

# How Social Media Plays A Role in Stay-At-Home-Moms' Transition: A Case Study in China

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In China, stay-at-home moms (SAHMs) often experience a hard time during their transitions, such as returning to school or restarting their careers. Yet, their experiences throughout this transition and their strategies to overcome potential challenges are rarely studied in the CSCW literature. In this study, we examined how Chinese SAHMs leveraged social media platforms to assist their transition and help them navigate the potential challenges. Through interviewing 15 SAHMs who have successfully completed their transitions, we identified the key role that social media platforms (e.g., RedNote, Douyin) play in helping SAHMs build resilience as they re-engage with society. For example, many SAHMs found peer support during their transition from mom-centric social groups where they could receive advice that was specific to their situations and constraints. When they achieved their goals, they turned into contributors in such groups and altruistically shared their experiences to help other moms. Based on the findings, we discussed the opportunities to support SAHMs' transitions.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in HCI**

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Social Media, Non-Western Context, Stay-at-home Moms, Resilience, Computer-Supported Cooperative Work

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## 1 Introduction

Stay-at-home moms (SAHMs) refer to those moms who care for their children full-time while their partners work outside the home. In the US, the number of SAHMs has been relatively stable, i.e., roughly one in four moms is identified as SAHMs in 2021 [20]. In some other countries, however, the population of SAHMs has grown rapidly. For example, in China, based on a recent statistic from Sohu (a popular online news website in mainland China), 82% of all moms born after 1995 chose to be SAHMs [6]. That accounts for nearly a quarter of all females from the post-1995 generation.

Although these SAHMs made up their minds to leave their jobs or decided not to continue their schooling to take on full-time child care for various reasons, such as reducing childcare costs, valuing family time, and preferring family-based early education, many of them considered restarting

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their careers or continuing their education as their children reached school age [21]. However, staying home full-time for a while has created a large gap in SAHMs' social life, knowledge, and working experiences, which further poses significant challenges for their transition [25]. Moreover, offline resources or supporting infrastructures may not be readily available or accessible for many SAHMs [16, 28]. As a result, SAHMs started to turn to other places, such as social media and online communities, to seek support and advice [5, 51].

In this paper, we examine this phenomenon, particularly focusing on the role of social media in SAHMs' transition. The HCI community has a long history of studying and understanding how individuals in the transitional phase (e.g., veterans [54]) readjust themselves into their social lives or careers. Yet, how social media afford SAHMs through their life transition to work has been understudied, especially in non-Western contexts where women may encounter additional social and cultural constraints while transitioning [41, 57]. We attempt to investigate this issue in the context of China and focus on one overarching research question: *What roles do social media play when SAHMs make life-changing transitions?*

To address this research question, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 15 SAHMs who actively shared their transition experience on RedNote (XiaoHongShu) and Douyin (Chinese TikTok), and aimed to uncover their experiences and motivations for using social media and online communities during their transition as well as how the digital platforms supported their transition. We focused on these two platforms because they were the most popular social media platforms among SAHMs in China. We found that social media played an important role in SAHMs' transition and facilitated the formation of a mom-centric online community, which provided strong social and emotional support for SAHMs. This process boosted SAHMs' confidence when facing various challenges for transition. However, ill-intended comments on social media also negatively impact SAHMs' social media experiences, resulting in a higher need for emotional support.

Our paper makes the following contributions to HCI. First, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first paper that investigates how SAHMs in China transit back to their professional life and what roles social media play during the transition. We further identify the challenges they encountered in the process, their multiple identities at different transitional stages, and their evolving motivations to use social media throughout the process. Second, we discuss opportunities on how the HCI community could support SAHMs' efforts to restart their career.

## 2 Related Work

Our study focuses on SAHMs' transition to the workplace, particularly their leverage of social media platforms during the process. Therefore, the following literature review section is structured into two parts. It begins by presenting the role of ICTs in SAHMs' transition. Then, it provides background information regarding the situation of SAHMs, identities, and online communities.

### 2.1 Transition Resilience and ICTs

Due to the nature of the changes and discontinuity in transitions, where rules, norms, and interactions between the individual and the environment require reconstruction, various challenges emerge in this process [14]. These challenges include shifting identity [14, 62], cultural and social adjustments [34], resource loss and reconstruction [17, 49], and mental health [50]. Among numerous studies on the transition process, resilience has been underscored, defined as the practices individuals employ to recover from disruptions during the transitional phase [37].

Numerous studies have found the various factors that influence the resilience of the transition, such as individual characteristics [33, 40, 48], social networks and community support [9, 36, 46], culture [61], and environmental and economic factors [35, 63]. A recurrent factor revealed by many studies is the positive influence of personal self-efficacy on the facilitation of positive adaptation

of people in changing situations [10, 53]. Such positive results have been observed in different demographic and occupation groups, such as nursing [59], and first-generation college students [12]. The effect of social support is equally significant, contributing to resilience [11, 58]. For example, the study by Udwan et al. [60] showed that various resources, including family, friends, organizations, and social networks, positively affected the participation of refugees in digital activities, further enhancing health promotion and identity management. Strolin-Goltzman et al. [55] emphasized the positive relationship and emotional connections in the academic context. Their results showed that such connections and support from the people who accompany them could ease their transition from high school to university. This finding resonates with a study by Süss et al. [56], which presented the importance of well-being for individuals in the transitional phase.

