that what matters most is not strict equivalence in exchanges, but whether the distribution of support feels appropriate and conducive to maintaining harmonious relations (Lin & Yi, 2011). Although full-time children receive financial support from their family members, they also provide care, emotional comfort, and practical assistance, often helping their parents with digital tasks such as making payments or booking appointments (Eckhardt, 2023). As Blau (2017) noted, in social exchange relationships, the party with greater resources generally holds more power over the terms of the exchange, an insight that helps explain how parents' financial support can shape the expectations, boundaries, and everyday dynamics of full-time children.

3.2.2 Intergenerational Reciprocity

While social exchange theory provides a broad foundation for understanding reciprocal relations, intergenerational research offers a more comprehensive view of how these exchanges unfold across family generations.

Intergenerational family relationships take different forms, shaped by individual circumstances, family dynamics, and broader structural conditions (Lowenstein et al., 2007). *The intergenerational solidarity paradigm* (Roberts et al., 1991) offers a foundational framework for analyzing exchanges and mutual support among family members across generations. It conceptualizes solidarity through six distinct dimensions: affectual solidarity (emotional closeness and mutual affection), associational solidarity

(frequency and patterns of interaction), consensual solidarity (agreement in values, beliefs, and attitudes), functional solidarity (the provision of material, instrumental, and social support), normative solidarity (feelings of obligation and family responsibility), and structural solidarity (opportunities for interaction, often shaped by geographical proximity). This framework has evolved to include the dimensions of conflict and intergenerational ambivalence, recognizing that family relationships often encompass both harmony and tension (Katz & Lowenstein, 2010; Silverstein et al., 2012). Reciprocity, therefore, remains a central theme in the study of adult parent–child relationships, where both generations act as independent agents who exchange support dynamically across the life course.

According to Meyer (2017), three models outline patterns of intergenerational reciprocity. The descending model, the most traditional, operates through indirect reciprocity in which each generation reciprocates the previous one, forming a chain of mutual support. The ascending model proposes that an active generation owes something to its elders, justified by the support those elders once provided. The double reciprocity model differs from the other two by highlighting two-way exchange, in which those who give support eventually receive it in return, underscoring the cyclical nature of intergenerational care.

Reciprocity is widely recognized as a key principle shaping intergenerational exchanges of time and financial support (Henretta et al., 1997; Hjälml, 2012; Hollstein & Bria, 1998; Leopold & Raab, 2011). Studies conducted in different cultural contexts reinforce this view. For example, in Nigeria, adult children expressed a strong sense of indebtedness and a perceived obligation to reciprocate the support received from their parents (Akinrolie et al., 2020). Similar dynamics are evident in Central and Eastern Europe and East Asia, where adult children describe caregiving and financial transfers as a way to ‘repay’ parents’ earlier sacrifices and support (Charenkova, 2023; Pei & Cong, 2020). Beyond reciprocity, Silverstein et al. (2012) introduces the notion of *moral capital*, a stock of internalized social norms that obligate children to care for and support their parents, positioned between self-interest (for parents) and altruism (for children).

Socioeconomic and health factors also shape patterns of intergenerational exchange. Grundy (2005) found that among “third-age” parents (aged between 55 and 75), those with higher income, home ownership, and stable marital histories were more likely to provide support to their adult children. Reciprocal patterns also emerge over time: adult children who receive early or ongoing financial assistance from parents are more likely to provide

social or financial support later in life (Leopold & Raab, 2013). Consistent with this, studies support the “support bank” hypothesis, which proposes that parental help in middle age increases the likelihood of receiving care in old age (Henretta et al., 1997; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997; Silverstein et al., 2012). Together, these findings highlight that intergenerational support is dynamic, shaped by socioeconomic resources and evolving across the life course rather than determined at a single point in time.

3.2.3 Intergenerational Dynamics in the Context of Changing Family Structures in China

The emergence of full-time children in China reflects shifting dynamics within the country’s family structures. Families have long functioned as the primary safety net during periods of economic uncertainty. Scholars such as Chou (2011) and Wu et al. (2014) note that Chinese families traditionally provide material support, emotional care, and other forms of assistance to older members. Historically, need has been identified as the basis of intergenerational support, leading to financial transfers from adult children to elderly parents, especially widowed mothers (Barbalet, 2025). Another important form of support is grandparental childcare, which allows older family members to maintain support by providing care to younger generations (Chen et al., 2011; Qi, 2018).

However, these support systems are now being reshaped by ongoing social and economic change. Chinese families are becoming smaller and more nuclear (Xu & Xia, 2014), altering the way of intergenerational interaction. In other words, the family as a social institution is adapting to new realities. This transformation resonates with the notion of the individualization of family ties, which suggests that family relationships are increasingly defined by communication, negotiation, and personal choice rather than rigid tradition (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001).

At the same time, China’s transition toward a market-oriented society creates pressures to reinterpret long-standing values in ways that align with contemporary economic and social realities. In this context of social change, Confucian principles such as responsibility and filial duty—once deeply rooted in intergenerational relations—have been reframed (Liu et al., 2024). Ikels (2004) argues that filial piety should be understood as a lived, negotiated practice rather than a fixed cultural rule. In everyday life, acts of care are adjusted to accommodate modernization and shifting family expectations. These adjustments are influenced by broader forces such as urbanization, economic pressures, changing gender roles, and evolving household structures. Yan (2020) similarly observes that filial piety has

undergone a significant transformation: instead of emphasizing unconditional obedience and sacrifice, it is increasingly expressed through more negotiated, emotionally grounded relationships, where adult children have greater autonomy while still recognizing the family as a core moral and social institution.

Wang and Ishak (2025) further suggest that intergenerational relationships are undergoing substantial change, with support for older family members increasingly shaped by personal choice rather than strict moral duty. Similarly, Tu (2016) notes that in contemporary Chinese families, intergenerational ties now go beyond the traditional model of “raising children for old-age support.” Instead, they increasingly involve reciprocal cooperation, where both generations work to maintain emotional closeness and a shared sense of usefulness and value. These observations underscore that family relationships in contemporary China are negotiated rather than automatic, with affection, obligation, and exchange intertwined and constantly recalibrated.

3.3 Emotional Expression and Affective Dynamics on Social Media

Social media platforms provide spaces for users to discuss personal concerns and form emotional connections with others who share similar experiences and perspectives (Bennett, 2012). These environments are inherently rich in emotion (Xu et al., 2024) and make it easy for users to communicate and share feelings with large audiences (Suarez Vazquez & Chica Serrano, 2021). As social media becomes increasingly embedded in everyday life, scholars have turned to examining emotional expression and user attitudes on these platforms.

A substantial body of research highlights that emotional expression on social media is patterned rather than random. Studies show that users tend to post more positive than negative content online—a pattern often described as a “positivity bias” (Pentina & Zhang, 2017). This bias is reinforced by norms of positive self-presentation and platform-specific cultures, particularly on visually curated spaces such as Instagram and Facebook (Masciantonio et al., 2025). Negative expressions, by contrast, are viewed as more intimate and socially risky, and may be interpreted as signs of vulnerability or reduced social desirability (Ostendorf et al., 2020). This tendency aligns with findings that emotional expression online often serves as a way for users to manage their feelings in everyday life, helping them cope with stress or navigate periods of uncertainty (Balani & De Choudhury, 2015). Beyond individual expression, digital platforms also enable collective emotional

dynamics. Users respond to one another, reinforce shared interpretations, and co-construct emotional climates that may not emerge in offline settings (Laniado et al., 2012). Such processes can intensify agreement, amplify criticism, or cultivate supportive atmospheres, depending on the issue at hand (Döveling et al., 2018). These dynamics demonstrate that emotional expression online is not simply personal but is shaped by the presence of audiences, shared norms, and evolving platform cultures.

Building on these observations, Papacharissi (2015) introduces the concept of *affective publics*, arguing that digital publics often gather through shared emotions and storytelling rather than purely rational debate. These publics form through affective ties that connect individuals to unfolding social or political events. Similar dynamics are evident on Chinese social media. Zhao and Zhu (2025) find that on platforms such as Weibo, users often gravitate toward like-minded others and form loosely connected communities grounded in shared values. Through mutual recognition, participants cultivate value-based identities and a sense of belonging, which helps sustain ongoing engagement.

3.4 Full-Time Children on Xiaohongshu: Bridging a Gap in Existing Research

As discussed above, social media function as emotional spaces where users share feelings, negotiate relationships, and construct meaning collectively. Within this environment, Xiaohongshu has become a prominent platform for young Chinese people to share personal experiences and express emotional narratives. Blending lifestyle curation, social networking, and community interaction, it offers a semi-public setting where everyday life is shared through images, short videos, and written posts (Gao, 2024).

Recent scholarship has begun to explore the rise of full-time children, situating the phenomenon within shifting intergenerational relations and wider socioeconomic change in China (Ma, 2024; Sun, 2024; Tian & Pan, 2024). Zhou and Miao (2024) suggest that interactions between full-time children and their parents are not simply dependent or one-directional; instead, they reflect negotiated reciprocity in which emotional labor and domestic work are exchanged for financial support. Assigning monetary value to tasks traditionally understood as filial duties suggests a pragmatic strategy adopted by both sides in response to economic uncertainty (Pan & Ouyang, 2025). These studies highlight how filial piety is being reinterpreted and how family roles adapt under changing social conditions.

Tian and Pan (2024) examine why young adults choose to “work” for their parents and how they make sense of their daily lives in this role. Analyses of posts across platforms, including Weibo, Douyin, Douban, and Xiaohongshu, suggest that emotional and financial interdependence helps sustain the arrangement. Findings indicate mixed outcomes: on one hand, being a full-time child may ease stress and strengthen family relationships; on the other hand, it may reinforce dependency and restrict autonomy (Sun, 2024).

Ma (2024) connects the emergence of full-time children to broader structural trends such as demographic ageing, slowing economic growth, and the rise of involution. From this perspective, the role functions as a coping mechanism that enables young adults to step back from competitive labor markets, rising living costs, and uncertain career prospects. In this sense, full-time children represent both continuity and change: they draw on established norms of filial responsibility while also reflecting new aspirations and anxieties in contemporary youth culture.

Despite these growing contributions, notable gaps remain. Current literature focuses primarily on economic, demographic, and familial explanations and tends to treat the phenomenon as a sociological or policy issue. Much less attention has been paid to how full-time children are discussed emotionally in online spaces. Few studies examine the sentiments, arguments, and affective discourses circulating around the topic, or how these narratives relate to shifting values around work, dependence, self-worth, and generational belonging.

To address this gap, this study turns to Xiaohongshu as a key site where meanings around full-time children are produced, circulated, and contested. Rather than treating the phenomenon solely as an outcome of structural pressures, this research considers both how young people articulate and make sense of becoming full-time children and how these articulations are emotionally interpreted and evaluated within online discourse. In doing so, this study examines the thematic construction of experiences and motivations (RQ1), as well as the affective responses they generate (RQ2), thereby capturing both meaning-making processes and emotional dynamics surrounding the phenomenon. The dual focus provides the conceptual foundation for the empirical analyses that follow, which investigate how full-time children are discussed and evaluated within contemporary debates about youth precarity, intergenerational relations, and changing ideals of adulthood in China.

4 Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods design that combines computational text analysis with qualitative thematic interpretation. The mixed-methods approach is necessary because the dataset is both large and linguistically diverse, making it difficult to analyze solely through manual coding. NLP techniques, including topic modelling, sentiment analysis, and text mining, provide a structural overview by identifying recurring themes and emotional tendencies across thousands of posts and comments. These outputs guide and inform the subsequent qualitative phase, in which representative excerpts are closely read to interpret context, nuance, and meaning-making that automated methods alone cannot capture.

In this design, computational methods and qualitative analysis play complementary roles: topic modelling indicates what users discuss, sentiment analysis shows how emotions are expressed, and thematic interpretation helps explain why these patterns matter for understanding family dynamics, youth precarity, and online discourse. Integrating these methods enables a more comprehensive analysis than either approach alone, allowing the study to map broad discursive trends while remaining grounded in users' lived experiences and everyday narrative practices.

4.1 Data Collection

Data were collected through automated web scraping of user-generated content on Xiaohongshu, targeting discussions related to the full-time children phenomenon. To capture relevant posts and interactions, the scraping process focused on content containing keywords such as “全职儿女” (full-time children), “全职女儿” (full-time daughter), and “全职儿子” (full-time son), reflecting different expressions of the term. The dataset covers posts and comments published between December 2022 (when the topic first appeared) and November 2025, during which it received widespread attention and sustained engagement.

A Python-based scraping script was developed using the DrissionPage library, which integrates Chromium browser automation to load dynamically rendered content. The crawler simulated typical user browsing behavior to retrieve complete text content, along with metadata and engagement metrics. Each row represents a unique post and includes its full text and associated metadata. When information was unavailable, the field was coded as “unknown.” All collected data were stored in a UTF-8 encoded CSV file. This

dataset forms the foundation for subsequent sentiment analysis and thematic analysis. For each post, the attributes listed in Table 1 were recorded in a structured format.

Table 1. Overview of the dataset attributes of posts

Attributes	Definition
Post_ID	The unique identifier extracted from the post URL.
Date	The publication date of the post, converted into the standard format (YYYY-MM-DD).
Title	The headline or title of the post.
Content	The full textual content of the post.

Comments from the selected posts were collected using an extended version of the same Python–DrissionPage framework. For each post, the unique Post_ID was extracted from its URL and used to link all retrieved comments back to their original source. The data were written into UTF-8 encoded CSV files. For each comment, the attributes listed in Table 2 were recorded in a structured format.

