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Understanding ADHD in the Age of Social Media: A Qualitative Study on User-Generated Narratives and Public Perceptions in China

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Abstract: With the growing public consciousness surrounding mental health, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) has emerged as a prominent and frequently discussed topic within Chinese social media environments. This study explores the ways in which ADHD is represented, interpreted, and negotiated through user-generated content (UGC) across major online platforms. Drawing on ten semi-structured interviews with high-school students, the research adopts the perspectives of Social Constructionism and Framing Theory to examine how digital discourse, emotional narratives, and peer interaction collectively shape the public's understanding of ADHD. The findings reveal that social media acts as a double-edged medium: on the one hand, it amplifies awareness, encourages empathy, and provides individuals with a space for self-expression and support; on the other hand, it often perpetuates misconceptions, oversimplified narratives, and self-diagnosis trends that blur the line between clinical accuracy and popular discourse. This dual function underscores the complex relationship between digital culture and health communication in contemporary China. The study highlights the need for more inclusive, scientifically grounded communication strategies that bridge the gap between emotional engagement and medical literacy. By integrating evidence-based knowledge with culturally sensitive storytelling, health communicators, educators, and policymakers can cultivate a more informed, responsible, and compassionate public dialogue on ADHD and mental health more broadly.

Keywords: ADHD; social media; user-generated content (UGC); social constructionism; framing theory; health communication

Published: 25 October 2025



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1. Introduction

1.1. Mental Health and the Rise of Digital Discourse

In recent years, as public conversations surrounding mental health have become increasingly open and social media continues to expand its cultural reach, psychological topics have found renewed vitality in digital spaces. Within this expanding environment of inclusiveness and attention to neurodiversity, individuals are becoming more willing to speak out-to share their personal experiences, seek empathy, and find comfort in collective understanding. Among the numerous mental health discussions emerging online, few have attracted as much attention and engagement as Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

1.2. From Clinical Definition to Online Representation

Clinically, ADHD is defined as a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by persistent patterns of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity that interfere with everyday functioning. However, on social media, the term has evolved beyond its medical

origins and entered the sphere of cultural interpretation. On platforms such as Red, TikTok, and Weibo, thousands of posts tagged with "ADHD" appear daily. A quick review of content on Red reveals nearly two hundred popular posts with more than one thousand likes each, about half of which have been uploaded in the past six months. These posts are rarely authored by medical professionals; instead, they come from ordinary users who narrate their own experiences, often in the form of short videos, memes, or diary-style captions. Algorithmic recommendation systems further amplify such content, transforming personal reflections into shared narratives that circulate widely and shape collective perceptions.

1.3. Research Focus and Theoretical Framework

The ADHD discourse online is remarkably diverse. Some posts describe the process of diagnosis, therapy, or coping strategies; others focus on disseminating accessible scientific knowledge; while many use humor, quizzes, or aesthetically curated "day-in-the-life" videos to make the topic relatable and emotionally engaging. This diversity increases the visibility of ADHD in public discussions but simultaneously renders its meaning more ambiguous. Because certain ADHD-related behaviors-such as distraction, forgetfulness, or impulsive decision-making-can resemble everyday traits, many users engage in self-diagnosis or casually identify with the term as a personality label. In response, other voices online challenge this trend, claiming that ADHD is being overused or even trivialized. These competing narratives reveal a deeper tension in China's emerging digital health discourse: the difficulty of distinguishing between medicalized understanding and popular reinterpretation within the participatory, fast-paced logic of social media.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates how user-generated content (UGC) concerning ADHD on Chinese social media contributes to shaping public understanding of the disorder. Specifically, it asks whether online discussions genuinely foster awareness, empathy, and inclusion-or whether they contribute to misunderstanding, stereotyping, and the dilution of clinical accuracy. Drawing on ten semi-structured interviews with high-school students who actively participate in online discussions about ADHD, this study adopts Social Constructionism and Framing Theory as conceptual frameworks. Through examining how narratives about ADHD are created, circulated, and received in digital environments, the research seeks to illuminate the broader dynamics of how new media influences public consciousness of mental health in China, and how individuals negotiate the boundaries between being scientifically informed and socially understood in the digital age.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Clinical Understanding and Social Misconceptions of ADHD

The World Health Organization (WHO) classifies Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) as a mental disorder, although its precise etiology remains under ongoing investigation. Current research suggests that ADHD arises from a combination of genetic, psychological, and environmental factors, including hereditary predisposition, early psychological trauma, premature birth, brain injury, exposure to environmental toxins, and maternal use of tobacco or alcohol during pregnancy. While no definitive cure has been identified, symptoms can be effectively managed through medication, behavioral therapy, educational interventions, and structured guidance [1].

