

Reflexive thematic analysis of 'GlassChildren' Reddit posts by siblings of autism

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Highlights:

- "Glass children" (siblings of autistic individuals) frequently report feeling overlooked and neglected by parents.
- Having an autistic sibling profoundly altered participants' personal development, mental well-being, and life trajectories.
- Participants commonly reported experiencing intense negative emotions, including sadness, anger, guilt, and future-related fears.
- Targeted interventions like parental education and therapeutic support are critically needed to prevent isolation.

Abstract

This study examined the experiences of individuals with autistic siblings who self-identify as "glass children," feeling overlooked or invisible due to their sibling's needs. 593 statements drawn from relevant threads by 53 individuals from the online forum R/GlassChildren were analysed following six phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, producing themes, reviewing potential themes, defining themes, and producing the report. Themes suggested that many participants felt neglected by their parents, experienced tumultuous sibling relationships, and had life trajectories profoundly altered by this, including their mental health and wellbeing. Participants primarily used the forum for support, solidarity, and advice, which led to a strong emphasis on their sharing a wide range of negative emotions, including sadness, anger, guilt, blame, and embarrassment, as well as fears about the future. Limitations include the lack of data verification and the representativeness of siblings as a whole. Though this study did not aim to quantify the prevalence or degree of such self-identification among siblings, the results clearly highlight a critical need for more accessible, targeted interventions, including parental education, therapeutic support, and peer networks, to help prevent feelings of neglect and isolation among these siblings.

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1. Introduction

In a 2010 TED Talk, the entrepreneur Alicia Maples coined the term "glass child" to encapsulate the experience of siblings of individuals who require high levels of care and attention due to complex needs (TEDx Talks, 2010). The term reflects the feeling of invisibility, with the interests and difficulties of individuals often overlooked in favour of their siblings. These experiences are typically negative, stemming from feelings of neglect or burden, particularly by parents. While the term can apply to siblings of individuals with any condition, it mainly refers to those with siblings who have chronic illnesses or disabilities (Hanvey et al., 2022). Notably, Maples herself identifies as a glass child due to her experience of having an autistic brother.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD: DSM-5) is characterized by persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, alongside restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities, which may include inflexible adherence to routines and heightened or reduced sensitivity to sensory input (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Notably, autistic individuals experience differences in social interaction, communication, and sensory processing, which can influence their experiences across social, familial, academic, and personal domains (WHO, 2018). Global autism prevalence is currently estimated at 1 in 100 individuals (WHO, 2023), with a significant rise in diagnoses in recent decades (Onaolapo & Onaolapo, 2017). A range of studies suggest that the presence of neurodiversity within families can bring both advantages and challenges to family systems (Macks & Reeve, 2007; Cridland et al., 2014). While the present study focuses on siblings who self-identify as glass children, this is set against the background of the broader context of how family dynamics are shaped by the presence of autism. Much of the initial family-based research in this area focuses on parents, with Woodgate et al. (2008) finding that many parents of autistic individuals experience isolation and challenges with vigilant parenting, maintaining family well-being, and navigating the family system. Giallo et al. (2013) similarly found social isolation to be a key factor in this population, with additional research finding that parental physical and mental wellbeing and family coherence are impaired (Davis & Carter, 2008; Schieve et al., 2007). In a systematic review of 26 studies, Saccà et al. (2019) found that heightened parental stress was the primary issue associated with having an autistic child, compromising coping strategies and problem-solving abilities in both parents and children. Similarly, a systematic review (Vasilopoulou & Nisbet, 2016) reported that parents of autistic children reported a lower quality of life compared to the general population.

Early research in this field overlooked siblings' experiences (Watson et al., 2021). In fact, Green (2013) found that sibling relationships in autism are often the longest-lasting in a person's life, with siblings frequently acting as early teachers, role models, and companions. Furthermore, growing up with an autistic sibling offers a unique chance for emotional, psychological, behavioral, and social growth (McHale et al., 2012). As a result, it is not surprising that having a neurodivergent sibling can influence individuals' life paths, including their social, family, and psychological development (Lovell & Wetherell, 2016). More recent research shows that typically developing (TD) siblings of autistic individuals tend to have poorer emotional, behavioral, social, and psychological outcomes compared to their peers (Shivers et al., 2019). Mandleco and Webb (2015) compared TD siblings of autistic individuals with siblings of those with Down Syndrome (DS). Their study found that children with autistic siblings reported less prosocial behavior, more negative perceptions of their sibling, and experienced higher stress and negative impacts on their friendships due to their sibling than those with DS siblings. Leedham et al. (2020) analyzed 18 qualitative studies on siblings' experiences of autism across the lifespan. Their findings included both feelings of affection, empathy, and love toward their siblings, as well as expectations for TD siblings to assume specific responsibilities, which significantly affected some individuals' mental health later in life. In their systematic review focusing on adult siblings, Watson et al. (2021) emphasized that interactions with their autistic siblings can both positively and negatively influence self-identity, personal development, social interactions, and coping strategies.