Table 2. Overview of the dataset attributes of comments

Attributes	Definition
Comment_ID	The unique identifier assigned to the comment.
Post_ID	The identifier of the original post to which the comment is linked.
Date	The publication date of the comment, converted to the standard date format (YYYY-MM-DD).
Likes	The number of likes the comment has received.
Comment_count	The number of sub-comments associated with the comment.
Location	The User's approximate IP-based geographical location (when available).
Text	The full textual content of the comment

4.2 Ethical Consideration

This research also takes into account the ethical risks associated with scraping and analyzing social media data, particularly issues related to user privacy, consent, and contextual integrity. Although content on this platform is publicly accessible, this study recognizes that user-generated posts often contain personal reflections intended for specific audiences rather than the general public. Obtaining direct consent from individual users is not feasible in large-scale social media research; however, the study follows the spirit of informed consent by prioritizing harm reduction, anonymity, and respect for user expectations. Guided by the principle of contextual integrity (Markham et al., 2018; Nissenbaum, 2004), this study treats these materials as semi-private. Data containing

identifiable names or precise location details were excluded from the dataset. Posts and comments are interpreted within their social and emotional context and are not presented in ways that could misrepresent users or reinforce stereotypes.

4.3 Data Description

The raw dataset consists of two linked parts, including 106 posts and 11232 comments. After removing blank entries, the final dataset includes 106 posts and 11,222 comments.

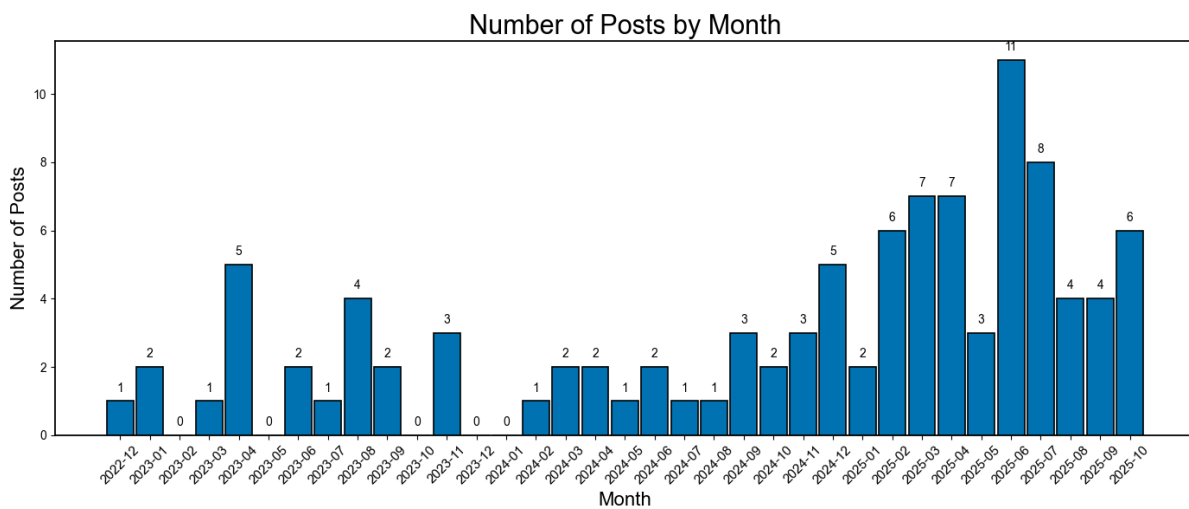


Figure 1. Number of Posts by Month

To illustrate how the dataset is distributed across time, Figure 1 presents the monthly frequency of posts. As shown in Figure 1, posting activity remains relatively low and sporadic throughout 2023 and early 2024. A gradual increase appears in late 2024, followed by a sharp rise in early 2025, with activity peaking in June 2025 (11 posts—the highest monthly count). After this peak, posting levels remain higher than in earlier periods, indicating sustained engagement rather than a short-lived spike. Overall, the temporal pattern shows that posts about full-time children became increasingly frequent over time, with most posts clustering in 2025 rather than being evenly distributed throughout the full data period.

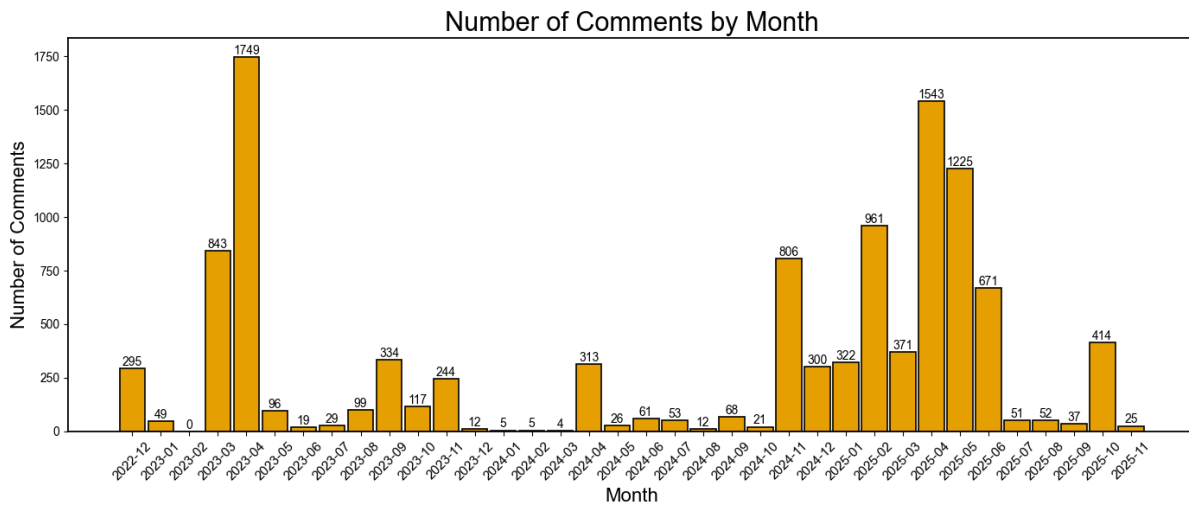


Figure 2. Number of Comments by Month

Figure 2 presents the monthly distribution of comments associated with the 106 collected posts. Across the dataset, comment activity shows substantial variation, with several months producing disproportionately large volumes of engagement. Early peaks appear in March 2023 ($n = 843$) and April 2023 ($n = 1,749$), even though the number of posts in these months is relatively low. This suggests that a small number of posts generated unusually high interaction. After mid-2023, engagement becomes more intermittent but remains variable, with notable spikes in November 2024 ($n = 806$).

A renewed phase of high comment activity emerges in early to mid-2025, particularly February 2025 ($n = 961$) and April 2025 ($n = 1,543$). These peaks align with months that also saw higher numbers of posts, indicating broader visibility and increased public attention during this period.

Overall, compared to the relatively stable post frequency, the distribution of comments is markedly uneven, reflecting both temporal clustering of user engagement and the tendency for certain posts to attract disproportionately large comment threads. This descriptive pattern provides important context for interpreting later analyses, as the density and timing of comments may shape topic representation and sentiment patterns in the results.

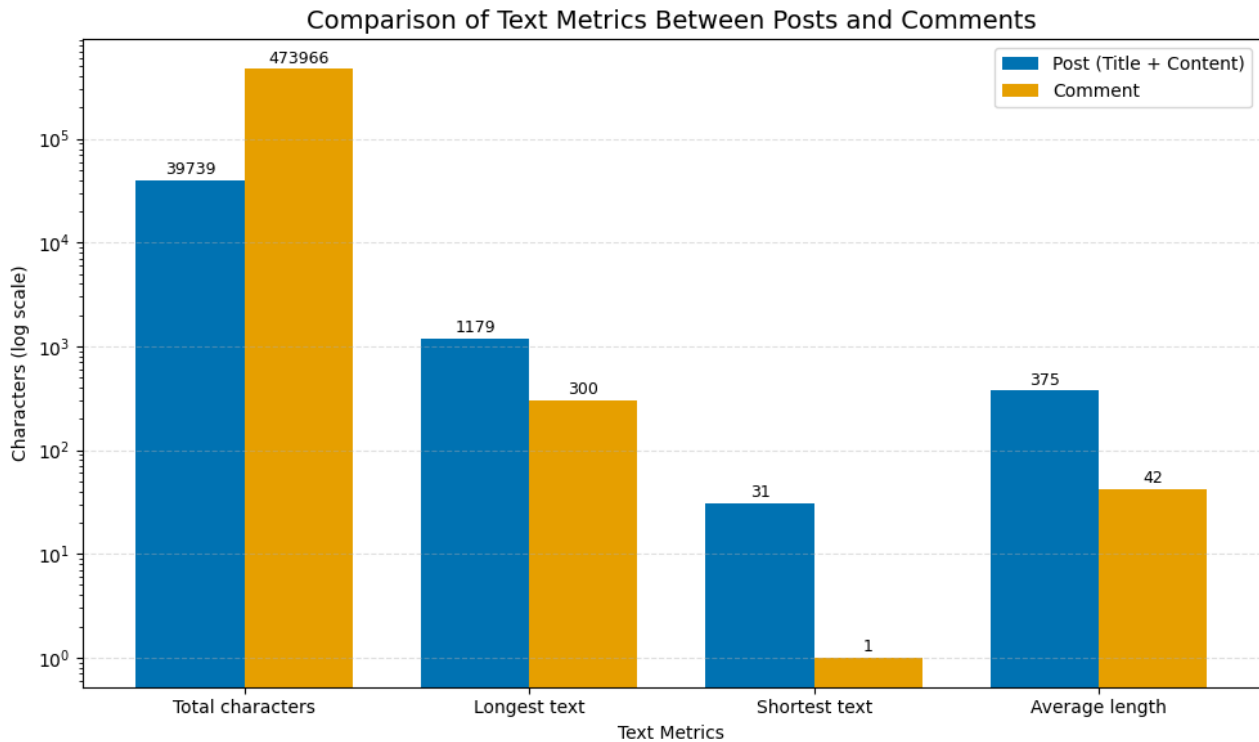


Figure 3. Comparison of Text Metrics between Posts and Comments

Before presenting the topic and sentiment analysis, it is important to document the structural characteristics of the texts. Figure 3 compares text-length metrics for posts and comments, illustrating the substantial difference in narrative space between longer posts and shorter, reactive comments. As shown in Figure 3, across all posts, the combined texts of posts (title + content) contain 39,739 characters. The longest combined text reaches 1,179 characters, while the shortest contains only 31 characters, with an average combined length of 375 characters. The comments contain 473,966 characters, with an average length of 42 characters per comment. Because the posts and comments are written in Chinese, character counts do not directly correspond to word length or information density in the same way they do in English. The Chinese writing system encodes meaning primarily through logographic units, where each character typically represents a morpheme and can carry meaning independently (Olson, 2025). As Sampson (2015) notes, Chinese characters function as meaning-bearing units rather than a sequence of letters and allow complex ideas to be expressed in fewer visible symbols compared to alphabetic writing systems.

4.4 Data Preprocessing

Before analysis, all textual data were systematically preprocessed to ensure consistency, reduce noise, and improve interpretability. Because posts and comments differ in structure and language use, separate preprocessing workflows were applied to each.

4.4.1 Posts Data

The post dataset was first cleaned to remove noise and ensure consistency before analysis. Missing and duplicate entries were deleted to prevent analytical bias, and noninformative content such as repeated symbols was removed. Although emojis can convey affective cues in online communication, their meanings on platforms such as Xiaohongshu are often context-dependent and may be ambiguous or ironic. Emojis such as “笑哭” (often indicating ironic laughter) and “狗头” (commonly used to mark sarcasm or joking intent) can therefore reduce the reliability of automated sentiment classification. In this sense, emojis were therefore removed to maintain analytical consistency, and emotional interpretation in this study relies primarily on linguistic content.

A text preprocessing pipeline was then applied to the data, in which URLs, hashtags, and emojis were stripped, and text written in Traditional Chinese was converted to Simplified Chinese using OpenCC (OpenCC Team, 2010–present). Additional cleaning steps included removing Chinese punctuation, excessive whitespace, and non-Chinese alphanumeric characters.

To improve textual coherence, the post title and main body were merged into a single field (title_text), which served as the primary corpus for analysis. Posts shorter than ten characters were excluded to filter out low-content entries such as reactions or incomplete posts. After cleaning, a corpus of 103 posts was stored in CSV format.

4.4.2 Comments Data

The comment dataset required a more granular cleaning process due to the volume, variability, and informal nature of user-generated content. As with the post dataset, each comment was processed through a standardized cleaning pipeline. This included the removal of hyperlinks, user mentions, hashtags, emoji, and Chinese punctuation, as well as the conversion of Traditional Chinese to Simplified Chinese using OpenCC (OpenCC Team, 2010–present). To further enhance data quality, an additional filtering step was applied to

exclude advertisements, spam, and low-information content. This included comments containing promotional or referral language, such as “邀请码” (invitation code), “扫码加入” (scan to join), and “加我微信” (add me on WeChat), as well as repetitive filler expressions such as “哈哈” (haha). Comments with fewer than four characters or without any Chinese characters were also removed.

Following textual cleaning, duplicate comments were identified and eliminated both within individual posts and across the entire dataset to avoid overrepresentation. Comments containing personally identifiable information or specific location references were excluded. After all cleaning and filtering procedures, a total of 9,799 comments were retained and stored as a CSV file for analysis.

4.5 Topic Modelling

4.5.1 Overview of Topic Modeling

Topic modeling is an unsupervised machine-learning technique used to uncover latent semantic structures in large text corpora. It assumes that texts sharing similar vocabularies are likely to discuss related concepts, enabling researchers to identify clusters of meaning that emerge organically from the data rather than from pre-defined categories (Murakami et al., 2017). This makes topic modelling particularly suitable for extracting themes in this study for several reasons.