Some studies specifically focused on the role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the process, revealing their positive effect on resilience [4]. The study by Haimson et al. [27] showed that people often turned to social technologies to help navigate shifting identities and networks and find support and resources in their life transitions, such as physical movement [31], relationships [26, 30], and job changes [8, 13]. The research by Marwick and Boyd [37] investigated how technology played a crucial role for people who experienced environmental disruption. Their results showed that technology provided alternative resources that allowed them to rebuild, adapt, and establish new routines or action patterns in their professional and personal lives. Further studies showed that ICTs could provide public participation support and a digital network for resilience, which can help provide relief assistance and navigate the new social structures [42, 43].

Technology and social media have been widely used to improve transition resilience among various groups, which manifests itself in various ways, such as aiding identity development and providing social support. For example, a study by Blaising and Dabbish [7] examined the transitions of 27 freelancers to online platforms, revealing their self-directed socialization using a combination of online and offline resources to address challenges. Semaan et al. [54] studied the veteran re-integration's ICT usage in transition resilience. Their findings showed that they used ICTs to cultivate identity awareness, such as understanding unfamiliar societal rules and norms while re-integrating into civil society. Similarly, Ardianto [4] conducted a study centered on resilience and social media usage within urban farming communities. On the other side, Garg [23] further investigated collaborative technological practices for transition resilience employing the family resilience framework, situating the COVID-19 case. By interviewing 22 Asian Indian parent-teen dyads in the U.S., several ways that technology helps to contribute to family resilience were revealed, including sharing information and emotions and socializing and mobilizing virtual groups. The results identified the importance of social media in enhancing resilience by developing absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities.

Inspired by this line of inquiry, the current research focuses on understanding the transition resilience of a previously understudied group – stay-at-home moms (SAHMs). SAHMs have their unique challenges and social contexts compared to those explored in previous work, and our research aims to fill this gap by understanding what challenges they face in their transition process from home to work or school, and how social media works during the transition process.

## 2.2 Stay-at-home-mom, Identities, and Online Communities

Much of the literature on HCI has examined parenting within online communities, particularly mothers' engagement. The results of Sarvas et al. [51] showed that mothers, particularly those with young children, were more likely to use online platforms to communicate with others with similar experiences. Similarly, a study by Ammari et al. [1] investigated the implications of parents sharing personal information about their children online on social networking sites, i.e., sharenting. Their results showed that mothers were more likely to share content about their children than fathers,

which could potentially cause harms [39]. Located in the role of parenting, the identity of being a mother or father provides common ground, leading to similar experiences and shared emotional connections. This commonality allows such groups to discuss various topics, such as parenting, family, time arrangements, and child development [22, 64]. Schoenebeck [52] investigated the online discussions within the mothers' online community based on 51 million posts and comments from the website Youbemom.com. Their results showed that family and time were the two most popular topics among mothers in the online community, echoing the findings from Archer [3]'s study.

Some literature on fathers' online engagement presented similar patterns with mothers, such as information-seeking and social support. For example, fathers discussed fatherhood challenges online and also looked for encouragement [15, 19]. On the other hand, by employing in-depth interviews, Jensen et al. [32] particularly examined fathers' online engagement within the context of shifting caregiving and societal roles. Their findings showed that Danish fathers discussed their experiences of stereotype-based discrimination and legal inequities. The study also observed the strong political interest of fathers in collective action to support changes in social structures to ensure gender-equal child caretaker rights.

Much literature has particularly examined stay-at-home parents, including their challenges and online engagement. Compared to working parents, stay-at-home parents have been found to spend more time on childcare and housework [21]. Ammari and Schoenebeck [2] specifically interviewed 18 participants in the U.S. to examine their use of the Internet and social networks as stay-at-home dads (SAHDs). Their findings highlighted the use of social networks by SAHDs as a means to seek social support and overcome isolation during off-line care experiences.

In addition, studies have shown that many stay-at-home moms intend to return to the workforce after a chosen period exclusively for caring. Such decisions often arise from economic necessities, a desire for intellectual challenge, and being asked to seek a manageable balance in their lives [21]. The transition between a stay-at-home mom and work has been shown to be a challenge for most stay-at-home parents, which is influenced by career breaks and child care [25]. The study conducted by Schoenebeck [52] observed that "work-parenting demands" as a new pattern in the online parenting community. Existing work showed that mothers faced both penalties and costs when trying to combine their roles in motherhood and employment, particularly when reentering the workplace after a child-related break [25]. Previous researchers emphasized that the work and skills developed during full-time maternity were not recognized by stakeholders in the business sector, which could lead to wage penalties, stigmas, and discrimination during reentry. Furthermore, Helford et al. [29] surveyed 1,025 stay-at-home parents, investigating perceptions of staying-home experience and workforce re-entry. Their results revealed that stay-at-home parents were concerned about the workforce re-entry, which was affected by their satisfaction with parenting arrangements. For stay-at-home parents, mothers are more likely to be concerned about their career progress after re-entering the workplace, indicating that they perceive staying home as hurting their careers more than fathers. Partridge [44]'s findings echoed such results, which showed that mothers who return to the workforce after an extended time away tended to have lower self-confidence and concerns about rejection and discrimination.