Accounts of the lived experience of younger siblings included being expected to take on mature responsibilities, such as caring for their autistic siblings and helping with household tasks (Gorjy et al., 2017; Cridland et al., 2016; Mascha & Boucher, 2006); while also fearing for the future of themselves and their siblings (Benderix & Sivberg, 2007; Tsai et al., 2018; Petalas et al., 2012). Additionally, many reportedly faced unpredictable behaviors, including aggression and meltdowns, which negatively impacted their well-being. Common emotions included embarrassment, guilt, anger, and social isolation, with some reluctant to invite friends over or disclose having an autistic sibling due to receiving negative comments from others (Benderix & Sivberg, 2007; Mascha & Boucher, 2006; Gorjy et al., 2017; Pavlopoulou & Dimitriou, 2020). Notably, individuals reported differing parenting approaches, including higher expectations and less attention (Costa & da Silva Pereira, 2019; Cridland et al., 2016; Chan & Goh, 2014; Ward et al., 2016; Tsai et al., 2018). Negative coping

strategies also emerged, with some feeling isolated due to fear of their sibling's violence, while others felt compelled to appease their sibling to avoid conflict and spare their parents' stress (Angell et al., 2012; Tsai et al., 2018). This aligns with the findings of Hayes and Watson (2013), whose research highlighted that parenting stress in parents of autistic individuals is substantial enough to require attention and intervention to support family functioning. These findings imply that siblings not only encounter direct challenges from having an autistic sibling but are also affected by the stress experienced by their parents.

While siblings may encounter challenges, they often also report positive effects including a sense of pride and growing empathy, better coping and compromising skills, and greater acceptance over a lifetime (Angell et al., 2012; Corsano et al., 2017; Chan & Goh, 2014; Ward et al., 2016). Additionally, several siblings expressed a desire to use their role to promote acceptance and awareness of autism (Hwang & Charnley, 2010; Gorjy et al., 2017). Regarding sibling interactions, many individuals shared feelings of admiration for their sibling and enjoyed their companionship (Angell et al., 2012; Petalas et al., 2009; Pavlopoulou & Dimitriou, 2020; Mascha & Boucher, 2006; Costa & da Silva Pereira, 2019; Ward et al., 2016; Gorjy et al., 2017). Others expressed gratitude for the support they received from friends and extended family, especially in situations where parental support was lacking (Petalas et al., 2012; Cridland et al., 2016). Although the existing literature on siblings covers outcomes consistent with the experience of being a glass child, their lived experiences have not been well documented to date. The total number or proportion who identify with this lived experience or consciously adopt this identity remains unknown, but research into the lived experiences of siblings of people with disabilities or chronic illnesses (Hanvey et al., 2022) suggests it is likely to be common.

1.1. Online forums as a source of data on sibling experiences

A large portion of the population now spends much of their lives online, with online time continually increasing (Suler, 2004; Odgers & Jensen, 2020). It is also notable that many young people now turn to online resources for support, as offline help-seeking is often hindered by stigma and individuals' desire to handle problems on their own (Pretorius et al., 2019). There has been a significant rise in studies using online forums: internet pages designed for diverse groups to discuss a variety of topics and seek emotional and informational support (Hsiung, 2000). Notably, online forums can provide safe environments for individuals to share personal issues (Campbell et al., 2001) and have been recognized as valuable sources of data for qualitative research (Im & Chee, 2012). Forums related to autism include both charity-run forums and general social media sites. Various fora run by the National Autistic Society (National Autistic Society, 2021), for example, provide anonymity for participants and allow individuals who are directly or indirectly affected by autism to discuss issues, share stories, and ask for advice. Online forums can also be found on social media sites such as Facebook, which allows the creation of both public and private groups, such as "Autism Parents Support Group" (Facebook, 2024). The online site Reddit also provides widely distributed forums known as "subreddits" that promote open conversation about nearly any subject. One notable study that used Reddit to explore the experiences of individuals with autistic siblings is that of Dansby et al. (2017), who examined support-seeking by neurotypical (NT) siblings of autistic individuals in the subreddit R/Autism (Reddit, 2024b). The findings aligned well with previous literature, revealing unique family dynamics, a broad emotional spectrum including guilt, anger, love, and pride, and insight into how autistic siblings influenced the life trajectories of their NT siblings, such as their career choices. The study also identified a spectrum of coping strategies, both negative (such as blaming others or substance abuse) and positive (such as seeking peer support or therapy). In the ten years since Dansby et al. (2017) collected data, the scale and diversity of content across platforms, and perhaps on Reddit in particular, have increased exponentially, making it an ideal context for further study.