Despite these established medical insights, public understanding of ADHD remains fragmented and often distorted. The disorder is frequently reduced to a moral or behavioral flaw-associated with laziness, impulsiveness, or lack of discipline-rather than recognized as a neurodevelopmental condition. Popular discourse also perpetuates a number of misconceptions, such as the belief that ADHD affects only children, that anyone who struggles to concentrate must have it, or that it can be overcome through

personal effort or willpower alone. These misunderstandings not only hinder early diagnosis and treatment but also reinforce the stigma surrounding mental health, limiting opportunities for open and informed discussion.

2.2. Social Media as a Double-Edged Tool for Health Communication

Existing scholarship on the role of social media in health communication presents two main perspectives. The first emphasizes its potential as a positive force for disseminating professional knowledge to the public. Social media enables health institutions to extend their reach, share research findings, and engage directly with audiences in an accessible format [2]. In such contexts, professional experts typically manage verified accounts, ensuring that content remains scientifically accurate while benefiting from the speed, visual appeal, and interactivity of digital networks. Although most studies in this tradition focus on institutional communication rather than user-generated content (UGC), they highlight how social media's low access barriers and participatory nature make complex scientific concepts more approachable than conventional academic publications.

Conversely, the second perspective highlights the risks associated with uncontrolled information flows in participatory online spaces. When UGC dominates, misinformation can proliferate rapidly, particularly when emotionally charged content spreads faster than evidence-based material [3]. Algorithm-driven platforms like Facebook and similar social media systems have been shown to foster echo chambers, repeatedly exposing users to homogeneous viewpoints while filtering out opposing perspectives [4]. This selective exposure reinforces preexisting biases, polarizes audiences, and ultimately distorts collective understanding of health topics. Together, these studies reveal a central paradox of digital health communication: while social media democratizes access to information, it simultaneously magnifies the risk of distortion and oversimplification.

2.3. Cultural Contexts of Digital Health Communication in China

Within China, the dynamics of social media-based health communication are shaped by distinctive cultural norms and social values. Traditional attitudes toward mental illness often emphasize restraint and self-reliance, discouraging individuals from seeking professional help offline [5]. In this context, social media provides a relatively private and less stigmatized channel for individuals to access mental health information, share experiences, and even conduct preliminary self-assessment. Responding to this demand, some conscientious UGC creators produce scientifically grounded content, such as self-assessment tools and guidance on seeking professional consultation, thereby serving an informal yet important educational function.

At the same time, the emotional culture of Chinese social media emphasizes collective empathy and affective resonance. Posts that evoke personal vulnerability, perseverance, or shared struggle tend to attract higher levels of engagement and visibility. As previous research has shown, emotional storytelling has become a key strategy in effective online communication [6]. Under algorithmic reward systems that prioritize popularity and interaction, such content is often amplified across platforms. This environment incentivizes creators to favor emotional appeal over scientific precision, making ADHD narratives both more relatable and more prone to distortion. Consequently, the convergence of empathy-driven storytelling and algorithmic amplification profoundly shapes how ADHD is publicly framed, understood, and sometimes misunderstood in the Chinese digital landscape.

3. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

3.1. Social Constructionism: The Co-Creation of Meaning

The spread of ADHD-related content on Chinese social media can be meaningfully examined through the lens of Social Constructionism, which posits that knowledge and

social reality are co-created through communication, interaction, and shared cultural context [7]. From this perspective, the meaning of ADHD is not predetermined by medical discourse but is constantly reconstructed through users' narratives, online discussions, and the interpretive practices of digital communities. On platforms such as Red or Weibo, individuals articulate their lived experiences-describing moments of distraction, emotional struggle, or self-recognition-which collectively shape how ADHD is socially understood. These micro-level interactions form a dynamic process of meaning-making, turning private psychological experiences into public cultural knowledge.