First, the Xiaohongshu dataset is large and heterogeneous, which makes manual thematic analysis alone impractical for identifying overarching patterns. While close reading offers depth, it cannot capture less frequent yet meaningful themes across thousands of posts and comments. Topic modelling, by contrast, provides a scalable way to map the major discursive clusters in the corpus, which can then be interpreted qualitatively (Isoaho et al., 2021). Second, simpler quantitative methods, such as keyword counts or word clouds, treat words in isolation and fail to capture contextual meaning. They can highlight frequent terms, but cannot show how ideas cohere into themes. Modern embedding-based topic models overcome this limitation by grouping texts according to semantic similarity, allowing them to detect recurring themes and discursive patterns even when vocabulary differs across users (Mersha & Kalita, 2024). Third, supervised methods require predefined labels, which are unsuitable here because the full-time children phenomenon lacks an established thematic structure. Using an unsupervised model allows themes to

emerge inductively from users' own language (Lind et al., 2019), aligning with the exploratory aim of understanding how the phenomenon is described, discussed, and interpreted online. Additionally, transformer-based approaches that combine contextual embeddings with clustering algorithms have proved particularly effective for analyzing short, informal social-media texts, as they capture nuanced semantics and emotional tone beyond surface-level word co-occurrence (Abdalgader et al., 2024).

4.5.2 Why BERTopic

This research employs the BERTopic library (Grootendorst, 2022) to extract major discussion themes from Xiaohongshu posts and comments. BERTopic combines transformer-based sentence embeddings, dimensionality reduction, and density-based clustering into a single workflow: texts are first encoded into contextual embeddings, reduced in dimensionality using UMAP (McInnes et al., 2018) to preserve semantic relationships, and then grouped into clusters using HDBSCAN (Campello et al., 2013). This pipeline allows topics to emerge from semantic patterns rather than surface-level word frequencies.

Compared with earlier bag-of-words approaches, BERTopic produces richer semantic representations and performs well on short Chinese social-media texts, in which meaning is often implicit, nuanced, or context-dependent (Liu et al., 2025). In this study, the model uses the Alibaba-NLP/gte-multilingual-base embedding (Zhang et al., 2024), which has strong performance on Chinese corpora while retaining multilingual robustness. This configuration enables a nuanced analysis of semantic similarity and emotional tone in both posts and comments, offering deeper insights into how users discuss and make sense of the full-time children phenomenon.

4.5.3 BERTopic Procedure in This Research

Text Segmentation, Cleaning, and Vectorization Workflow

Building on the preprocessed datasets described in Section 4.4, topic modelling was conducted separately for posts and comments, given their distinct linguistic characteristics. Analyzing the two datasets separately allows the model to identify broad themes expressed in posts while also capturing the more immediate, interaction-level responses found in comments.

The first step in preparing the text for topic modelling involved Chinese word segmentation using the Jieba library. This step was essential not only because Chinese lacks explicit word delimiters, but also because Xiaohongshu users frequently write in an informal style that combines full sentences with slang, emojis, and conversational expressions. For posts, titles and main content were concatenated before segmentation to maintain contextual coherence and narrative flow. Comments are shorter and more interactive; segmentation was thus applied at the sentence level to ensure that emotion-bearing and conversational phrases such as “我也这样” (same here) and “太真实了” (that is so real), were accurately captured.

The next step involved optimizing stop words to reduce noise in the modelling corpus. A customized stop word list was constructed by merging five major open-source Chinese stop word dictionaries—Baidu, HIT (Harbin Institute of Technology), SCU (Sichuan University), cn-stopword, and stopwords-zh (Diaz & Xu, 2016; Goto, 2017) —followed by manual refinement to remove overly broad or redundant entries. This stop word list was applied during vectorization to exclude functional particles, such as “的” (of), “了” (aspect marker), and “在” (at), as well as highly frequent internet expressions that contribute little semantic value, such as “哈哈” (haha), “呵呵” (hehe), and “哇塞” (wow). For the comment dataset, an additional cleaning step was applied: short entertainment-oriented or off-topic responses (e.g., single-character reactions or repetitive praise) were removed using regular expressions to improve the quality of the modelling input.

Following segmentation and stop word optimization, the third step involved vectorization and embedding generation. CountVectorizer was used to construct term–document matrices, and its key threshold parameters were adjusted rather than left at default values to better suit the linguistic characteristics of Xiaohongshu text. The parameter `min_df` specifies the minimum number of documents in which a term must appear to be retained in the vocabulary. Increasing `min_df` helps remove extremely rare words, such as typos, idiosyncratic slang, or one-off emojis, which contribute noise and offer little analytic value in topic modelling. Conversely, `max_df` sets the maximum proportion of documents in which a term may appear; lowering it filters out highly frequent words that occur across the corpus (e.g., filler particles or platform-specific expressions), which are unhelpful for distinguishing between topics.

For the post dataset, `min_df` was set to 3 (default is 1) and `max_df` to 0.9 (default is 1.0). These more restrictive thresholds were chosen because post content is longer, more coherent, and less noisy than comments, allowing the model to exclude infrequent or overly common terms without losing meaningful information. For the comment dataset, which consists of shorter and more variable text, slightly more flexible thresholds were applied (`min_df` = 2, `max_df` = 0.95) to avoid discarding terms that might appear only a few times but still carry semantic or emotional relevance. In both cases, parameter choices were empirically tested: several threshold combinations were explored, and these settings achieved the best balance between vocabulary size, term relevance, and topic stability.

Topic Modelling of Posts

To uncover thematic patterns in the post dataset, BERTopic was applied through a multi-stage workflow combining semantic embeddings, dimensionality reduction, density-based clustering, and keyword extraction.

For semantic embedding generation, the dataset was encoded using the SentenceTransformer model Alibaba-NLP/gte-multilingual-base, which produces 768-dimensional contextual embeddings trained on large multilingual corpora. This model was selected instead of BERTopic's default embedding model because it performs strongly on Chinese text, and preliminary tests showed that it generated more coherent clusters and contextually appropriate topics for Xiaohongshu content. Its 768-dimensional embedding size is standard for transformer-based sentence encoders and preserves sufficient semantic nuance for short, informal social-media texts (Zhang et al., 2024).

The first step involved reducing the high dimensionality of the 768-dimensional sentence embeddings using the Uniform Manifold Approximation and Projection (UMAP) algorithm. UMAP is commonly used in text analysis because it preserves local neighbourhood relationships while projecting embeddings into a lower-dimensional space. Several parameters were intentionally modified from their defaults to better suit the structure of the post dataset.

The `n_neighbors` parameter was set to 10, slightly lower than UMAP's default of 15, to retain more fine-grained local structure. This adjustment was appropriate because posts are relatively long and semantically coherent, and a smaller neighborhood size helps maintain subtle distinctions between narrative themes. The `n_components` parameter was increased to 5, compared with UMAP's default of 2, since preliminary tests showed that a

two-dimensional projection produced unstable clusters and loss of semantic detail; five components provided a better balance between computational efficiency and representational richness. The `min_dist` parameter was set to 0.15, compared with the default of 0.1, to allow moderately compact clusters without forcing different thematic regions to collapse into overly tight groupings. Finally, the distance metric was set to cosine, instead of the Euclidean default, because transformer-based embeddings encode semantic similarity more reliably through directional similarity rather than absolute distance.

Once reduced, embeddings were clustered using HDBSCAN, a density-based algorithm capable of identifying clusters of varying shapes and automatically determining the number of topics. Here as well, several parameters were adjusted from defaults. The `min_cluster_size` parameter was set to 5, lower than HDBSCAN's general default of 15, to allow the model to detect smaller but meaningful thematic groups in the post dataset, where some topics appear less frequently. The `min_samples` parameter was set to 3, instead of leaving it at the default "None" (which equals `min_cluster_size`), to provide greater flexibility in identifying clusters supported by dense local structure without requiring large sample sizes. The cluster selection method was set to "eom" (excess-of-mass), replacing HDBSCAN's default "leaf" method; "eom" was selected because it produced more stable clusters in preliminary runs and is generally better suited for content-rich texts like full posts.

To further enhance the distinctiveness of topic representations, the ClassTF-IDF transformer (Grootendorst, 2022) was applied after clustering. This is an additional weighting procedure built into BERTopic rather than a default step in vectorization. ClassTF-IDF reweights terms by amplifying those that are disproportionately characteristic of a cluster while down-weighting words that appear broadly across the corpus, improving topic coherence and interpretability. For each topic, the top 10–12 keywords were extracted to provide an initial semantic summary. Topic coherence and interpretability were then manually reviewed, and semantically overlapping or near-duplicate clusters were merged using BERTopic's `reduce_topics()` function to ensure conceptual clarity. To support the qualitative interpretation phase, representative posts were identified using TF-IDF-based cosine similarity by selecting those closest to each cluster centroid.

This procedure produced three dominant themes that summarized the main narrative patterns through which Xiaohongshu users described the full-time children phenomenon: 家庭 (family), 工作 (work), and 情绪 (emotion).

Comment Pre-classification Using Post-derived Themes

Before conducting topic modelling on the comment dataset, an additional semantic-similarity classification step was introduced to categorize comments into meaningful conceptual groups. This step was motivated by the observation that topic modelling on the post dataset produced three dominant interpretive dimensions, including “family”, “work”, and “emotion”, which consistently shaped how users described their experiences as full-time children. To reflect the thematic structure observed in the posts, this analysis applied the same three categories to the comments and added a fourth, “other”, to include comments that did not align with these relational or emotional themes.

The classification was implemented using the SentenceTransformer framework (Reimers & Gurevych, 2019) together with the text2vec-base-chinese model (Xu, 2023).

SentenceTransformer builds on BERT-style architectures to generate sentence-level embeddings optimized for semantic similarity comparison via cosine distance. The text2vec-base-chinese model is trained with the CoSENT objective on Chinese STS-B and related datasets, making it well-suited for general-purpose Chinese semantic matching tasks (Xu, 2023).

All comments were preprocessed and encoded into 768-dimensional embeddings using text2vec-base-chinese. The four category labels (“family,” “work,” “emotion,” “other”) were encoded in the same way to generate reference vectors. Using cosine similarity, each comment embedding was compared against the four category embeddings, and the category with the highest similarity score was assigned as its predicted label. A Python script automated this workflow, computing embeddings, generating similarity scores, selecting the maximum-scoring category, and exporting the result dataset for subsequent analysis.

Topic Modelling of Comments (“Other” Category)

Following the semantic pre-classification step, only comments labelled as “other” were selected for topic modelling, resulting in a subset of 834 comments. These comments did not fall into the relational or affective categories identified earlier but instead contained

broader social reflections, humor, moral judgements, or meta-commentary on the full-time children discussion. Applying BERTopic to this subset enabled a more exploratory analysis that avoided reproducing themes already captured in the post dataset and made it possible to identify patterns not visible in comments centered on emotional or relational meanings.

To prepare the embeddings for clustering, dimensionality reduction was performed using UMAP. Several parameter settings were intentionally adjusted from UMAP's defaults, given the more heterogeneous and noisy nature of comment text. The `n_neighbors` parameter, for example, was set to 20, higher than the default of 15, to stabilize the local structure of short, informal comments. A larger neighborhood helps reduce fragmentation by creating smoother local manifolds in datasets where individual texts are brief and semantically diffuse. The `n_components` parameter was set to 6, compared with the default of 2, because initial experimental runs showed that a two-dimensional projection caused excessive information loss and unstable clusters. Increasing the dimensionality to six components helped preserve emotional nuance and conversational variability while still enabling effective clustering. The parameters `min_dist` and the use of a cosine metric followed the same rationale as in the post modelling procedure: a slightly higher `min_dist` than the default (0.1) allowed clusters to remain interpretable without becoming overly compact, and cosine distance was more appropriate for transformer-generated embeddings than Euclidean distance.

Once reduced, the embeddings were clustered using HDBSCAN. Parameter values were again adjusted rather than relying on defaults to better capture the structure of comment data. The `min_cluster_size` parameter, for instance, was increased to 18, higher than the algorithm's general default of 15, to filter out unstable micro-clusters that frequently appear in conversational social-media text. Similarly, `min_samples` was set to 8, instead of leaving it at the default "None" (which causes it to default to `min_cluster_size`), to require slightly stronger local density for cluster formation and thereby improve thematic stability. The "leaf" cluster selection method was used instead of the default "eom", as exploratory tests showed that the leaf method better captured fine-grained sub-themes in short comments without excessively fragmenting the dataset. This contrasts with the post dataset, where longer text benefited from the more conservative "eom" method.

Topics were then extracted from the resulting clusters using the ClassTF-IDF weighting scheme, with the 10–12 most distinctive keywords representing each topic. Because comments are conversational and often context-dependent, manual refinement played a

crucial role in determining whether clusters reflected meaningful themes or conversational noise. Semantically overlapping clusters were merged when needed to improve coherence and interpretability. Finally, representative comments were identified using TF-IDF-based cosine similarity by selecting those closest to each cluster centroid. These examples were later examined alongside representative posts to compare how the discourse differed between post authors and commenters.

4.5.4 Thematic Analysis of Topics

Following BERTopic modelling, a thematic analysis was conducted to qualitatively interpret, refine, and validate the machine-generated topics. Because topic modelling groups texts based on statistical patterns of semantic similarity rather than conceptual meaning (DiMaggio et al., 2013; Jacobi et al., 2016), this additional interpretive stage was necessary to understand how users make sense of the full-time children phenomenon, which aligns with the qualitative aim of this study.

In line with qualitative thematic analysis, the interpretation began with close reading (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). Both the BERTopic-generated keyword lists and the representative excerpts were reviewed to examine how users expressed opinions, narrated personal experiences, or responded to others. These excerpts provided the interpretive anchors for identifying underlying meanings, since they revealed tone, framing, and communicative intent that computational models by themselves cannot capture.