Existing work has studied the transition of a stay-at-home parent reentering the workplace, including the reasons, feelings, and challenges upon reentry. However, limited studies have investigated social media usage during their transition and how it can help their resilience in transitioning between different roles.

### 3 Methodology

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To understand social media's role in SAHMs' transition experiences, we conducted remote semi-structured interviews with 15 users who have successfully navigated this transition. Next, we introduce the methodological details.

### 3.1 Participants Recruitment

We recruited participants from RedNote and Douyin (Chinese TikTok), for two reasons. First, both platforms are among mainland China's most popular social media platforms, having more than 10 billion and 3 billion monthly active users, respectively in 2023. While Douyin is popular across all age groups in China, RedNote's user demographics are skewed towards young females, all aligning closely with our target populations – those who used to be full-time SAHMs but are experiencing or have experienced the transition to the workplace. Second, before we settled on the target platforms, we investigated all major social media platforms in China (e.g., Weibo, Zhihu, TikTok, etc.) by searching SAHM-related posts. We found that other platforms did not provide enough data (e.g., very few posts) or data with good quality (e.g., inactive posts from a few years ago). As a result, we settled on RedNote and Douyin, on which we could find abundant SAHM-related posts of good quality. This phenomenon, by itself, is also interesting to us as through this pre-study, it is not clear what characteristics make RedNote and Douyin more popular among SAHMs compared to other platforms.

To create a more diverse set of participants who are experiencing or have experienced different types of transitions, we started the recruitment process by searching for relevant posts, then manually contacted the users who posted those posts. We first identified a list of relevant keywords, such as "SAHMs back to work/school," "moms apply to schools," "SAHMs experiences", and so on. Using these keywords, we manually searched for relevant posts. We then carefully examined the search results to make sure that the content was relevant to the experiences of the SAHMs. Then, we sent direct invitation messages to the mothers who made these posts. During this process, we followed the policy of two platforms on sending direct messages and only sent a maximum of 10 messages per calendar day. We kept recruiting participants until saturation was reached in our interviews. In total, we successfully recruited 15 participants. The average age of interviewees was 31.13 (range = 26-37). Table 1 shows the participants' demographic information. The interviews were conducted between August 2023 and January 2024.

It is worth noting that our recruitment process also allows us to mitigate the potential biases caused by the search algorithms used on these social media platforms. Typically, the search algorithms may show biases towards content creators who make more posts or are more popular. Our process started with identifying relevant posts (rather than content creators), allowing us to identify different kinds of posts regardless of their creators or their popularity. As shown in Table 1, the number of participants' followers and the total number of likes on their content cover a wide range, indicating our participants' varying popularity levels on these platforms.

### 3.2 Interview Protocol

The interview protocol consists of three major sections. In the first section, participants were asked for background information, including their demographic information, family situation, SAHMs experiences, and current position in returning to work or school. Then, in the second section, participants were asked to discuss their challenges during their transition. They were encouraged to share specific examples, especially those they encountered. In the final section, participants were asked about their usage of RedNote and Douyin, and why they picked specific social media platforms rather than others. The complete interview protocol can be found in the Appendix A.1. For every question, we asked the interviewee to provide detailed examples they had experienced.



*Translation of the post content:*

I am a 35-year-old mother who took a two-year left from work to focus on childcare as a SAHM. I hold a master's degree in computer science from a top-tier Chinese university and have also studied abroad.

Aiming to re-enter the workplace, I have actively sought job opportunities for the past two weeks, but have not obtained any interview invitation. How hard it re-entering the workforce! Nevertheless, I am determined to try my best. Fighting!  
 #Curseof35 #SAHMReEnterWorkplace

Fig. 1. An example post from RedNote



*Translation of video description and text above video:*

Welcome to the vlog documenting a day in the life of a mom born in 1998, who is returning to the workplace

#DocumentingRealLife #WorkingMoms  
 #DailyLifeForElegantMoms#Vlog #WomenOfPower

Fig. 2. An example video from Douyin

Each interview lasted around 60 minutes, and every interviewee was provided with CNY 50 (USD 7.20) for participation.

**3.3 Data Collection and Analysis**

All participants were asked to sign a consent form before they could participate in the interviews. All interviews were conducted remotely using Tencent Meetings. We audio-recorded all interview sessions and then transcribed them for data analysis using Tencent Meeting, one of China's leading cloud-based conferencing platforms. For data analysis, we employed an open coding approach, which was followed by a thematic analysis. Two researchers coded two transcriptions together at the sentence level to generate an initial code book. During the coding process, they discussed the coding results to ensure they had a similar and consistent understanding. Using the initial code book, the two researchers split the rest of the transcriptions, and each coded a half. Upon