3.2. Framing Theory: Shaping Perception Through Representation

Framing Theory further clarifies how the presentation and tone of information influence public perception [8]. The way ADHD is "framed" determines not only what is highlighted but also how audiences interpret and evaluate the disorder. Posts framed as educational or scientific often encourage understanding and empathy, helping viewers to perceive ADHD as a legitimate mental health issue. In contrast, humorous or self-diagnostic framings risk trivializing the condition, portraying it as a personality trait, lifestyle trend, or even social label detached from its clinical foundations. As previous studies have indicated, the emotional and stylistic framing of health-related information can significantly shape both audience trust and behavioral responses [9]. In this sense, digital platforms act as framing agents, influencing how knowledge about ADHD is filtered, reinterpreted, and normalized within the online community.

3.3. Methodological Approach: Qualitative Exploration Through Interviews

Guided by these theoretical perspectives, this study adopts a qualitative approach to explore how ADHD is constructed, framed, and understood on Chinese social media. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten high-school students aged between sixteen and eighteen, all of whom are active users of major platforms such as Red, TikTok, and Weibo. Each interview lasted approximately ten to fifteen minutes and focused on participants' exposure to ADHD-related content, their understanding of the condition, and their perceptions of accuracy, resonance, and social influence. The interviews were recorded in note form, then summarized and thematically analyzed to identify recurrent patterns, interpretive tendencies, and shared cultural meanings.

This methodological design aligns closely with the principles of Social Constructionism and Framing Theory: rather than testing predefined hypotheses, it seeks to understand how meaning is produced within social interaction. By examining the interpretive frameworks that shape participants' perceptions, the research aims to uncover how digital communication both informs and distorts the public understanding of ADHD-revealing the complex interplay between empathy, emotion, and epistemic authority in China's online mental health discourse [10].

4. Findings

Based on ten semi-structured interviews with high-school students who actively engage with Chinese social media, this study identified four recurring themes that illuminate how ADHD is simultaneously constructed and framed in the digital environment. Overall, the findings reveal a dual pattern: while social media significantly enhances ADHD's public visibility and promotes empathy, it also contributes to misunderstanding and trivialization, particularly when entertainment-oriented framing outweighs scientific interpretation.

4.1. ADHD as a Socially Constructed Visibility

Consistent with Social Constructionism, participants emphasized that their first understanding of ADHD did not come from textbooks or medical consultation but from online content. Most respondents described encountering ADHD through user-generated

content (UGC) such as short videos, microblogs, or diary-style confessions. Through these digital exchanges, ADHD has become part of a collective vocabulary—an identity that feels relatable, shared, and even fashionable.

As Participant 1 noted, "I often see bloggers saying they can't focus or always procrastinate. It looks so real and even cute." This statement encapsulates the transformation of ADHD from a clinical diagnosis into a social identity marker. Participants appreciated the openness of such self-disclosure, seeing it as an act of courage and authenticity that helps dismantle social stigma. However, this same normalization has blurred the line between disorder and disposition. Some respondents admitted that they began associating ADHD with everyday inattention or stress, interpreting it as a personality trait rather than a medical condition.

Interestingly, several participants mentioned that ADHD visibility online created a "shared language" for discussing concentration difficulties, which they found comforting and validating. Yet this communicative familiarity also risks simplifying a complex neurodevelopmental disorder into a shorthand for common frustration. In essence, visibility brings inclusion—but at the cost of conceptual precision.

4.2. The Influence of Media Framing on Understanding

The data further suggest that the way ADHD is framed on different platforms plays a decisive role in shaping public perception. When information is presented through a scientific or educational frame—such as explanatory videos on Bilibili or Q&A threads on Zhihu—participants were more likely to view ADHD as a legitimate neuropsychological condition requiring diagnosis and management. These posts often employ clear visuals, factual language, and credible references, leading to increased trust and understanding.