The analytic focus was on identifying the core message and discursive orientation of each cluster rather than producing a fully developed coding scheme (Saldaña, 2009). The process involved iteratively comparing keywords with representative texts, examining how users framed the phenomenon in their own words. Topic labels were subsequently developed through an inductive reading of the outputs, prioritizing how meanings were articulated in the data rather than the statistical salience of individual terms (Charmaz, 2006).

Applying this interpretive procedure to both posts and comments made it possible to distinguish different discursive forms. By grounding the themes in multiple close readings of the original text, the analysis ensured that the final thematic structure remained closely aligned with how users themselves discuss the full-time children phenomenon on

Xiaohongshu, rather than reflecting categories introduced by computational tools or researcher assumptions (Edwards-Jones, 2014).

4.6 Sentiment Analysis

4.6.1 Overview of Sentiment Analysis

Sentiment analysis—also referred to as opinion mining—is an NLP technique that uses computational methods to automatically detect and classify the emotional orientation expressed in text, typically along dimensions such as positive, negative, or neutral valence (Pang & Lee, 2008). It is widely used to analyze affective responses on digital platforms, particularly in social media environments where users share opinions, frustrations, and interpersonal support. In this study, sentiment analysis complements topic modelling by capturing not only what users discuss but also how they feel about the full-time children phenomenon.

Using sentiment analysis is well-suited to the aims of this research for several reasons. First, the dataset consists of thousands of short, informal texts in which emotional expression plays a central role. Manual coding of emotional tone across such a large corpus would be highly labor-intensive and inconsistent, while sentiment models can provide a systematic overview of affective patterns that can later be interpreted qualitatively (Duncan et al., 2024). Second, simpler quantitative approaches, such as counting emotional words or analyzing emoji frequency, struggle with the subtleties of Chinese social-media language, where irony, self-deprecation, encouragement, and resignation are often conveyed implicitly. Transformer-based sentiment analysis, by contrast, evaluates meaning in context and can detect emotional cues that go beyond isolated keywords (Gowda, 2025). Finally, pairing sentiment analysis with thematic interpretation strengthens the study's qualitative insight. While topic modelling identifies the structural themes of discussion, sentiment analysis shows how these themes are emotionally framed. Interpreting model outputs through close reading ensures that emotional categories remain grounded in the discourse of Xiaohongshu users rather than being treated as purely computational artefacts. This integrated approach allows the study to capture both the semantic and affective dimensions of the phenomenon in ways that neither qualitative coding nor computational modelling could achieve alone.

4.6.2 Model Selection

For both posts and comments, sentiment analysis was carried out using the pretrained Chinese model IDEA-CCNL/Erlangshen-RoBERTa-110M-Sentiment (Zhang et al., 2022). The model is based on the RoBERTa architecture and fine-tuned specifically for binary sentiment classification in Chinese. Developed as part of the Erlangshen model series by IDEA-CCNL, the model is trained on extensive Chinese corpora and is commonly applied in sentiment analysis and other text classification tasks in Chinese NLP research. The model reports an accuracy of 96.61% on the ChnSentiCorp dataset (Zhang, 2025), indicating strong performance in classifying Chinese text.

4.6.3 Sentiment Analysis Procedure

The same sentiment analysis procedure was applied to both posts and comments to enable direct comparison between the two forms of expression. In total, 103 posts and 9,799 comments were included in the sentiment analysis. Each text entry was fed into the Erlangshen sentiment-classification pipeline, which generates probability scores for two labels: Positive and Negative. For each entry, the model returns a probability associated with the Positive label, and this value was used as the basis for subsequent classification.

Because social-media language often contains subtle, ironic, or ambiguous expressions, a conservative labelling strategy was adopted. This approach reduces false positives: if the model is not strongly confident that a text is positive, it is safer to assume that the sentiment is negative, given the linguistic tendencies of the dataset. In this study, sentiment neutrality is not treated as a separate analytical category. Instead, texts that do not display a clearly positive orientation are classified as negative. Instead of automatically assigning the sentiment with the highest predicted probability, a confidence threshold of 0.7 was set. Only texts with a Positive probability above 0.7 were labelled as Positive; all others were treated as Negative to avoid misclassifying ambiguous or weakly positive expressions. Applying this threshold ensures that only clearly articulated positive sentiments are classified as positive, resulting in a more cautious and analytically reliable sentiment distribution across both posts and comments. Such conservative thresholding is consistent with sentiment analysis research that stresses the importance of carefully handling neutral and mixed expressions in informal online discourse, where tone can be implicit or non-literal (Bordoloi & Biswas, 2023).

To assess whether the overall sentiment orientation differed meaningfully from chance, the study also conducted two supplementary statistical tests: a binomial test for the post dataset and a one-sample proportion z-test for the comment dataset. These tests evaluated whether the observed proportion of positive sentiments exceeded a neutral baseline of 0.5. Incorporating these tests provides a simple statistical validation that complements the qualitative interpretation and supports the robustness of the observed sentiment patterns presented in the Results chapter.

4.6.4 Interpretation of Sentiment Classification

Since the sentiment model used in this study produces a binary output (Positive or Negative), the analysis focuses on how these two categories help map the overall emotional orientation of users discussing the full-time children phenomenon. In this context, the sentiment labels are used to indicate whether the text delivers a positive or negative message. A Positive label reflects expressions of approval, support, empathy, relief, or other favorable emotions, whereas a Negative label captures dissatisfaction, frustration, disapproval, anxiety, or more emotionally strained responses.

5 Results

5.1 Topic Patterns and Sentiment Trends in Posts

This section presents the thematic patterns identified in the Xiaohongshu posts through topic modelling and qualitative interpretation. It begins by summarizing the three themes extracted by BERTopic and visualizing their semantic relationships. The section then turns to an in-depth qualitative reading of each topic, drawing on representative excerpts to illustrate how users describe the experience of becoming a full-time child. Together, these analyses provide a grounded understanding of how the phenomenon is articulated in posts, highlighting the roles of family dynamics, employment pressures, and emotional adjustment.

5.1.1 Identifying Topic Structure in Posts

This section presents the three main topics identified through topic modelling. Topic –1 (53 posts), which consists of outlier texts that do not form a coherent semantic cluster, was excluded from the analysis and is therefore not reported here. Each topic is named according to its thematic focus, and representative keywords are shown in both Chinese and English.

Table 3. Representative Keywords for Post Topics

Topic	Size (n posts)	Keywords (Chinese)	Translation
Topic 0: Intergenerational relations and family expectations	21	儿女, 家庭, 妈妈, 孩子, 回国, 爸妈, 年轻人, 压力, 退休, 我 妈	sons/daughters, family, mother, child, return home, parents, young people, pressure, retire, my mother
Topic 1: Job search strain and career burnout	17	加班, 公司, 简历, 找到, 真实, 裸辞, 下午, 咖啡, 企业, 两年	overtime, company, résumé, find a job, reality, “naked resignation” ¹ , afternoon, coffee, corporate, two years

¹ “裸辞” (naked resignation) is a growing trend in China where individuals quit their jobs without securing a new one, often driven by burnout, dissatisfaction with workplace culture, or the desire to pause, reset, and pursue alternative life or career paths.

Topic	Size (n posts)	Keywords (Chinese)	Translation
Topic 2: Anxiety and adjustment	12	害怕, 想法, 阿姨, 身上, 记录, 解决, 电话, 享受, 同学, 还会	fear, thoughts, aunt, body/on oneself ² , to record, solve, call, enjoy, fellow student, still feel

Table 3 summarizes the thematic structure identified in the post dataset. Topic 0 (21 posts) is the largest cluster and contains vocabulary associated with family roles, intergenerational relations, and domestic expectations. Topic 1 (17 posts) consists of employment-related terms, reflecting concerns about job search, workplace pressure, and career uncertainty. Topic 2 (12 posts) groups emotionally expressive vocabulary, particularly among users who recently returned from studying abroad and describe adjustment difficulties. Taken together, the keywords provide an initial overview of how users narrate the full-time children phenomenon through family dynamics, employment struggles, and emotional responses. The following visualization (Figure 4) illustrates how these themes relate to each other in semantic space.

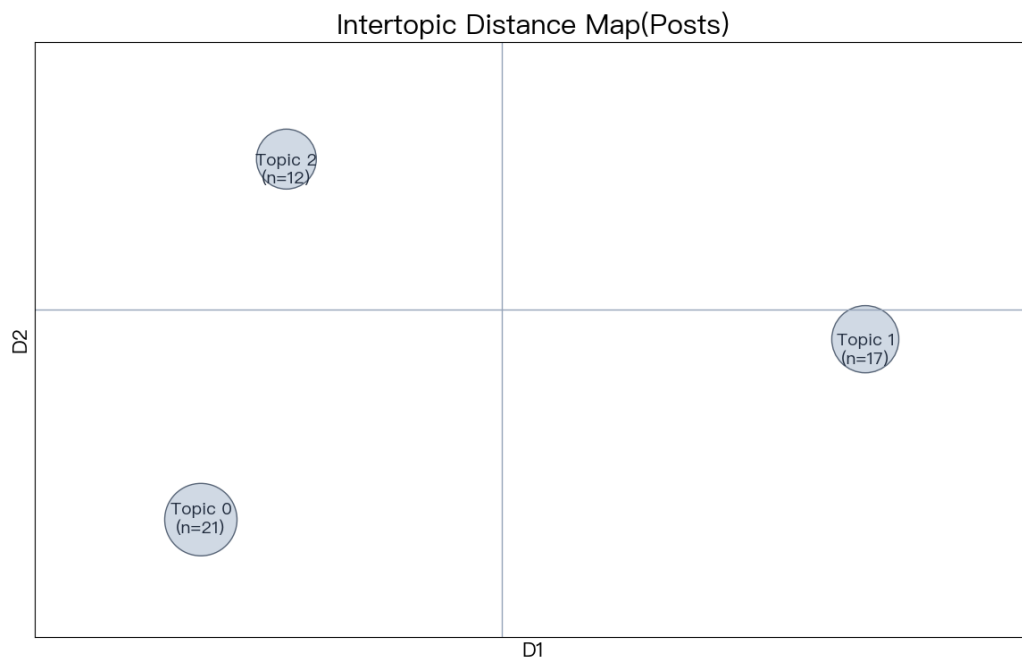


Figure 4. Intertopic Distance Map of Post Topics

² “身上” (body) in this context often conveys embodied feelings (e.g., what happens to me/ on my body), depending on usage.

Figure 4 presents the intertopic distance map generated by BERTopic, which visualizes the semantic relationships between topics in a two-dimensional space (D1 and D2). These axes are created using dimensionality reduction (e.g., UMAP) and have no direct interpretive meaning. They summarize variation within the high-dimensional semantic space of the model (McInnes et al., 2018). In this representation, topics positioned closer together share more similar word distributions, whereas topics further apart are more distinct, consistent with conventions in topic-modelling visualization (Grootendorst, 2022).

The map is here to demonstrate that the three topics identified in the dataset form coherent and well-separated clusters, rather than overlapping or redundant groups. This provides methodological validation that the themes interpreted in the subsequent sections reflect meaningful patterns in the data. As shown, Topic 0 (n = 21) occupies a distinct area on the left, reflecting the specificity of its family-centered discourse. Topic 2 (n = 12), located slightly above and to the left, shows partial proximity to Topic 0, consistent with some shared discussion of family roles, while still forming its own emotion-centered cluster. Topic 1 (n = 17) appears on the far right, indicating the greatest semantic distance from the other topics, which aligns with its strong focus on work-life balance.

Together, the spatial separation of these clusters supports the interpretive claim that the three themes represent distinct dimensions of how users discuss the full-time children phenomenon.

5.1.2 How Users Describe Full-Time Children: Interpretation of Post Topics

Topic 0: Intergenerational Relations and Family Expectations

Topic 0 highlights how family relations and responsibilities shape the full-time children's experience. Rather than portraying the arrangement as simple dependence, users describe complex interactions around care, expectations, and everyday coordination within the household. Posts frequently discuss how parents interpret this arrangement, how young adults deal with social expectations, and how household responsibilities are redistributed. Keywords such as “儿女” (sons/daughters), “家庭” (family), “妈妈/爸妈” (parents), and “孩子” (child) point to recurring discussions around filial obligation, family roles, and intergenerational reciprocity. This theme reflects how authority and responsibility are negotiated within the household. One representative post humorously compares family life to a workplace contract:

逃学博士被家长开除，全职儿女合同续签失败。

A PhD dropout gets fired by their parents; my full-time daughter's contract was not renewed.

This framing portrays the parent–child relationship as resembling a workplace structure, with built-in expectations, accountability, and even performance evaluation. Other excerpts emphasize broader socioeconomic pressures, such as parents remaining the primary financial providers:

身边全职儿女越来越多了...爸妈是家里的经济支柱。

There are more and more full-time children around me... parents are the family's financial support now.

Here, users point to a broader pattern in which parents continue to provide financially while their adult children face unstable labor conditions.

Parental uncertainty also appears as a common emotional thread:

孩子一直不工作或者找不到工作怎么办？

What should I do if the child refuses to work or simply can't find a job?

Together, these excerpts show how full-time children is experienced as a relational and negotiated arrangement embedded in intergenerational expectations and economic uncertainty.

Topic 1: Job Search Strain and Career Burnout

Topic 1 centers on the challenges of entering or re-entering the labor market. Keywords such as “加班” (overtime), “公司” (company), “简历” (résumé), and “找到” (find a job) indicate that discussions often relate to job search struggles, workplace dissatisfaction, and the pressure to find a stable job. Many posts describe negative work experiences, particularly excessive overtime and disillusionment with corporate culture, which prompt individuals to resign and temporarily adopt the role of a full-time child.