	Age	Education	Years as SAHM	Prior Occupation	Children?	Platform	No. of Followers	No. of Likes
P1	36	UG	7	Teacher	2	RedNote	294	5277
P2	37	UG	2-3	Fanatical	1	RedNote	47	215
P3	35	UG	2	Unemployed	1	RedNote	62	580
P4	35	G	2-3	Internet Operations	1	RedNote	1533	202k
P5	31	UG	3	Entrepreneur	2	RedNote	551	112k
P6	33	HS	2-3	Sales	2	RedNote	38	43
P7	29	UG	4	Accountant	1	RedNote	53	253
P8	33	G	10	Unemployed	1	RedNote	3566	6696
P9	26	UG	2-3	Advertising	1	RedNote	76	638
P10	29	UG	1	Teacher	1	Douyin	471	3299
P11	30	UG	1-2	Design	1	Douyin	558	13k
P12	27	G	2-3	Daycare teacher	1	Douyin	34	238
P13	31	UG	5	Journalism	2	Douyin	2548	39k
P14	29	HS	6	Nursery	2	Douyin	2922	5795
P15	26	HS	2-3	Daycare teacher	1	Douyin	5	18

Table 1. Summary of Participants' Demographics. "U" refers to "Undergraduate"; "G" refers to "Graduate"; "HS" refers to "High School". The "No. of Followers" and "No. of Likes" represent the total followers and likes shown on our participants' profile page at the time of the research.

completion, they switched their transcriptions and double-checked the other half. They discussed the codes as they double-checked, resolved any disagreements during the discussion, and reached a complete agreement. In this process, they updated the code book as needed. As the two coders achieved full agreement, intercoder reliability is not needed [38]. Because the original interviews were in Chinese, all quotes were associated with themes and were translated from Chinese to English.

It should be noted that the leading researcher of this project is a stay-at-home mom herself who has returned to school. As a result, the data collection and data analysis processes were well-informed by her experiences and observations throughout the years as a SAHM.

## 4 Results

Our findings focus on how SAHMs make life transitions and how they use social media to support such transitions. The results demonstrate SAHMs' challenges in managing multiple identities and how social media platforms support them in making transitions, as well as how their usage of social media changes over time as their identities shift.

### 4.1 Multiple Identities for SAHMs

One key finding from our interviews relates to SAHMs' multiple identities at different stages when staying at home and how SAHMs manage these identities.

**4.1.1 SAHMs as Full-time Moms: Challenges.** The first obvious identity for SAHMs is full-time moms. Research from social sciences has documented moms' experiences when they stay home full-time and their main responsibility is taking care of the children and families [18, 47]. Yet, our study reveals several challenges faced by moms when they stay at home. Some challenges have led them to make a transition to a new lifestyle, yet their identity as SAHMs continues to introduce new challenges during their transition. We summarize the key challenges below.

#### Challenge-1: Lack of Financial Independence

As SAHMs who typically did not have a source of income, they also lacked financial independence, which was the most common challenge among all participants. This setup reflects the traditional family structure in Chinese culture, in which one of the family members (typically the male)

supports the family financially while others focus on matters within the family. Yet, our participants demonstrated severe anxiety due to the lack of financial independence. As P3 shared,

*“I experienced anxiety and a sense of loss of control, particularly regarding my financial situation. This was because I found that none of my living expenses were earned by myself, such as the costs of taking children out.”* (P3)

As shown in the later section, the lack of financial independence became the main motivation for SAHMs to make a life transition and seek employment opportunities. We will present the details in Section 4.2.

### **Challenge-2: Social Stigma**

Another common challenge among our participants related to the social stigma they have experienced. In many cases, the social stigma was closely associated with their identity as SAHMs and the fact that they were perceived as not having a “traditional full-time job.” It should be noted that, although more and more people in Chinese culture have started to realize that being a full-time mom is also considered a full-time job, many others still have different opinions. For example, P12 described her experience with one of her best friends before and after she became a SAHM,

*“One of my close friends before began to distance herself from me after I became a SAHM. She thought that I had an easy and happy SAHM life, (not having to work outside the home but enjoying the life) such as traveling with kids. She felt her life as a working woman to be more stressful and difficult(, in comparison to what she imagined my life was like).”* (P12)

Some SAHMs, such as P10, even believed that society often had an unfair expectation for SAHMs - they need to be able to take care of their families, yet at the same time, they should also have their careers. P10 referred to such expectations as “a distorted interpretation of egalitarianism” between males and females. In some other cases, SAHMs also received social stigma during their transition to seek a new career. Many SAHMs were “stereotyped” because of their identity as full-time moms. For example, some SAHMs were refused job opportunities because the employers believed that they would not have enough time or energy to handle the daily job responsibilities. P1 explained her experiences when applying for a new position,

*“I received interview invitations from three schools, and two among them asked me during the interview: ‘Considering that you have two kids and one of them is so young, do you have enough energy (to handle both the daily job responsibilities and parenting)?’ ”* (P1)

### **Challenge-3: Disadvantaged Job Market for SAHMs**

As full-time moms, SAHMs also faced a job market that was not welcoming to them. As a context, in China, it is a common practice to ask for job candidates’ personal information, such as their ages, marital status, family planning, etc. Oftentimes, such information plays a crucial role in employers’ hiring decisions. Such an environment often puts SAHMs in a disadvantaged position as job candidates because of their life stage. For example, many employers in China look to hire job candidates who are 35 years old or younger (a requirement that is typically specified in job ads), mostly due to their anticipated productivity as employees. This also means that anyone over 35 years old would be in a less advantageous position during their job search, with the possibility of being discriminated against occasionally. P3 shared her experience regarding “the curse of 35”,