In contrast, entertainment-oriented or humorous frames, more prevalent on TikTok and Weibo, frequently trivialize ADHD by equating it with laziness, moodiness, or disorganization. Participant 6 remarked, "TikTok videos are too exaggerated; they make ADHD look like just being lazy or funny." This kind of framing transforms ADHD into a meme or cultural trope, detaching it from its medical foundation. By comparison, Participant 2 observed, "Bilibili's science videos explain the neural mechanism, so I can understand it's not just lack of focus." This contrast underscores how framing—whether through humor, empathy, or science—determines whether the audience acquires informed understanding or inherits misconceptions.

Several participants also noted that visual aesthetics and tone influence perceived credibility. Calm narration and neutral imagery were associated with trustworthiness, while exaggerated gestures or playful editing diminished perceived seriousness. Thus, framing operates not only through content but also through style, rhythm, and affective tone—all of which shape how viewers cognitively and emotionally interpret ADHD.

4.3. Emotional Resonance and the "Empathy Frame"

A third major finding concerns the dominance of emotional storytelling, or what may be termed the "empathy frame." Across platforms—especially on Red and TikTok—participants expressed a strong sense of emotional connection with vloggers who shared personal stories of distraction, anxiety, or self-doubt. This emotional resonance fosters a sense of belonging and mutual understanding, aligning with the resonance culture that characterizes much of Chinese digital communication. Participant 7 stated, "Those daily-life Vlogs are so real; I can totally relate to them."

This affective engagement plays a positive role in reducing stigma and encouraging dialogue around mental health. However, emotional resonance sometimes comes at the expense of factual rigor. Participants frequently admitted that they were moved by a creator's sincerity yet rarely verified whether the person was medically diagnosed or merely self-identifying. As a result, empathy becomes a key driver of visibility but also a potential source of conceptual drift.

Furthermore, the empathy frame reinforces performative dynamics: creators who share emotional content often receive higher engagement and algorithmic visibility, which in turn encourages others to adopt similar styles. Over time, ADHD-related storytelling becomes part of a participatory emotional economy—where authenticity, vulnerability, and relatability are rewarded, while nuance and precision risk being overshadowed.

4.4. Understanding and Misunderstanding

Integrating both theoretical lenses reveals a complex dual effect of social media discourse on ADHD perception. On one hand, the social construction of ADHD through shared experience and emotional framing cultivates empathy, reduces stigma, and facilitates open conversation about mental health among youth. On the other hand, entertainment-oriented and self-diagnostic framings dilute clinical meaning, leading to partial or distorted understandings.

Of the ten participants, six demonstrated an informed and empathetic grasp of ADHD as a legitimate disorder, while four exhibited misconceptions shaped by entertainment or resonance-driven narratives. These mixed outcomes highlight the paradoxical nature of digital health communication: social media functions as both a space of awareness and a site of misrepresentation.

Overall, ADHD on Chinese social media emerges as a hybrid construct—both an educational topic and a cultural performance, both a call for understanding and a reflection of digital playfulness. The findings underscore the necessity of developing balanced communication strategies that sustain emotional engagement while maintaining informational accuracy. Only by reconciling empathy with expertise can online discussions move beyond superficial awareness toward meaningful mental health literacy.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal the complex dynamics through which ADHD is interpreted, shared, and negotiated on Chinese social media. Rather than merely reflecting medical knowledge, digital spaces have become arenas where ADHD is continuously reconstructed through emotion-driven communication, participatory storytelling, and platform algorithms. This section discusses the broader implications of these findings from three perspectives: (1) the transformation of medical knowledge into cultural discourse, (2) the ambivalent role of emotional resonance in public understanding, and (3) the implications for digital health communication and literacy.

5.1. From Medical Diagnosis to Cultural Identity

The interviews suggest that ADHD in China has undergone a process of "cultural translation." On social media, diagnostic terms are no longer confined to clinical contexts but circulate as part of youth culture and self-expression. This transformation aligns with the social constructionist view that meaning is co-created through interaction rather than dictated by experts. For many young users, ADHD becomes not only a medical category but also a language for articulating personal struggle, academic pressure, and identity confusion. Such reinterpretation may democratize mental health discourse, enabling individuals to claim ownership over their experiences. However, it also risks blurring the distinction between medically recognized conditions and everyday behavioral patterns, thereby weakening the authority of professional health knowledge in the public sphere.