Users frequently share daily routines involving job applications, preparing CVs, or dealing with repeated rejection, revealing broader anxieties about competition, precarity, and unstable career prospects. As one user writes:

在家做了全职女儿半年，中途上了两个月班又辞职了。

I've been a full-time daughter for six months; I worked for two months in between and then quit again.

Such reflections illustrate the emotional tension between taking time to rest and feeling pressure to return to productive employment. Topic 1 therefore captures a recurring pattern in which temporary withdrawal from work is shaped by both economic uncertainty and ambivalent feelings about productivity, career expectations, and self-worth.

Topic 2: Anxiety and Adjustment

Topic 2 highlights a distinctly emotional dimension of the discourse, centering on a subgroup of users who returned to China after studying abroad and struggled to find a stable job. Keywords such as “害怕” (fear), “想法” (thoughts), and “记录” (to record) suggest that these users turn to Xiaohongshu as a space to express anxiety, uncertainty, and psychological strain. Posts often involve personal reflections or conversations with supportive others, such as “阿姨” (aunt).

Some users share more intense emotional distress:

留学回国的焦虑...现实狠狠泼来冷水

The anxiety of coming back from studying abroad... reality hit hard.

The theme of failed expectations appears repeatedly:

英留子回国当全职女儿半年的感受是：哈哈，以为过得很开心吗？Noooo，只是因为根本找不到工作。

As a Chinese student who returned from studying in the UK and has been a full-time daughter for six months: “Haha, did you think I was enjoying life? Noooo — it's just because I couldn't find a job at all.

One user expresses the dilemma more bluntly:

留学回国之找不到工作被迫成为全职女儿。请问人可以一辈子不打工吗？

Studied abroad, came back, couldn't find a job, and was forced to become a full-time daughter. Question: Is it possible for a person to go through life without ever working?

Overall, the posts in this subgroup are marked by strong emotional intensity, revealing feelings of frustration, uncertainty, and disorientation as users cope with the gap between expectations and lived experience.

Across the three topics, becoming a full-time child is narrated as a situational and negotiated response rather than a simple withdrawal from work or adulthood. Users explain this role through intergenerational relations, labor-market strain, and emotional adjustment. Family life is described as structured by expectations and reciprocal responsibilities, often legitimized through contractual metaphors, while job search difficulties and burnout shape full-time children as a temporary strategy rather than a permanent identity. Emotional reflection further highlights how users articulate anxiety, frustration, and ambivalence in response to disrupted expectations. Together, these narratives present dependence as conditional and justified, embedded in ongoing negotiations over responsibility, productivity, and adulthood. To complement this thematic structure, the next subsection examines how these narratives are emotionally presented by analyzing the overall sentiment of posts before exploring how sentiment varies over time and across topics.

5.1.3 Overall Sentiment Orientation of Posts

In the post dataset, 87 posts (84.5%) were classified as positive, indicating that the majority of users present their experiences with encouragement or optimism. Only a small number of posts fell below the threshold and were classified as negative.

This tendency towards positive expression aligns with Xiaohongshu's broader communicative norms, where personal reflections are commonly framed through playful or aesthetically curated styles (Xu & Zheng, 2025). Even when users discuss pressure, uncertainty, or job-search frustrations, the emotional tone is often softened through humor, self-deprecation, or short-term coping narratives.

To determine whether the predominance of positive sentiment exceeded what would be expected by chance, a binomial test compared the observed proportion of positive posts with a baseline probability of 0.5. The result ($p < .0001$) confirms that positive sentiment is

statistically dominant rather than incidental. In other words, positive framing is a defining feature of how users articulate the full-time children role.

5.1.4 Sentiment Patterns Across Time and Themes

While the previous subsection summarized overall sentiment, visualizing sentiment patterns allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how emotional tone shifts across the dataset. These figures do not operate as stand-alone statistical findings; rather, they complement the qualitative themes by illustrating how optimism, humor, ambivalence, and frustration appear in different narrative contexts. This approach supports RQ2 by showing how emotional tone is distributed, not only what emotions are expressed.

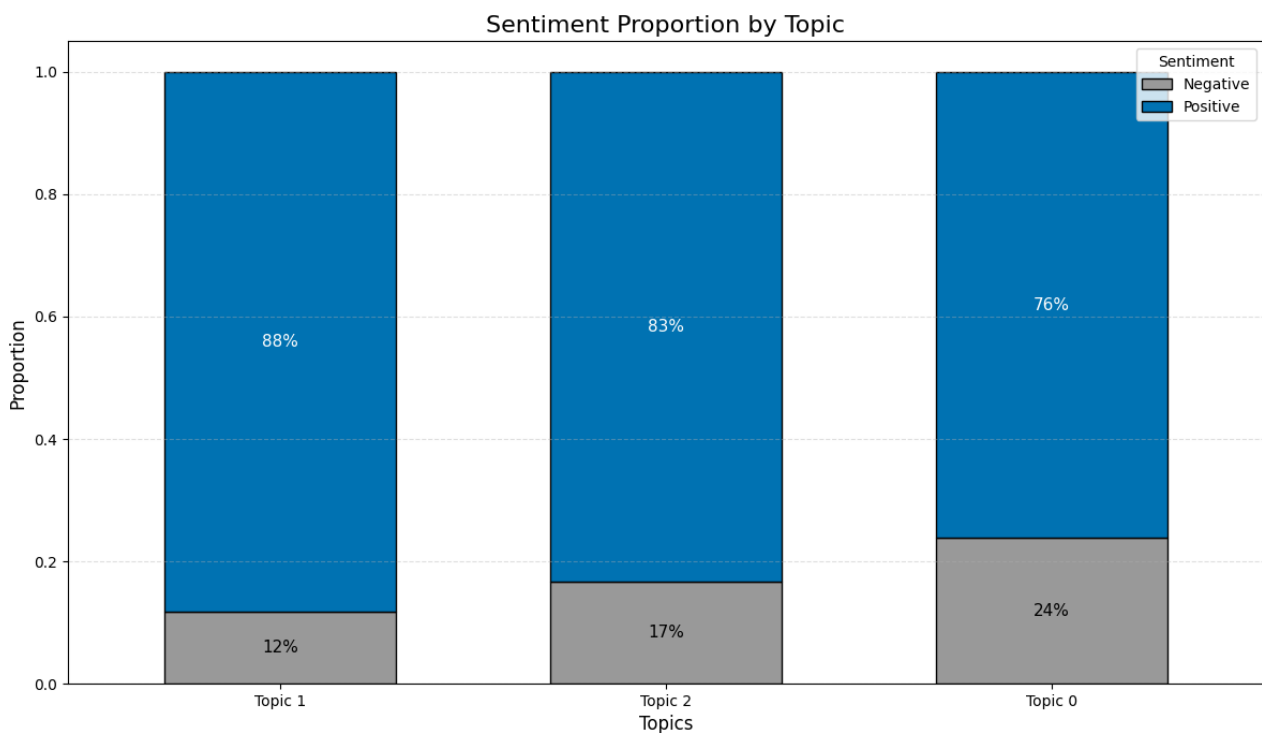


Figure 5. Sentiment Distribution Across Topics (Posts)

Figure 5 shows how positive and negative sentiment is distributed across the three topics identified in the post dataset. This visualization provides a simple way to compare the emotional tone associated with each thematic domain.

Across all topics, the majority of posts are classified as positive, but the proportions differ in meaningful ways. Topic 1 (job search strain and career burnout) shows the highest share of positive sentiment (88%), suggesting that even when users discuss work-related stress

or resignation, their tone tends to be positive or framed as temporary relief from pressure. Topic 2 (anxiety and adjustment) also remains predominantly positive (83%), though the slightly higher proportion of negative posts reflects the more uncertain and emotionally vulnerable experiences described by users. Topic 0 (family relations and expectations) has the most mixed emotional profile (76% positive; 24% negative), consistent with the tension users describe between gratitude, dependence, parental expectations, and the negotiation of household roles.

Rather than indicating highly polarized reactions, these proportions suggest that emotional expression varies with the kinds of challenges users describe. Posts about family responsibilities contain more ambivalence, while posts about work or adjustment tend to maintain a light or hopeful tone despite the underlying stress. This pattern complements the thematic analysis by showing that the emotional tone of discussions about full-time children is shaped not only by practical circumstances but also by the narrative context in which those experiences are described.

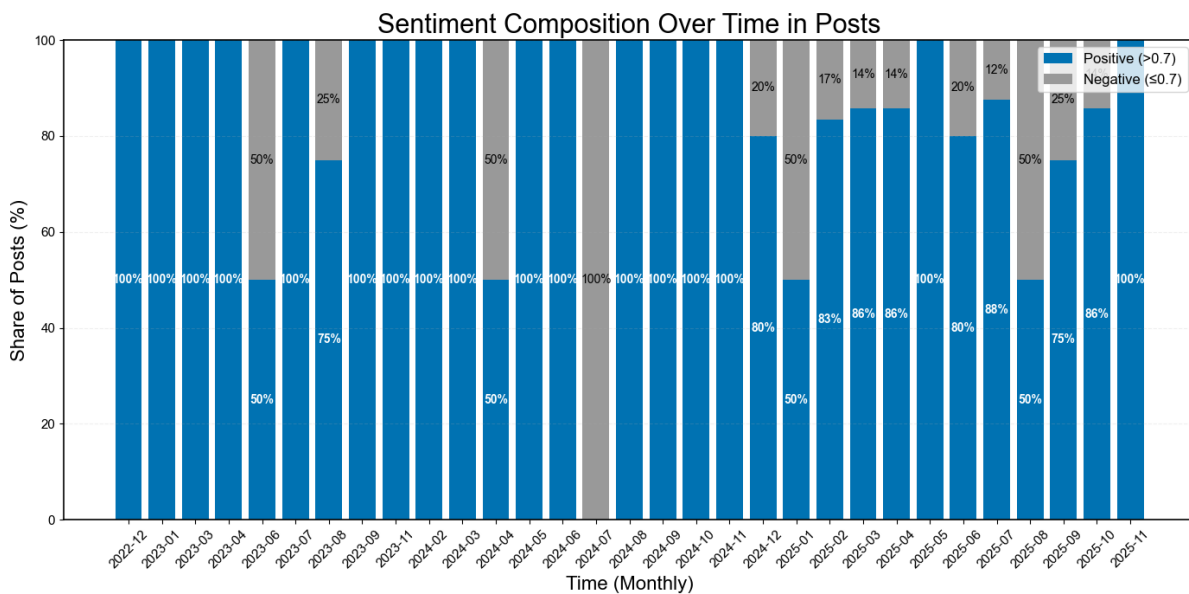


Figure 6. Monthly Sentiment Composition of Posts

Figure 6 illustrates how sentiment in posts changed over time. Across most months, positive sentiment dominates, and in several periods, the share of positive posts reaches 100%. This pattern aligns with earlier findings that users tend to share the full-time children lifestyle in light-hearted or encouraging ways, even when discussing stress, uncertainty, or employment difficulties.

Some months, however, show more mixed sentiment. Months such as June 2023, April 2024, and January 2025 show a higher proportion of negative posts, reaching around half of all posts in those months. These shifts may correspond to key moments in the yearly cycle, including job-hunting seasons, graduation timelines, or heated public debate around related cultural trends such as lying flat.

From early to mid-2025, a slight but noticeable rise in negative sentiment becomes more frequent, suggesting that as the phenomenon gained visibility, discussions also became more ambivalent. Despite fluctuations over time, the dominant tone is still positive, indicating that many users narrate the full-time child role as a playful, short-term solution rather than as a long-term burden or source of shame.

These periodic shifts highlight that users' attitudes toward full-time children are situated within changing social pressures rather than being fixed or uniform.

5.2 Topic Patterns and Sentiment Trends in Comments

While the previous section examined how full-time children present and describe their own experiences in posts, the comment section offers a different angle: it reveals how wider audiences react to, interpret, and emotionally evaluate the phenomenon. Because comments are typically shorter, more spontaneous, and more conversational, they provide insight into the interactive dynamics surrounding full-time children. This section therefore analyzes the thematic patterns and sentiment trends in comments to complement the post-level findings and to further address RQ1 and RQ2.

5.2.1 Identifying Topic Structure in Comments

Because comments related to “family”, “work”, and “emotional expression” were removed before topic modelling, the themes identified in this section reflect what remains after excluding the three dominant dimensions found in the posts. In other words, the comments analyzed in this section are those that do not align with the previously identified categories and instead represent the remaining portion of the dataset.

The themes that emerge from this subset point to broader cultural reactions, meta-commentary, collective meaning-making, and users' interpretations of the full-time children phenomenon. Rather than sharing personal experiences, many of these comments shift to a broader level, responding with life philosophy, social expectations, or expressions

of admiration and critique. As with the post analysis, topic -1 (373 comments) was excluded from the analysis and is not reported here.

Table 4. Representative Keywords for Comment Topics

Topic	Size (n comments)	Keywords (Chinese)	Translation
Topic 0: Reflection on life, uncertainty, and adulthood	344	人生, 上岸, 国内, 快乐, 感觉, 下辈子, 健康, 回国, 毕业, 不错, 好好, 一年	life, "to get ashore" ³ , in China, happiness, feel, next life, health, return to China, graduate, good, nice, one year
Topic 1: Everyday routines and self-management	74	家里, 女儿, 全职, 老人, 在家, 退休, 工作, 躺平, 父母, 时间, 老公, 天天	at home, daughter, full-time, older adults ⁴ , retire, work, lying flat, parents, time, husband, every day
Topic 2: Admiration and moral judgement	43	羡慕, 好羡慕, 幸福, 真幸福, 卧槽, 父母, 哇塞, 浪费, 庆幸, 太棒了, 同意, 只能靠	envious, so envious, happiness, so happy, no way, parents, wow, waste, feel blessed, great, agree, rely on

Table 4 presents the three comment topics identified through topic modelling, their relative sizes, and representative keywords. Topic 0 is the largest cluster (344 comments), indicating that reflective and philosophical responses dominate audience reactions. Topics 1 and 2 are smaller, suggesting that comments focused on everyday routines or explicit evaluation occur less frequently.