*“In addition to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the most significant challenge is the ‘curse of 35’, in other words, the ‘35-year-old cutoff’ in recruitment. Many companies in China do not hire women who are 35 or above. Some even explicitly state on job search websites that they only consider female candidates under the age of 35.”* (P3)

This phenomenon may have a significant impact on SAHMs, as most SAHMs were over 35 years old when they decided to restart their career. While some companies may offer programs that specifically target at female employees who are ready to return to work (e.g., Microsoft, Accenture), such programs are currently not popular in China.

**4.1.2 SAHMs as Content Creators: First Step Towards Financial Independence.** Because of the challenges mentioned above, many SAHMs among our participants turned to social media and became content creators to make a living. Aside from the financial reasons, many SAHMs also reported how social media provided emotional support as they spent more time on it.

Among all social media platforms in China, RedNote has been the most popular one due to its popularity among young, highly educated females. As full-time moms, being content creators on RedNote provides them an opportunity to earn money. While some participants mentioned that they intentionally started to use RedNote with expectations to monetize it, several other participants noted that their income from RedNote emerged organically. They noted that RedNote offered a “relatively low bar for monetization.” For example, P1 only had less than 180 followers, but she has already received promotion requests from two manufacturers. P12 further shared that many SAHMs were making a living via social media platforms and briefly explained,

*“As a SAHM, reentering the workforce can be challenging after being away for several years. Upon examining and learning from the experiences of many others, I found that many SAHMs who seek financial independence typically decide to make money as content creators on social media platforms. Many SAHMs are actually doing it now. Or some others might start their own small businesses, which require little investment, such as a bakery.”* (P12)

With a clear path to monetization, some participants shared their expectations, hoping that RedNote could provide additional support to SAHM and help them earn income. For example, P4 shared her thoughts,

*“I think the platform can offer some kind of classes to teach stay-at-home-moms to, for example, take great videos of different products, or something like that, and I think it should be something very official... probably provide stay-at-home-moms more traffic so that they have more exposure ... I’ve heard that this should be something fairly easy and they basically won’t have to sacrifice anything.”* (P4)

While P4 shared her desire for more traffic to incentivize additional income, we do believe that such actions may cause further issues, such as inequities among other marginalized populations, such as older adults, children, or people from remote areas. We will unpack this point further in the discussion.

**4.1.3 SAHMs as Independent Women: Social Media Assists the Creation of a New Character.** Being a content creator provides SAHMs not only a source of income and emotional support but also an opportunity for further identity change. Many participants reported that the additional income they brought via being content creators enhanced their sense of financial independence, which further led to a new character as independent women. For example, P4 illustrated her point,

*“Make your own money... No matter how big or small your career is, only when you have your own work can you maintain a sense of self and achieve independence. I think that a SAHM does not have her own identity within the family. To put simply, a SAHM’s time, energy, and plans are entirely dedicated to family matters, leaving no room for herself. However, only when you go out (to work) and allocate some time and energy to your own endeavors, whether in a small clerk position or administrative role, you are doing something for yourself. This is what I consider a fulfilled life for an independent individual. Otherwise, life can be challenging when one person has no room for herself.”* (P4)

## 4.2 Evolving Motivations for Social Media Usage

The other major theme that emerged from our interviews relates to SAHMs’ evolving motivations for using social media. We found it particularly interesting that SAHMs have changing motivations as they were at different stages during their transition from full-time moms to their new careers. The various motivations at different stages helped SAHMs to become financially independent,

socially connected, and eventually, be willing to pay back to the community by sharing their spirits and experiences. We present the details below.

**4.2.1 Financial Incentives as Main Motivation Prior to Transitions.** As mentioned above, financial incentives remain the key motivation for SAHMs to turn to social media. Interestingly, we noticed that financial incentives were considered as a motivation only at the early stage of SAHMs' transition or before they made up their mind to seek full-time employment. SAHMs expected a satisfactory level of income as content creators, and many of them stated that should the income be sufficient, they would continue doing so given the flexibility in such positions. Yet in reality, making a satisfactory level of income as content creators has been extremely difficult, which eventually became a driving force for SAHMs to seek alternative ways to increase income, such as finding a full-time job in real life. Most SAHMs faced the challenges of monetizing the traffic to their social media channel. For example, P1 shared,

*"Most of my content revolves around my daily life and parenting, such as tips on purchasing baby food. However, I am still exploring (how to become a TikTok creator and make money). I have noticed that being a mom or parenting influencer who stands out is highly competitive and fierce... It appears that the practical advice I shared on TikTok has not drawn the expected attention."* (P1)

In some other cases, SAHMs did not have enough resources to fully understand and engage with the monetization mechanisms on social media. For example, P10 was supposed to receive support from a third-party agency to increase her exposure on social media, but her actual experiences turned out to be very different,