5.2. The Ambivalence of Emotional Resonance

The concept of "resonance culture" provides insight into why emotional storytelling dominates ADHD-related content in China. Posts that emphasize vulnerability, self-disclosure, or relatable failure tend to attract higher engagement, reflecting both the algorithmic preference for emotional intensity and the audience's desire for affective

connection. This emotional framing generates empathy and destigmatization, allowing mental health topics to gain visibility in ways that were previously unthinkable. Yet, the same emotional amplification may oversimplify complex disorders into digestible, sentimental narratives. When empathy becomes performative or commodified through platform logic, it risks reinforcing shallow identification rather than promoting genuine understanding. In this sense, resonance functions as a double-edged mechanism—humanizing the disorder while simultaneously flattening its complexity.

5.3. Implications for Digital Health Communication

These findings carry important implications for how health information should be designed and disseminated in the digital era. Effective mental health communication cannot rely solely on factual correction; it must also engage with the emotional and participatory dimensions of online culture. Public education campaigns, for instance, could integrate narrative-based communication while maintaining scientific integrity. Similarly, platform designers could introduce moderation or recommendation systems that prioritize evidence-based content without suppressing user voices. The challenge lies in finding an equilibrium between inclusivity and accuracy—encouraging self-expression while preventing misinformation. For educators and policymakers, this calls for broader efforts in media and health literacy, equipping young users with the ability to critically assess emotionally charged online narratives.

5.4. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study is exploratory and qualitative in nature, based on a small sample of high-school participants. While the interviews provide rich insight into youth perceptions, they cannot represent the full diversity of Chinese social media users. Future studies could expand the participant base to include parents, teachers, or diagnosed individuals, thereby capturing intergenerational and experiential differences. Quantitative approaches or platform-based data analysis could also complement these findings by identifying patterns of algorithmic amplification and cross-platform framing. Comparative research between China and other cultural contexts would further illuminate how different media ecosystems shape the social meaning of ADHD.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how ADHD is represented and interpreted on Chinese social media, using Social Constructionism and Framing Theory as analytical frameworks. Through semi-structured interviews with ten young users of Red, TikTok, Bilibili, and Zhihu, the research highlighted that ADHD has evolved beyond a purely clinical diagnosis into a socially constructed identity. This identity is continuously shaped by user-generated content, emotional storytelling, and the interactive logic of digital platforms.

The influence of social media on ADHD discourse is ambivalent. On one hand, online content increases visibility, fosters empathy, and encourages open conversations about mental health. Users often encounter ADHD through relatable personal narratives rather than formal medical texts, which helps reduce stigma and build understanding. On the other hand, entertainment-oriented framing, exaggerated self-disclosures, and algorithmically amplified content can propagate oversimplified or inaccurate perceptions, blurring the boundary between medical conditions and everyday behaviors. The study underscores that the way ADHD is framed—whether scientifically, humorously, or emotionally—affects how audiences perceive, internalize, and remember the disorder.

Within China's resonance-driven digital culture, emotional engagement frequently outweighs informational precision. Users co-construct ADHD narratives through shared identification, storytelling, and interaction, producing both opportunities for empathy and risks of trivialization. While these dynamics promote social visibility and affective

connection, they can also reduce ADHD to a transient label or meme, detaching it from clinical reality. Therefore, the findings highlight the necessity of communication strategies that balance emotional resonance with scientific rigor, ensuring that public engagement does not compromise informational integrity.

Although this research was limited in scope and based on a small qualitative sample, it provides valuable insights into how mental health is negotiated in contemporary Chinese online spaces. Future studies could expand to different age groups, investigate the role of platform algorithms in shaping discourse, or conduct cross-cultural comparisons to better understand the global dynamics of ADHD representation online. Practically, the findings suggest that health communicators, educators, and platform designers should create content that is both scientifically accurate and emotionally engaging, fostering informed understanding while maintaining humanity in digital mental health discourse.

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