The keyword profiles indicate different modes of engagement: Topic 0 is characterized by abstract and reflective language, Topic 1 by concrete references to daily practices, and Topic 2 by short, affective expressions. Together, these topics illustrate that commenters engage with the phenomenon at varying levels of depth, ranging from general reflection to brief moral or emotional reactions.

³ “上岸” (to get ashore) is a popular term among Chinese job seekers referring to successfully securing a stable, competitive position, especially in the public sector, state-owned enterprises, symbolizing finally escaping uncertainty and achieving security.

⁴ “老人” (older adults) refers to users’ parents and grandparents.

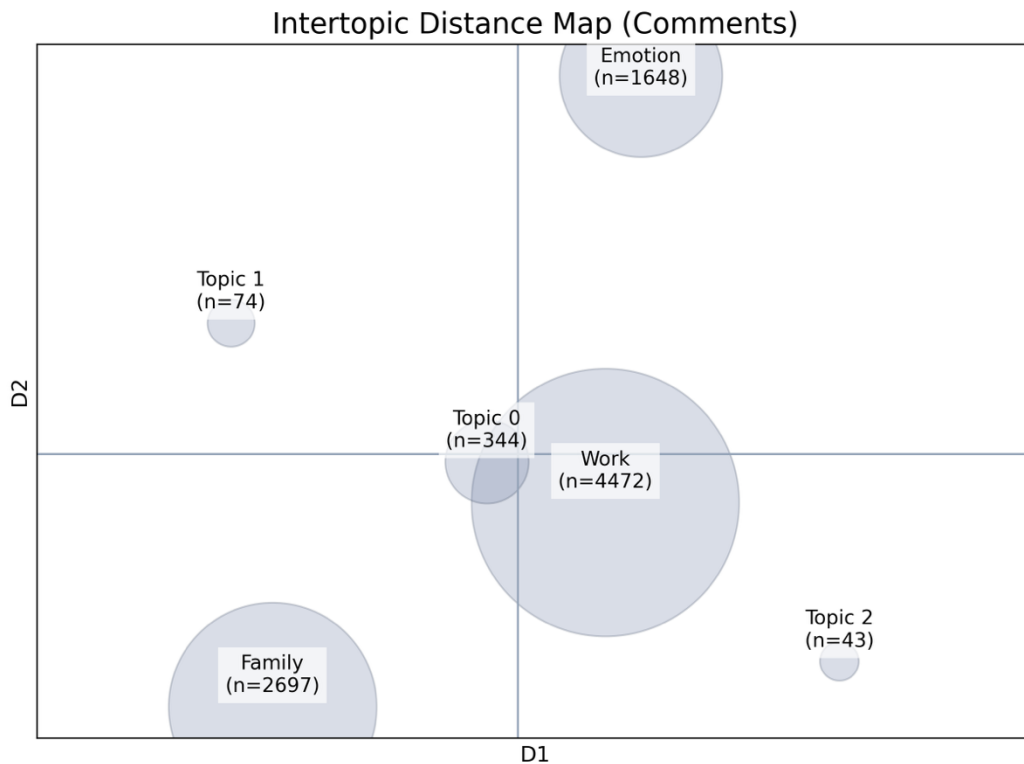


Figure 7. Intertopic Distance Map of Comment Topics

Figure 7 visualizes the semantic structure of the comment corpus using an intertopic distance map. The three large clusters corresponding to “work” (n = 4,472), “family” (n = 2,697), and “emotion” (n = 1,648) are shown as reference groups. These clusters represent comments that were excluded from topic modelling but are retained in the visualization to provide contextual grounding. Displaying these reference clusters allows the reader to see how the analyzed comment topics are positioned in relation to the broader comment landscape.

Topic 0 (n=344) appears closest to the “work” reference cluster, indicating that even after removing explicit mentions of job search, labor pressure, and employment insecurity, many commenters continue to draw on work-related vocabulary when reflecting on life direction, uncertainty, and adulthood. This suggests that broader existential or philosophical reactions remain implicitly shaped by structural anxieties surrounding work, contributing insight into RQ1 on how the phenomenon is contextualized within wider social pressures.

Topic 1 (n=74) is located in the upper-left region of the map, relatively distant from both “work” and “family.” This distance reflects how the topic captures a distinct mode of engagement centered on daily habits, self-management routines, and household rhythms that do not strongly overlap with the more emotionally charged or obligation-oriented comments previously filtered out. Its position highlights a separate space of meaning-making that focuses on everyday practices rather than structural concerns, again contributing to how audiences make sense of the phenomenon.

Topic 2 (n=43) appears in the lower-right periphery, far removed from all three reference clusters. This marginal position indicates that highly expressive, evaluative reactions, such as admiration, envy, or disbelief, form a compact, emotionally intense category distinct from both practical routines (Topic 1) and broader reflections (Topic 0). This aligns with RQ2, which examines how emotional expressions appear in the conversation, even outside the main “emotion” category removed earlier.

Overall, the map shows that once comments directly tied to “work,” “family,” or “emotion” are excluded, the remaining topics still occupy meaningful and distinct positions within the comment landscape. Their spatial arrangement shows how these residual discussions relate to the three dominant interpretive dimensions while still remaining clearly distinct from them. This structural overview helps clarify how commenters engage with the full-time children phenomenon beyond the most obvious categories, providing a fuller answer to both RQs.

5.2.2 How Users Respond to Full-Time Children: Interpretation of Comment Topics

Topic 0: Reflection on Life, Uncertainty, and Adulthood

Topic 0 centers on broader reflections about life direction, meaning, and the uncertainty surrounding adulthood. Keywords such as “人生” (life), “上岸” (to get ashore), “国内” (in China), “快乐” (happiness), “健康” (health), and “下辈子” (next life) suggest that users are not only responding to the full-time children phenomenon but also using it as a starting point to question what constitutes success, stability, or a desirable future.

Instead of focusing on practical concerns, many comments present philosophical viewpoints or express frustration with social expectations. Some users emphasize openness and the idea that there are multiple valid life paths:

人生没有标准答案。

There is no standard answer to life.

Others convey discouragement or self-doubt:

感觉人生完了。

It feels like my life is over.

Meanwhile, some articulate a shift toward minimalist or health-focused priorities:

人生真的只要健康平安就好了。

Life really only needs health and peace.

These patterns suggest that Topic 0 provides room for users to rethink social norms, express feelings of uncertainty, and articulate alternative understandings of what adulthood and success might mean.

Topic 1: Everyday Routines and Self-Management

Topic 1 focuses on the everyday routines and self-management practices associated with being a full-time child. Representative keywords such as “家里” (at home), “全职” (full-time), “老人” (elderly), “退休” (retired), and “躺平” (lying flat) suggest that users discuss the rhythm of daily life, caregiving responsibilities, and the balance between rest and productivity.

Some comments describe highly structured and aspirational daily schedules, which can carry both admiration and irony. For example:

我现在就是在家做全职儿女每天八点半前起来.....然后去健身房做力量训练.....下午就是陆家嘴散步。

I'm currently a full-time daughter at home. I get up before 8:30, go to the gym, then in the afternoon take a walk in Lujiazui.

Others highlight the emotional negotiation involved, shifting between the desire for rest and the pressure to meet external expectations.:

啊我是家里一直想让我躺平但我跃跃欲试一直在外挨打。

My family wants me to lie flat at home, but I'm eager to try, so I keep getting beaten down outside.

These comments suggest that being a full-time child involves balancing freedom with dependence and rest with responsibility. Topic 1, therefore shows how daily routines function as a space where identity, agency, and family expectations are negotiated.

Topic 2: Admiration and Moral Judgement

Topic 2 captures highly evaluative reactions to the full-time children phenomenon, characterized by emotionally expressive keywords such as “羡慕” (envious), “幸福” (happiness), “真幸福” (so happy), “哇塞” (wow), and “卧槽” (no way). Rather than describing personal experiences, these comments respond to others' circumstances, often expressing admiration, disbelief, or envy toward those who are financially supported by their families.

Many examples take the form of short, affective responses:

我只是羡慕了。

I'm just envious.

我天呢，真羡慕了。

Oh my god, I'm really envious.

我去，太幸福了。

Wow, that's too blessed.

Despite their light tone, these comments reveal deeper generational tensions between aspiration and economic constraint. Admiration and envy coexist with an implicit awareness that such arrangements are not accessible to everyone. As a result, Topic 2 not only reflects emotional response but also points to underlying critiques of inequality in parental resources, class mobility, and opportunities available to young adults.

5.2.3 Overall Sentiment Orientation of Comments

In the comment dataset, 5,500 comments (56.1%) were classified as positive. Negative comments make up the remaining share, but these are dispersed across a wide range of

topics rather than forming a cohesive negative narrative. This distribution suggests that, although comments represent a more reactive and conversational form of engagement than posts, users still tend to express encouragement, empathy, or light-hearted evaluation rather than overt criticism.

To assess whether the predominance of positive sentiment in the comments differed significantly from chance, a one-sample z-test for proportions compared the observed share of positive comments (56.1%) to a neutral baseline of 0.5. The test produced a Z-statistic of 12.22 and a p-value of 1.15×10^{-34} , indicating that the proportion of positive comments is significantly higher than would be expected if positive and negative evaluations were equally likely. In other words, the share of positive sentiment in the comment section is not incidental but statistically robust, reinforcing the impression that users tend to discuss the full-time children phenomenon in approving, empathetic, or encouraging terms.

5.2.4 Comment Volume Across Post Topics

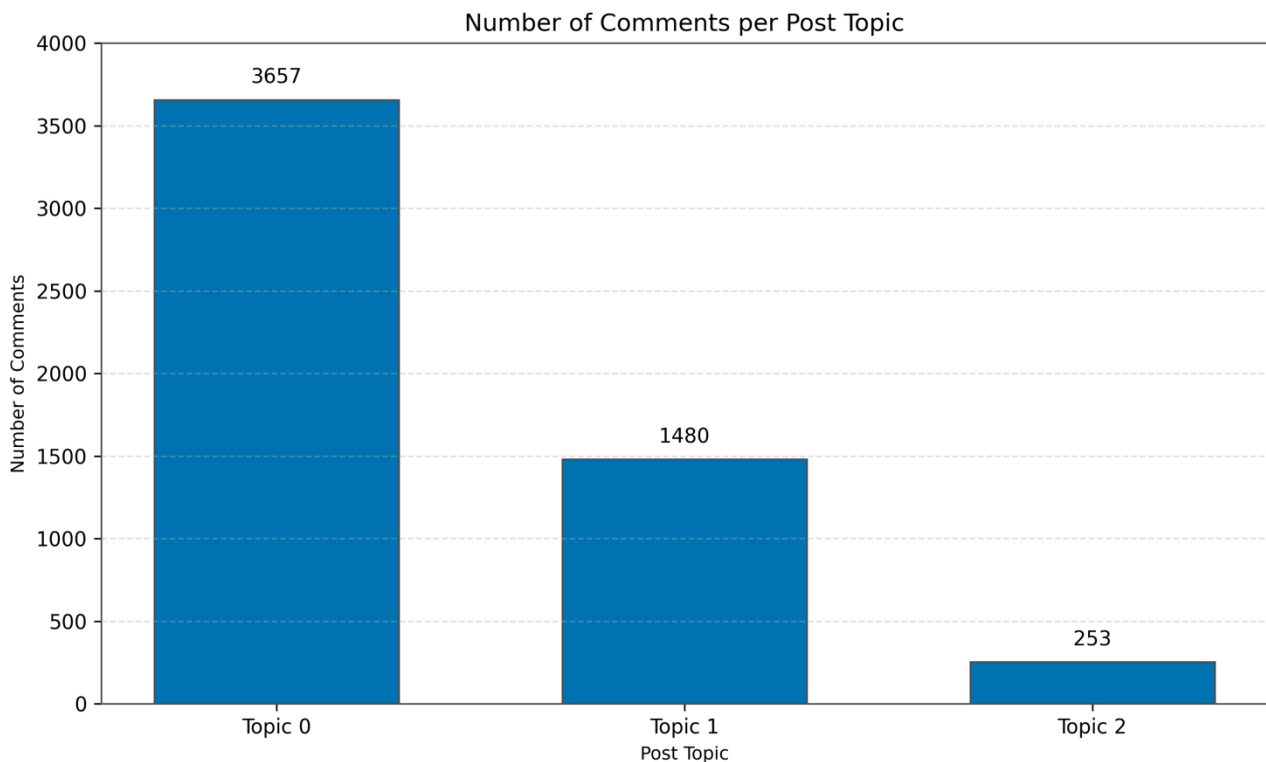


Figure 8. Comment Volume Across Post Topics

Before examining how comment sentiment varies across post topics, it is important to consider differences in audience engagement. Figure 8 therefore presents the number of

comments per post topic, providing context for the sentiment proportions discussed in the following section. Topic 0 (intergenerational relations and family expectations) attracts the largest number of comments (3,657), indicating that discussions around family roles and obligations generate the highest level of audience engagement. Topic 1 (job search strain and career burnout) receives a moderate volume of responses (1,480 comments), suggesting sustained but less intense interaction. In contrast, Topic 2 (anxiety and adjustment) generates substantially fewer comments (253), despite its strong emotional content.