*"They invited me to sign an agreement and join in a trade union, where creators' earnings are divided between the union and the creator. Although they assured me that joining this union would provide some traffic support (for my content), that did not happen. Actually, joining the union did not make any changes to me, and I continued to share independently without others' help. Finally, I did not make any money on Douyin, and the one-year contract with this union expired without any impact on me."* (P10)

**4.2.2 Finding Peer Support During Transition Through Mom-Centric Social Groups.** As SAHMs started to make their way to a new stage of their lives, their motivation of using social media also evolved. Their identity as SAHMs and their unique transition journey could make it challenging for SAHMs to find others who have the same trajectory when they decided to restart their career. Therefore, they found it difficult to find support and understanding from the original social circle around them, while social media platforms, such as RedNote, provided a platform where a mom-centric community has formed organically, connecting them with others who share the same transition experiences. Many participants commented that they were able to meet other moms who were in a similar situation, either as full-time moms or as someone who was ready to return to work. As a result, it has become much easier to receive peer support.

Some moms mentioned that sharing content online had become a positive stimulus for them. This would happen when they posted something on RedNote and later on, they found out that their posts may have received responses from other moms who had similar experiences and learned something from the post. In the following example, P8 used other people's experiences as a motivation for herself. She mentioned that if other moms could complete the project, she would be able to do that too:

*"I did a lot of searches on other SAHM. I feel like if they can get up at 4 am and do stuff, you know, if you see they can do it, you know there is a community with a positive atmosphere, which makes you believe in you [that you can also do it]. I think that's the most important part."* (P8)

P6 shared a similar experience, suggesting that the positive experiences from other SAHMs may serve as an empowerment for her to power through any difficulties she was experiencing:

*“I can feel that they are also anxious but at the same time, positive. I read their post, and I can feel that positivity, then I will be more positive as well. Every time I read them before I sleep, I feel empowered.” (P6)*

**4.2.3 Altruistic Sharing After Going Back to Work.** Practically, since making a living by sharing their experiences on social media is difficult, we expected that most SAHMs would stop sharing after a while or when they were able to secure a more stable job. Interestingly, all participants, especially those who successfully transitioned to other full-time jobs, decided to continue to share their experiences on social media because they would like to inspire other SAHMs with their own journeys. P5 described this process as obtaining a “sense of accomplishment”,

*“(Whenever I made a post about my SAHM experience,) I would receive many many comments and DM about it. Once I received a message from a mom who said that my post helped her a lot. It’s like when you share something, there are always others who can respond to my posts, and I indeed feel like I was helping others. That sense of accomplishment makes me want to stay on the platform. I’m part of the community.” (P5)*

For some other participants, providing emotional support to other SAHMs also brings a feeling of satisfaction. As P11 illustrated,

*“I feel that I did something meaningful and valuable, and it does not make me feel tired and struggling like working for companies... I hope that one day when others see my shared experiences on social media platforms, they will feel that (these posts are) valuable and helpful to them... Please do not be afraid and anxious. If I, a SAHM, can successfully return to the workplace, they can also make it and find (a job).” (P11)*

### 4.3 Negative Impacts on SAHMs Due to Social Media Usage

The findings thus far have focused on how social media platforms like RedNote and Chinese TikTok supported SAHMs and helped them build resilience during their life transitions. Yet, it should be noted that many SAHMs also had negative experiences on social media, causing unnecessary psychological burdens and emotional fluctuation which negatively impact their transitions. One type of experience mentioned by a few SAHMs related to ill-intended comments after SAHMs’ posts. For example, P8 shared her experience when she made a post about her successful return to school:

*“They[ill-intended users] would jump out and say that I am bragging, how could it be possible for someone to do this [returning school while being a SAHM]. In fact, I did include a few other things in my post, such as my transcript, my offer letter, etc. Yet, they didn’t look at them. They looked at the title, and then started to comment on my post, saying that I was causing anxiety to other people and it was impossible for me to do so. They questioned the authenticity and the usefulness of my post.” (P8)*

In a sense, some people in the RedNote community have formed a stereotype of SAHMs. No matter what SAHMs do, the stereotype always exists, causing unfair treatment towards SAHMs. Such gestures will result in the negative experiences that SAHMs unfortunately have to go through. Another type of negative experience comes from SAHMs themselves. Some SAHMs acknowledged that, despite the support they were able to receive from RedNote, when they started to pay more attention to it, they may started to feel extra pressure. As P2 explained:

*“Some platforms... when you are paying extra attention to some posts, those attentions will in turn translate into an extra burden for yourself, because your thoughts can be easily influenced by those posts. For example, when some SAHMs complained about their job-seeking experiences and how they were treated differently, you are able to empathize with that feeling because you would be very likely to experience the same thing yourself. That, sometimes, is very hard to deal with.” (P2)*

As shown in this example, SAHMs' ability to empathize with other moms may unexpectedly cause negative emotions in them, indicating the need for better emotion-supporting mechanisms for SAHMs from the platform's perspective. We will further unpack it in the discussion section.

## 5 Discussion

Through our study, we identified a number of challenges that SAHMs may face during their transition, factors that may impact their decision, and their motivation to use social media platforms as a pathway to assist with their transition and resilience building. In this section, we further unpack SAHMs's unique challenges and needs based on our findings and why using RedNote as a pathway could work, then draw design implications.