5.2.5 Sentiment Patterns Across Themes and Over Time

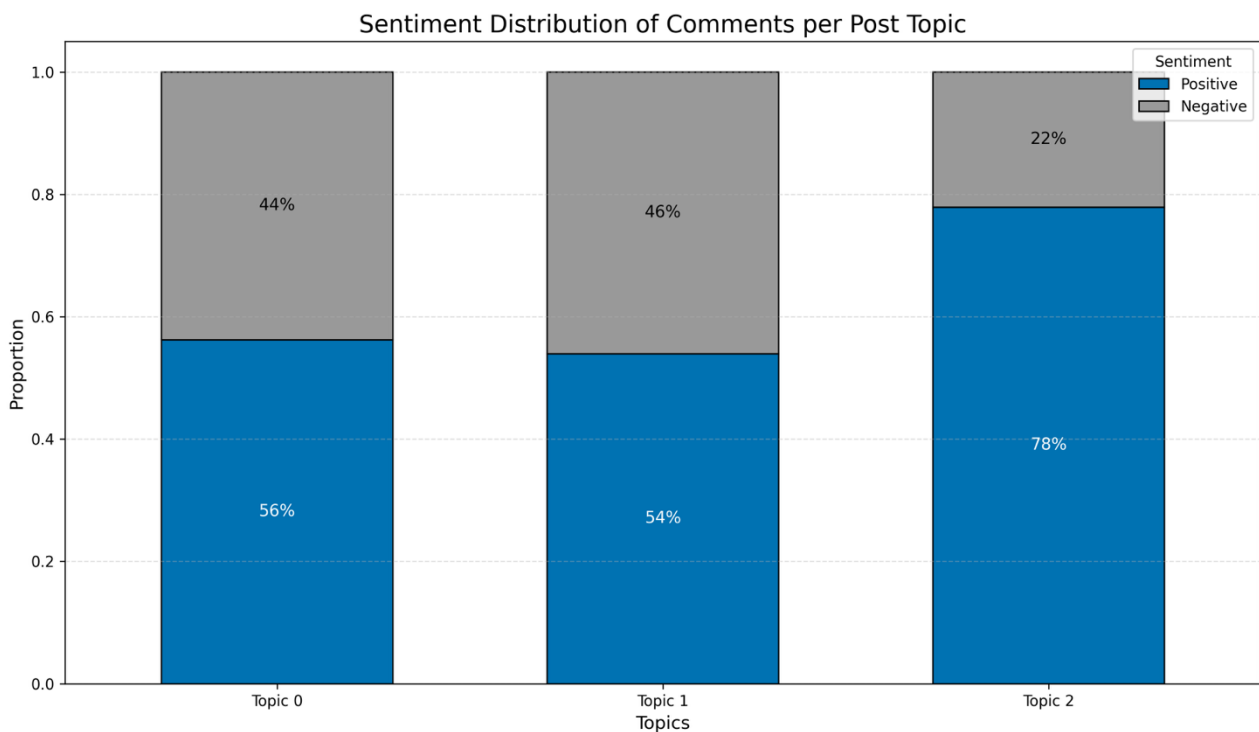


Figure 9. Sentiment Distribution of Comments Across Post Topics

Figure 9 shows how the emotional tone of comments varies depending on the topic of the post to which users are responding. This comparison highlights that comment sentiment is not uniform but shaped by the narrative context established in the posts. Across all three topics, positive comments remain more frequent than negative ones, yet the intensity and balance of reactions differ in meaningful ways.

For Topic 0 (intergenerational relations and family expectations), approximately 56% of comments are positive, and 44% are negative, indicating a moderately positive but highly

mixed emotional response. Some users express empathy, warmth, or relatability, while others raise concerns about fairness, obligation, or long-term sustainability. This split highlights that intergenerational arrangements, especially those involving financial support, are emotionally charged and socially contested.

For Topic 1 (job search strain and career burnout), sentiment is the most evenly distributed, with roughly 54% positive and 46% negative comments. Posts that describe employment struggles appear to receive both solidarity and skepticism. Users often respond with encouragement, yet they also express frustration with labor-market conditions, offer warnings, or question the feasibility of coping strategies. This balance reflects the broader precarity surrounding work in China and suggests that employment-related narratives prompt complex emotional reactions.

For Topic 2 (anxiety and adjustment), the emotional pattern shifts sharply: about 78% of comments are positive, compared with 22% negative. Although this topic generates fewer total comments (253 comments in total), the emotional tone is notably supportive. Users tend to respond with reassurance, empathy, or motivational messages when posters disclose vulnerability or personal anxiety. This suggests that openly expressed emotional strain activates a more nurturing and compassionate mode of engagement.

Taken together, these patterns show that commenters do more than simply approve or disapprove of the full-time children phenomenon. Instead, their emotional reactions vary significantly depending on the themes presented in the posts. Vulnerability tends to elicit supportive responses, while topics involving work or especially family trigger more ambivalent evaluation. This differentiation provides insight into how audiences negotiate the social meaning of the phenomenon and thus contributes directly to understanding the emotional dynamics that shape online discussions (RQ2) as well as how different aspects of the lifestyle are presented and interpreted (RQ1).

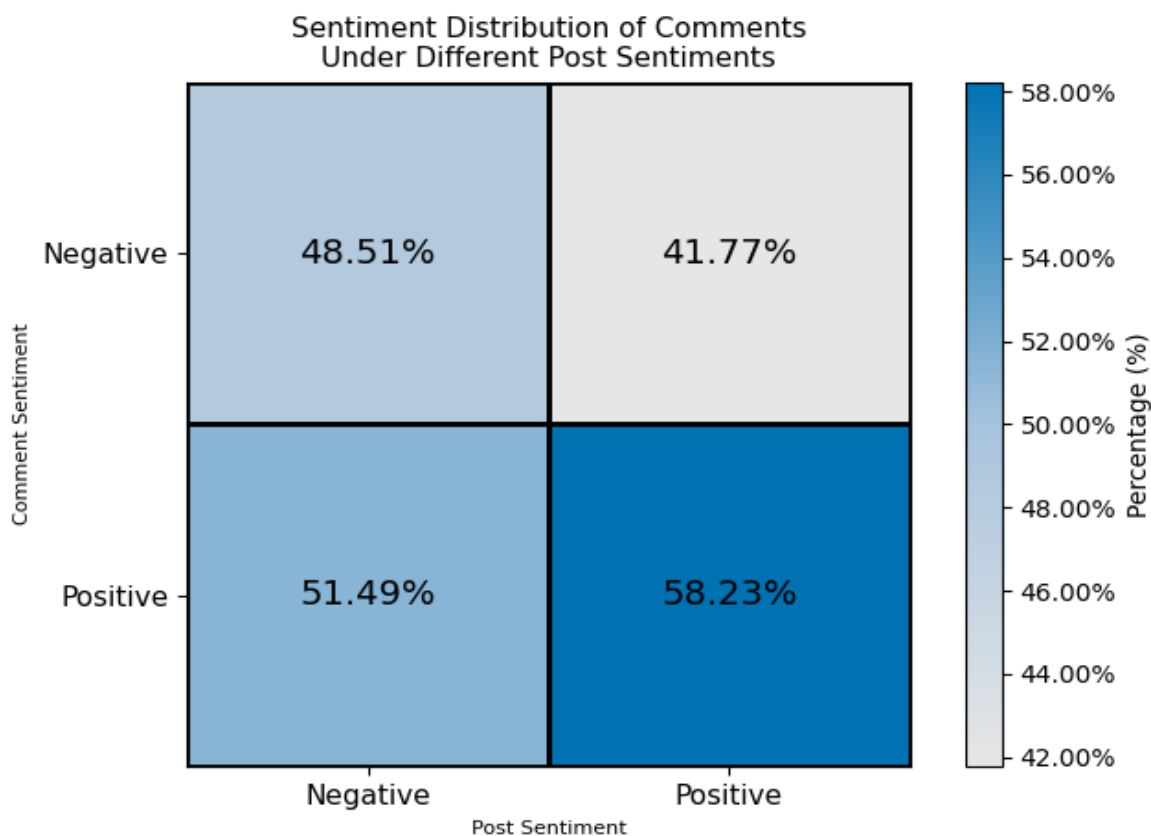


Figure 10. Comment Sentiment Distribution by Post Sentiment Category

Figure 10 visualizes the relationship between post sentiment and the emotional tone of comments. The matrix shows how audience reactions differ depending on whether a post is positive or negative. The results show a modest but meaningful alignment between post sentiment and audience sentiment.

For positive posts, most responses are also positive: 58.23% of comments fall into the positive category, while 41.77% are negative. This indicates that humorous, encouraging, or aspirational posts generally gain similarly supportive reactions. In contrast, comments responding to negative posts display a more balanced sentiment profile. Here, 51.49% of comments are positive, and 48.51% are negative. This near-even split suggests that negative posts do not simply trigger additional negativity. Rather, many users respond with reassurance, encouragement, or empathetic support. This pattern may reflect a form of peer-based emotional support, in which users actively counter distress with positivity.

Taken together, the figure shows that commenters do not simply absorb the emotional tone set by the post. Instead, they actively shape the tone of the discussion, sometimes amplifying positivity and sometimes counterbalancing negativity. This pattern helps

explain the overall emotional landscape identified in RQ2: while comments display more fluctuation and ambivalence than posts, they still maintain a tendency toward supportive or affectively warm responses, particularly when interacting with negative content.

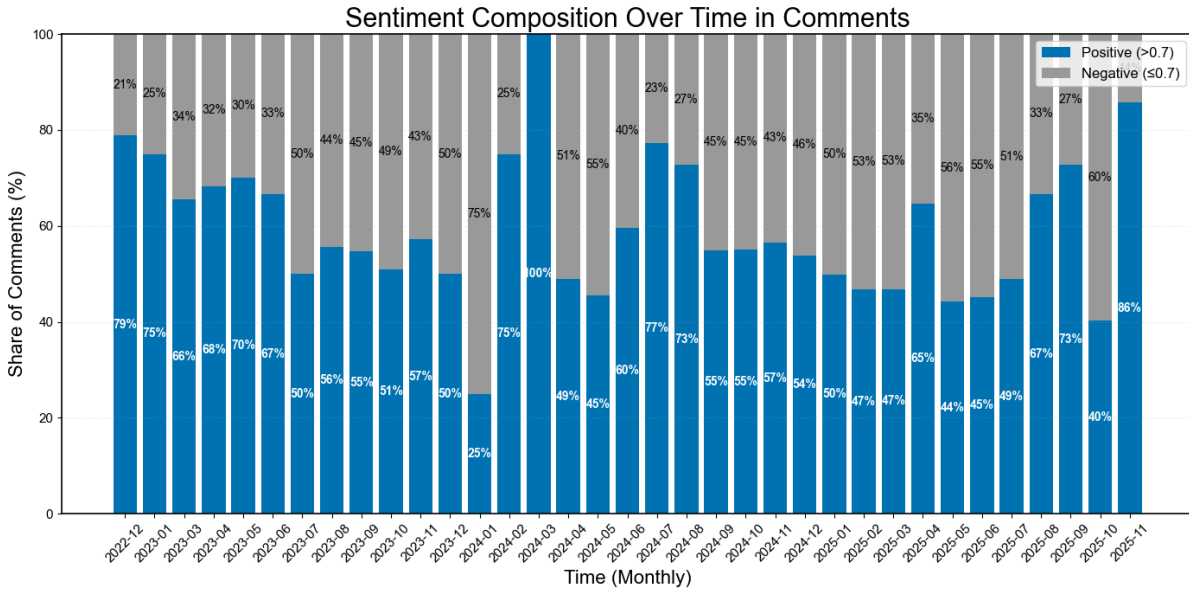


Figure 11. Sentiment Composition of Comments Over Time

Figure 11 presents the monthly distribution of positive and negative sentiment in the comment dataset. In contrast to the posts, which showed a consistently strong positive tone, comments display a more volatile and contested emotional pattern, reflecting how audiences evaluate, challenge, or reinterpret the full-time children lifestyle.

Across most months, positive sentiment still forms the majority (typically 50%–75%), but negative sentiment frequently rises into the 30–50% range. This indicates that comments contain much more disagreement, critique, frustration, or ambivalence than the posts themselves. In the earlier period (late 2022 to mid-2023), comments are mostly positive, with some months reaching around 75%–80% positivity. This corresponds to the initial phase of discussions around full-time children, when the topic circulated as a humorous or surprising trend and attracted largely supportive reactions. As the topic gained visibility, the sentiment balance started to shift. Sentiment becomes more mixed from mid-2023 onward. Months such as July and October 2023 and January 2024 show negative sentiment approaching or exceeding 40–50%. These shifts overlap with broader public debates about lying flat, employment pressure, and the slowing economy, which likely intensified skeptical or critical reactions.

A similar fluctuation reappears in 2025. Although positive comments remain the majority overall, months such as January, February, and March show an almost even split, suggesting increasing public ambivalence as the phenomenon became more widely discussed and more closely tied to economic frustrations. Toward the end of the timeline, positive sentiment rises again, particularly in September and November 2025 (73–86%). During this period, much of the content appears more playful or lifestyle-oriented, which tends to gain supportive reactions rather than critique.

In all, these temporal shifts illustrate that comments function as a more reactive and evaluative space than posts. Whereas posts often present the full-time child role through self-care or light irony, comments reveal the broader emotional negotiations surrounding the phenomenon, ranging from admiration and empathy to critique and social frustration. This supports the overall finding that emotional expression in the dataset is plural, dynamic, and shaped by changing economic and cultural conditions, directly addressing RQ2's focus on how users express feelings toward the phenomenon.