### 5.1 Reflection of Novel Findings

Recently, research has started to investigate the experiences of SAHMs related to their life, work, and how they navigate some challenges. For example, literature has suggested that many SAHMs desired to be bloggers while being full-time moms. Archer's study found that especially appreciated the flexibility and autonomy as bloggers, which enabled them to fit into their children's schedules perfectly [3]. Pettigrew et al. [45] also found that SAHMs used blogs as a way to connect with others. Zhou et al. [65]'s preliminary research also suggested financial incentives as a motivation for SAHMs to use social media.

Our study, instead of the general experiences of SAHMs, focused on how SAHMs transitioned back to work or school in the Chinese context. Such a transition has become a major theme in China due to several reasons. One reason is the biases and prejudice against SAHMs in society generally, pushing SAHMs to seek a different lifestyle and potentially become more independent. This shift is also partially due to the updates to the old "one-child policy". While the new policy allows families to have multiple children, it also creates new financial burdens and other possible issues. These factors, on the one hand, are calling for a change in SAHMs' family responsibility. On the other hand, however, our findings are bringing questions on what the society should do to better support SAHMs to make the transition successful. Our research investigated this phenomenon in depth and revealed the practices and challenges faced by SAHMs during the transition. Our results showed the interesting and unique patterns in SAHMs' identity change as they went through different stages of transition and revealed how the identity change corresponded and, at the same time, was supported by their motivations and practices of using social media.

In the next section, we discussed the implications of our results and further examine several important aspects of the SAHMs community.

### 5.2 Emotional Regulation and Needs of SAHMs

One major theme that emerged from both studies related to SAHMs' emotional management when they decided to restart their career. Our data suggests three main factors that contribute to the surging emotional needs of SAHMs. These factors are either related to how SAHMs perceive themselves or deeply connected to the social and cultural background in China. These factors further pointed to their unique needs regarding how to effectively navigate through their emotions during their transition.

*5.2.1 Societal reasons.* China has been in the middle of rapid development in recent years. Part of the growth is attributed to long work hours and high expectations from employers. For example, a trendy work style in mainland China is called "9-9-6", meaning that one is expected to work from 9 am in the morning to 9 pm at night for six days a week. With such expectations from most employers, job applicants are expected to be adaptive in order to get a job. As a result, certain

populations, due to their physical or other constraints, are in a less advantageous position when applying for employment. For example, young females who are not married are naturally less competitive in the job market as they may need to take maternity leave after they start their jobs. Similarly, many SAHMs are facing a similar issue because they are stereotyped as someone who cannot fully devote themselves to work due to childcare needs. In some cases, as shown in our results, some employers may have unrealistic expectations of what SAHMs should achieve professionally even during their time away from their career.

In addition, many employment opportunities (particularly the ones in state-owned companies or government agencies) and education opportunities in China have strict age constraints, typically around the age of 35. That is, if one is over the age of 35, he or she is no longer eligible for many positions or qualified to return to school. Yet, for many SAHMs, when their children reached school age, they had already passed 35 years old. As a result, their efforts to return to work or school have become even more challenging.

These societal factors largely contribute to SAHMs' anxiety. However, other people who are not part of the SAHMs community may not empathize with their feelings as many of them are not in the same position. As shown in our data, one effective way to regulate such anxiety is through peer support - a mom-centric community would warrant a group of audience who also share the same issues, and collectively, it becomes easier to navigate around these challenges.

*5.2.2 Cultural reasons.* In traditional Chinese culture, women are expected to stay at home and take care of the family while the men make a living. However, in modern Chinese society, it becomes increasingly difficult for a family to run on only one family member's income. In fact, several participants in Study 2 indicated that one of the main reasons why they started to use RedNote is the additional income for their families.

However, such expectations become problematic when SAHMs also return to work because culturally speaking, they would be expected to have a job and, at the same time, take good care of the family. Otherwise, regardless of how many achievements they have earned at work, they would be labeled as an "incompetent mom" or a "disqualified wife". Because of that, many SAHMs in our studies expected jobs that offer sufficient flexibility so that they can still balance their work needs and family needs. In some cases, they would need to sacrifice their preferred career path in exchange for the desired flexibility (e.g., not being able to work in the finance industry due to the high-strength workload).

### 5.3 Collective Emotional Labor

One interesting phenomenon we observed relates to SAHMs' usage of RedNote. Our results showed that SAHMs used RedNote for a variety of purposes, including monetizing their content sharing and creating impact. Maintaining a mature social network and trying to monetize it may require a significant amount of effort from SAHMs, echoing the notion of "emotional labor [24]." Emotional labor refers to efforts to manage one's emotions when certain expressions are required or expected [24]. For example, people who post on social media may need to hide their true emotions during live-streaming sessions as they need to show a positive attitude to their audience.

However, during the interview, none of our participants considered posting content as burdensome, and all of them enjoyed the process of sharing their experiences, providing help, and attracting attention from other SAHMs. That is, even though many SAHMs were trying to boost their social media presence, they did not consider their effort as emotional labor. Considering the traditional stereotype and high social expectations of SAHMs in China, we refer to this phenomenon as "collective emotional labor", i.e., the emotional labor associated with SAHMs was distributed across multiple entities and stakeholders, and as a result, has minimum impact on SAHMs.