6 Discussion

This study offers insight into how the full-time children phenomenon is understood, discussed, and emotionally interpreted on Xiaohongshu. The findings suggest that: (1) structural pressures, such as labor-market precarity and economic insecurity, alongside evolving family dynamics and intergenerational arrangements, shape the circumstances under which young people become full-time children; (2) users actively construct the meaning of full-time children through humor, routine-sharing, and self-presentation practices shaped by Xiaohongshu's platform culture; (3) emotional expression varies substantially across communicative contexts: while posts typically present experiences with optimism or playfulness, comment responses reveal a more varied emotional landscape, including reassurance, critique, and ambivalence; and (4) public reactions extend beyond personal accounts to include broader moral and generational questioning, with users debating inequality, responsibility, and changing expectations of adulthood. Overall, these results contribute to ongoing discussions of youth precarity, intergenerational negotiation, and digital affective culture in China.

6.1 Socioeconomic and Cultural Factors Underlying the Full-Time Children Phenomenon

The findings suggest that the rise of full-time children cannot be understood as an individual preference alone, but reflects the combined influence of economic pressures, cultural expectations, and evolving intergenerational relationships. Consistent with broader research on post-pandemic youth transitions in China (Zheng & Yan, 2024), Topic 1 (job search strain and career burnout) shows that many users describe difficulty entering or sustaining stable work. Posts frequently reference prolonged job searches, cycles of resignation, and preparation for civil service examinations, which resonate with discussions of involution in contemporary youth studies. These structural constraints echo broader trends such as rising educational attainment without corresponding labor-market absorption, wage stagnation, and the decline of stable employment (Li et al., 2014; Oxford Analytica, 2024). In this context, returning to the parental home becomes a pragmatic response. This reflects research highlighting how Chinese families often absorb labor-market risk and provide a safety net during periods of transition (Cook, 2002).

Family dynamics also play a central role in sustaining the full-time children arrangement. Topic 0 (intergenerational relations and family expectations) highlights that these

arrangements are sustained through practical exchanges, such as emotional companionship, household labor, and digital support, offered in return for financial assistance. Rather than emphasizing changing values, these patterns reveal the practical mechanisms through which families manage economic pressure and redistribute care. This pattern reflects the shift toward individualized family relations in China (Yan, 2020) and parallels research on intergenerational exchange, which highlights how support is often governed by negotiated reciprocity rather than unconditional obligation (Finch et al., 2003; Szydlik, 2016). In this sense, full-time children function as one strategy families use to balance economic strain, care needs, and relational expectations.

Finally, Topic 1 and Topic 0 together illustrate how the phenomenon aligns with broader cultural critiques of performance-driven labor norms. Rather than indicating disengagement, these posts present full-time children as a deliberate pause that allows young people to rest, protect their mental wellbeing, or plan for the future amid systemic uncertainty. This aligns with global patterns of downshifting or strategic withdrawal observed in Japan and Western contexts (Hsu, 2022), suggesting that full-time children represent a negotiated adaptation to precarity rather than a permanent retreat.

6.2 Constructing Full-Time Children Online

Discussions on Xiaohongshu indicate that full-time children are not only a practical response to structural circumstances but also a narrative identity shaped by platform-specific communicative norms. Across the dataset, posts and comments consistently mix lifestyle storytelling and self-aware commentary. Rather than merely stating that they live at home, users narrate their experiences as curated routines, entertaining stories, or motivational reflections. This pattern reflects well-established norms on Xiaohongshu, where the algorithm rewards content that is relatable, visually cohesive, and emotionally engaging (Bie & Zeng, 2024).

One notable pattern in the data is the use of employment metaphors to describe family life. Expressions such as “contract renewed,” “salary paid by parents,” or “performance evaluation by mom” appeared across multiple posts (Topic 0 and Topic 1). These metaphors humorously reframe the household as a mock workplace. Rather than random jokes, they illustrate how users borrow familiar corporate scripts to make sense of their situation. This aligns with the idea of framing (Goffman, 2023), where familiar scripts from one social domain are used to make sense of another. By borrowing the language of

corporate work, users highlight the irony of stepping out of the labor market, while still performing structured daily routines or “responsibilities” as full-time children.

Daily routine narratives further reinforce this identity construction. Posts and comments describe daily routines such as waking early, exercising, cooking, or performing light caregiving tasks. These accounts function as narrative strategies, allowing users to present themselves as responsible or health-oriented despite temporarily leaving the labor market. As Zillich and Riesmeyer (2021) suggest, such lifestyle self-presentations help maintain a sense of legitimacy and adulthood even when one’s trajectory diverges from traditional expectations.

Topic 2 (admiration and moral judgement) shows how commenters extend this meaning-making. While many responses express empathy or admiration, others share critique or skepticism, particularly concerning class privilege and dependence. These evaluative reactions resemble what Papacharissi (2015) describes as *moral publics*, where users collectively negotiate the boundaries of acceptable behavior and emerging social norms. In this case, commenters debate whether becoming a full-time child reflects comfort, necessity, avoidance, or care, illustrating a collective renegotiation of responsibility and adulthood.

6.3 Emotional Patterns and Responses

The emotional dynamics surrounding full-time children on Xiaohongshu reveal a clear distinction between modes of expression in posts and comments. While posts are predominantly positive, comments display greater emotional variation across topics and contexts. This divergence reflects different communicative roles: posts function primarily as self-presentations, whereas comments operate as interactive and relational responses.

The strong positivity observed in posts suggests that users often adopt a light or optimistic tone even when discussing burnout, uncertainty, or job-search difficulties. Rather than indicating the absence of distress, this positivity appears to function as a communicative strategy aligned with Xiaohongshu’s platform culture, where relatability, emotional moderation, and aesthetic presentation help manage stigma and maintain a sense of control.

Comments, by contrast, reveal a more dynamic emotional landscape. Negative sentiment appears far more frequently, yet cross-sentiment patterns show that commenters often

respond to negative posts with reassurance or encouragement. Rather than amplifying negativity, users frequently attempt to soften it. This pattern reflects what Papacharissi (2015) describe as *affective publics* where online engagement becomes a way for users to manage emotions together, express solidarity, and construct shared meanings. In this sense, emotional expression on Xiaohongshu is relational and participatory, reflecting not only individual feelings but also shared, relational practices through which users negotiate meaning and belonging. This study extends research on affective publics by showing that, in this context, affective engagement on Xiaohongshu often takes a regulating form instead of intensifying conflict. In discussions of full-time children, affective responses frequently work to normalize uncertainty, validate vulnerability, and counterbalance negative experiences associated with youth precarity. Emotional expression thus becomes a collective resource for managing insecurity rather than merely a reflection of it.

The comparatively higher share of positive responses to posts categorized under Topic 2 (anxiety and adjustment) further supports this interpretation. When users openly articulate fear or emotional strain, commenters tend to respond with empathy and support, suggesting that vulnerability activates a more nurturing mode of engagement. Together, these patterns indicate that emotional expression on Xiaohongshu is not only performative but also relational, contributing to the collective negotiation of how precarity, dependence, and adulthood are understood in contemporary China.

6.4 Generational Reflections and Meaning-Making

Beyond individual experiences or emotional reactions, the full-time children discussion becomes a site of broader generational reflection on adulthood, independence, and value systems in contemporary China. This dimension becomes particularly visible in the comments, especially those that were not categorized into the predefined themes of “family,” “work,” or “emotion.” These “other” comments create a space where users move beyond personal stories and engage in broader cultural interpretation, critique, and meaning-making.

A recurring theme is the questioning of conventional markers of adulthood, including stable employment, marriage, and home ownership. Instead of treating these as universal milestones, many commenters question their desirability or feasibility. This shift aligns with research showing that Chinese young adults increasingly adopt individualized and flexible definitions of adulthood (Feng & Hannum, 2024).

Inequality also emerges as a central point of reflection. Expressions of admiration and envy often carry an implicit recognition that the ability to become a full-time child depends heavily on family resources. In this sense, full-time children becomes a symbol of both privilege and vulnerability. It reflects privilege because it relies on parental financial support; yet it also reflects vulnerability because this support is often needed precisely due to a harsh labor market and rising costs of independence.

Finally, many comments explore evolving intergenerational expectations. Users describe shifting boundaries around responsibility and independence, portraying parent–child relations as flexible and open to negotiation. This reflects findings that online platforms often serve as spaces where young people playfully reinterpret, soften, or resist dominant cultural norms (Boyd, 2014). Rather than treating filial obligations as fixed, commenters articulate a space for dialogue, compromise, and resistance, revealing how social values are renegotiated across generations.

7 Conclusion

This study examined how the full-time children phenomenon is discursively and emotionally constructed on Xiaohongshu. Through a mixed-methods approach combining BERTopic modelling, sentiment analysis, and qualitative interpretation, the analysis offers a comprehensive understanding of both the thematic discourses (RQ1) and the emotional dynamics (RQ2) surrounding this emerging youth practice in contemporary China. Together, the results confirm the initial premise that the rise of full-time children is shaped by the intersection of structural precarity and shifting intergenerational relations, while also revealing additional layers of meaning expressed through users' narratives and emotions. The findings collectively reveal four key insights.

First, the results show that descriptions of becoming a full-time child are closely tied to broader structural and cultural forces. Users frequently referenced economic precarity, cycles of job searching and resignation, and the psychological burden of intense labor-market competition. These patterns resonate with research on youth precarity and involution, illustrating how instability in employment pushes many young adults to return home as a pragmatic and temporary strategy rather than a voluntary retreat. At the same time, intergenerational expectations remain central: parents provide financial support, while young adults reciprocate through companionship, caregiving, and household tasks. These narratives support research on the individualization of Chinese family life, where filial roles are increasingly negotiated, flexible, and shaped by mutual expectations rather than rigid obligation.

Second, the study finds that Xiaohongshu users discursively construct the identity of full-time children in ways that reflect platform-specific communicative norms. Humorous workplace metaphors, lifestyle storytelling, and self-aware commentary transform what might otherwise be seen as dependency into a relatable, aestheticized, and sometimes aspirational persona. The use of humor, playful irony, and routine narratives helps present full-time children as legitimate actors dealing with uncertainty, rather than as passive dependents. In this sense, the platform offers a discursive site where users collectively reinterpret the meaning of adulthood, responsibility, and productivity.

Third, the emotional analysis reveals a differentiated affective landscape that directly addresses RQ2. Posts were overwhelmingly positive, often describing unemployment or burnout in light-hearted or optimistic terms. Comments, however, showed far greater

variability: while positive responses remained common, negative or ambivalent emotions appeared regularly, especially in discussions surrounding work pressure or intergenerational tension. Statistical tests further confirmed that positive sentiment significantly dominated, but fluctuations over time and across topics show that emotions are reactive and shaped by broader events such as job-hunting cycles. These patterns align with theories of affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015), demonstrating how online communities collaboratively construct shared emotional interpretations of social issues.

Finally, comments that fell outside the main topical categories revealed deeper generational reflections. Users used the full-time children phenomenon as a lens to question normative ideals of adulthood, including career stability, marriage, and home ownership, while articulating alternative values centered on well-being, flexibility, and emotional security. Admiration, envy, and critique frequently coexisted, highlighting tensions between privilege and vulnerability, as well as between traditional expectations and evolving youth aspirations. This broader discourse positions full-time children not merely as a coping strategy or economic arrangement, but as a cultural symbol through which young people make sense of inequality, identity, and the pressures of contemporary Chinese adulthood.

Overall, these findings show that the full-time children phenomenon is simultaneously economic, relational, emotional, and symbolic. It offers insight into how young adults in China understand precarity, negotiate intergenerational ties, and use social media to collectively redefine what adulthood can mean. By mapping both the discursive themes (RQ1) and the emotional patterns (RQ2) surrounding this phenomenon, the study contributes to research on youth precarity, digital culture, and the affective dimensions of social media.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relies on publicly visible Xiaohongshu content, meaning that the demographics, identities, and motivations of users cannot be verified. Without user-level metadata, interpretations are based solely on textual patterns. Second, the dataset, while covering posts from 2022 to 2025, may omit relevant discussions on other platforms or in offline contexts. Third, topic modelling and sentiment classification, though powerful, cannot fully capture sarcasm, irony, or cultural nuance, especially in Chinese digital slang. Fourth, because comments were pre-filtered into conceptual categories, the thematic modelling of “other” comments focuses only on a subset of public reactions.

Future research could extend this study in several important ways. First, incorporating multi-platform datasets, for example, from Weibo, Douyin, or Bilibili, would allow scholars to compare how the full-time children phenomenon is narrated across different digital publics and communicative cultures. Second, studies that combine social media data with survey or interview methods could provide richer insight into users' socioeconomic backgrounds, motivations, and lived experiences, helping to contextualize the textual patterns identified here. Third, advances in Chinese-specific NLP, particularly models trained to detect irony, slang, and platform-specific discourse styles, would improve the accuracy of topic and sentiment interpretation. In addition, future work could examine how the discourse evolves over time in response to policy changes, labor-market fluctuations, or shifting public attention. Finally, comparative or cross-cultural research on youth precarity, intergenerational dependence, and digital meaning-making would help situate full-time children within broader global patterns, highlighting both the uniqueness of China's context and its connections to wider generational transformations.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Supplementary Materials

To ensure transparency and reproducibility, all supplementary materials associated with this thesis have been made publicly accessible on GitHub. These materials include:

- Python code used for data preprocessing, BERTopic modelling, sentiment classification, statistical tests, and all visualizations presented in the thesis;
- Figures generated during the analysis, including intertopic maps, sentiment distributions, and comparative visualizations across posts and comments;
- Both raw and processed datasets, including the cleaned versions of the Xiaohongshu posts and comments used for topic modelling and sentiment analysis;
- Custom text-processing resources, such as:
 - An expanded stop-word list compiled from multiple public Chinese lists and further adapted for Xiaohongshu linguistic patterns.

All materials can be accessed at the following repository:

https://github.com/11fsy/Thesis_appendix

These resources are provided to facilitate methodological transparency and to support future research seeking to replicate, validate, or extend the analytical procedures used in this study.