For example, many SAHMs in our study commented that their posts were expected to be more negative as they shared their challenges during their transition on RedNote. When they shared their experiences of successfully restarting their career, their posts were expected to be more positive. Most SAHMs needed to share their authentic feelings and experiences, which were already powerful enough to have an impact on others. In a sense, the community on RedNote helped reduce emotional labor on SAHMs. Similarly, other entities, such as their families, spouses, and friends, collectively help reduce the emotional labor associated with SAHMs. As a result, instead of being exploited due to the use of RedNote, SAHMs were able to have positive experiences with RedNote and use it as a pathway to build resilience.

#### 5.4 Opportunities for Supporting SAHMs' Transition

Our findings suggested a number of unique needs and challenges that Chinese SAHMs faced when they tried to restart their career. Based on our findings, we discuss the following opportunities to support SAHMs.

*5.4.1 Advocating a mom-centric community.* Our participants came to RedNote rather than other social media platforms mostly because they were able to find other SAHMs who were also at the same life stage. We have observed how a mom-centric community could boost SAHMs' confidence and assist with their life transitions. Yet, RedNote users are skewed toward young, highly educated females, meaning that most other SAHMs in China who are outside of this demographic group are likely not on RedNote. We advocate for a dedicated, mom-centric community that can be accessed by a broader scope of SAHMs (e.g., those from low socio-economic status groups or remote areas in China).

*5.4.2 Career Mentoring and Services for SAHMs.* Our results suggest that SAHMs were in need of targeted career mentoring, especially when they have been away from their career for several years. Such mentoring should focus on the unique needs of SAHMs, which would include not only the required skills for certain positions, but also other soft skills, such as balancing work and families, maintaining reasonable expectations for work, and handling interpersonal relationships at work. These soft skills are critical to many SAHMs, considering the fact that they have been in a completely different environment (i.e., their families) for some time. Similarly, it is also critical to provide SAHMs with necessary career services to reboot their career, such as job-related information, mockup interviews, etc. So far, career mentoring and services that are specifically targeted at SAHMs do not exist in China. Given the large and rapidly growing population, we believe that it will become essential to provide appropriate career training and help SAHMs restart their career.

## 6 Conclusion

Stay-at-home moms (SAHMs) have become a rapidly growing population among the younger generations in China. This paper focuses on understanding SAHMs utilize social media to build resilience and return to their career. Through an interview study with 15 SAHMs, we further investigated how SAHMs used RedNote to assist their transition. This paper contributes the first study that focuses on stay-at-home moms, reveals their needs and unique challenges for their return to professional life, and presents opportunities to support their transition.

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## A Appendix

### A.1 Interview Protocol in English

#### Demographic Questions

- What is your age?
- What is your educational background?
- How long have you been a stay-at-home mom?
- What was your occupation before being a stay-at-home mom?
- How many children do you have?

#### Experience of Being a Stay-At-Home Mom

- Why did you decide to become a stay-at-home mom?
- Have you experienced any changes in your life after becoming a stay-at-home mom? Could you talk about some examples?
- How do the people around you perceive your decision to become a stay-at-home mom?

#### Decisions to Return to Work or School

- What are the specific reasons that motivated you to consider returning to the workforce or school?
- Could you talk about any steps that you are currently taking or have taken to prepare for your return to the workforce or school?

## Challenges and Resilience

- Have you encountered any challenges while preparing for your return to the workforce or school? If so, could you talk about some examples?
- How did you overcome the challenges you mentioned above?
- Did you experience any changes during your preparation for the return to the workforce or school? If so, could you talk about some examples?
- Are/Were your family members supportive of your return to the workforce or school? If so, how?

*For those who have not yet returned to the workforce or school*

- What are your expectations for your life after returning to the workforce or school?

*For those who have already returned to the workforce or school*

- Could you share something about your experience after returning to the workforce or school?
- Have you encountered any difficulties when returning to the workforce or school? If so, how did you overcome them?

## Use of Social Media Platform ("RedNote")

*Information Seeking*

- What kind of information do you read on the platform during the process of preparing for returning to the workforce or school? Could you provide some examples?
- Do you think the use of "RedNote" has had any positive impact on your life? If so, how?
- Do you think the use of "RedNote" has had any negative impact on your life? If so, how?
- Besides using "RedNote", have you used other social media platforms in the process? What are the differences between using different platforms based on your experience?

*Information Sharing*

- As a content creator on "RedNote", what types of content have you shared on this platform?
- What specific reasons motivated you to share these contents on "RedNote"?
- Have you had any positive experiences as a content creator on "RedNote"? Could you provide some examples?
- Have you had any negative experiences as a content creator on "RedNote"? Could you provide some examples?
- Besides "RedNote", have you shared content on other social media platforms? Do you tailor the types of content to fit the specific platform?

## Expectation of Support and Opportunities

- What kind of help do you think would be beneficial during your return to school or work?
- What aspects of our society do you think can support the stay-at-home mom's return to the workplace or school?

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