1.2. Aims

We aimed to investigate the experiences of siblings of autistic individuals who self-identify as glass children, using qualitative data obtained from the subreddit page R/GlassChildren (Reddit, 2024a), which is described as "a community meant for people who have siblings who take up a disproportionate amount of their parents' time and energy". This forum provides a space for siblings to discuss their experiences of having disabled siblings and explore the glass child identity. The primary aim was descriptive, though of course, we aim to have implications for the practical application of our results.

Reddit was chosen as the primary platform for data collection over forums like Facebook groups or the National Autistic Society's (NAS) discussion pages (National Autistic Society, 2021) due to its ability to provide a more extensive and cohesive dataset on the glass child experience related to autism. Unlike the NAS platform, where each post forms an isolated chat with few replies, Reddit's subreddit structure allows for continuous

threads within a central forum. Additionally, the subreddit format arguably encourages deeper community engagement than forums such as Facebook, with posts often receiving multiple responses that generate dynamic, multi-perspective discussions. Furthermore, Reddit's robust search and tagging functions streamline the identification of relevant posts, further enhancing its value as a data source.

Positionality: The researcher is a sibling of an autistic individual, which informed engagement with the data and sensitivity to participants' accounts. This personal experience influenced the analysis by increasing awareness of participants' experiences, particularly regarding themes of emotional strain and long-term wellbeing, while care was taken to ensure that interpretations were guided by the data rather than the researcher's own assumptions. Importantly, reflexive awareness was maintained throughout to consider how the researcher's position shaped interpretation during theme development.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were selected based on their posts between August 2023 and 6th June 2024. This 10-month period was selected to maximize data inclusion while maintaining accurate chronology because, after a year has passed since a post was made, 'month of posting' information is removed. Posts in which individuals explicitly stated they had an autistic sibling were included in the dataset. The dataset comprised a total of 50 main posts and 19 comments responding to these posts, contributed by 53 participants identified by their usernames, with two having their identities replaced by "[deleted]" after anonymization, linked to a post. Seven of these participants posted twice, two posted three times, and one posted five times within the selected time frame. Demographic information was based on participants' explicit responses. Of 27 individuals who provided their age, the range was 18-39 ($M=28.5$). Participants were excluded if they identified as being under 18 years old. The sample included 12 women, 4 men, 1 transgender man, and 39 who did not specify. Six self-identified as neurodivergent; two with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), one with co-occurring ADHD and ASD, and three with ASD. Participants described themselves as from Australia, America, and France, though most did not specify a location. Cultural background, race, or ethnicity were rarely reported and are therefore not included and may not be reliable.

2.2. Ethical Procedures

Data were not collected in real time, as no new posts were created or monitored. As such, formal ethics approval was not required for this study (Proferes et al., 2021), though ethical consideration and consultation were undertaken. With regard to consent, publicly available data does not require user consent for use in research; indeed, seeking consent could have interrupted online discussions, driven users from the subreddit, and consequently deprived individuals of support (Smedley & Coulson, 2021). Instead, the researchers prioritised participant anonymity by drawing on ethical advice (Van Den Hoonaard, 2003) and employing robust anonymisation techniques using Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools (Zimmer, 2010). All quotations presented were paraphrased for anonymity using QuillBot (Learneo Inc., 2024) and ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2024). All quotes were processed through QuillBot twice to ensure thorough anonymity. QuillBot offers the option to edit specific words from a drop-down list, further helping ensure all quotes are thoroughly and fairly altered. This option also helped to preserve the original phrasing as closely as possible to enhance validity. Subsequently, each quote was rephrased a third time using ChatGPT with the prompt, "Please could you paraphrase this '[quote]'?" to refine fluency and tone. Finally, all modified quotes were checked with Google Search to confirm that they could not be traced, ensuring complete anonymity.

Additional steps that ensured the project's ethical integrity included excluding all data from individuals who explicitly stated they were under 18, in the interest of safeguarding minors from potential distress and addressing consent issues related to data use. No other data exclusions were made, ensuring a diverse dataset that includes various genders, populations, and both neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals.

2.3. Data Analysis

This study employed Reflexive Thematic Analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2020). A constructionist epistemology was adopted to account for the social and cultural influences in online interactions (Schwandt, 1998), in line with the view that experiences shared virtually may reflect broader social constructions rather than objective realities. Furthermore, analysis was primarily inductive, allowing themes to emerge

naturally, however discoveries established by existing literature such as that of Watson et al. (2021) and Dansby et al. (2017) were also used deductively to frame and refine findings.

Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2020) six phases include familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, producing themes, reviewing potential themes, defining themes, and producing the report. The first author initially familiarized herself with the data by repeatedly reading the posts, taking notes to highlight key patterns. The initial codes were systematically generated from significant data features using an inductive approach, allowing the data to guide initial analysis rather than personal bias or pre-conceived ideas from the existing literature. NVivo software (Lumivero, 2023) was used to efficiently organize and manage these codes, allowing all data items with the same code to be formatted in a single document when required.

Initially, inductive analysis explored novel patterns or themes in the data. Subsequent deductive analysis verified how the emerging findings fit established theories and further refined the framework. This mixed strategy aimed to produce codes that were rigorous and comprehensive, ensuring that findings were grounded in the data while also contributing to theory testing and development. These codes were then organized into potential themes by identifying common connections between them. This procedure was somewhat iterative, requiring frequent rearrangement to best organize data into comprehensive theme groups. All researchers reviewed and refined the themes to ensure they accurately captured the depth of the data, using deductive reasoning informed by previous literature to aid the process.

3. Results

Five hundred and ninety-three significant statements were extracted and assembled into 45 codes, resulting in five key themes: (1) Atypical Family Relationships; (2) Autistic Siblings Impacting Personal Development; (3) Autistic Siblings Impacting Life Trajectories; (4) Complex Emotional Dynamics; (5) The Form and Function of the Reddit Forum. Codes are shown for each theme in quotation.

3.1. Theme I: Atypical Familial Relationships

Participants shared experiences of growing up in families where the presence of an autistic sibling significantly shaped relationships, responsibilities, and emotional wellbeing. These accounts revealed patterns of feeling emotionally overlooked by parents, navigating fraught and sometimes distressing sibling interactions, and, for many, ultimately distancing themselves from family as a means of preserving their mental health and identity.

3.1.1. *Feeling Overlooked by Parents*

A recurring sub-theme was the feeling that their needs were overlooked by parents in favour of their autistic sibling: "My parents were more concerned about my sisters, so I was unable to even talk about how I felt," and "I attempted to discuss painful experiences in my childhood with my mother, but she was preoccupied with my sibling." One participant remarked, "I don't recall ever being asked what I wanted. It was always my sibling's way." Some participants also reported feeling negatively compared to their siblings, with achievements undervalued. Statements like, "My brother's much lesser accomplishment will always be interpreted as more," and "I detest that his achievements will always be valued more highly than my own," illustrate this frustration. Additionally, several participants described their parents' troubled relationships, often marked by frequent arguments or separation, which impacted the family dynamic, particularly for the autistic sibling. One participant noted, "My brother would get overwhelmed, scared, and confused when they were in the midst of an intense argument". As a result, many felt pressured to take on an emotionally supportive role, as reflected in comments like, "My parents used me for emotional support," and "This 'broken family' is only partially held together by me."

3.1.2. *Disconnection and Conflict in Sibling Relationships*

Many participants reported experiencing physical abuse from their autistic siblings, with statements such as, "My brother has always injured me while pursuing food," and, "He acts aggressively towards me, causing bruises and bleeding." Struggles with sibling relationships were common, with some participants feeling emotionally distant or wishing they were only children. One participant shared, "I didn't feel I had a sibling," while another admitted, "I faked being an only child to partners." Emotional detachment was evident in comments: "I don't consider my sibling to be my sibling,"; "I don't feel anything when I interact with my sibling." Dislike for their siblings was also common: "I'm not sure I have any affection for my sister,"; "I can't love somebody if they haven't improved my life in any way". Relationship complexity led to a sense of struggle: "My

emotions are still complex towards him,"; "It's difficult to build any kind of relationship with somebody who is unable to comprehend or interact with you." While no one shared wholly positive experiences with their autistic sibling, one participant did express gratitude for growing closer to their other siblings, stating, "Having something approaching an affectionate brotherly relationship-something I never really expected to have- makes me really happy".

3.1.3. *Choosing Distance as a Form of Self-Preservation*

Due to these tumultuous familial relationships, many felt the need to distance themselves from family members. Participants shared sentiments like, "To live my own life, I have no choice but to break away from my sister" and "This experience pushed me to relocate and cut off communication." Others echoed, "My life has improved by avoiding them; it was liberating and therapeutic," while some explained, "I barely interact with my mother and have severed ties with my autistic sibling without regret."

3.2. Theme II: Impact on Personal Development

This theme captures the profound and lasting effects that growing up with an autistic sibling had on participants' sense of self, emotional wellbeing, and everyday life. From internalising pressure to be the "good" or independent child, to navigating environments marked by unpredictability and emotional intensity, participants described how these dynamics shaped their behavior, self-expression, and psychological health.

3.2.1. *Pressure to be the 'Good' or Independent Child*

Many individuals felt pressured to be the 'good' or independent child, as reflected in statements like, "Being self-sufficient and mature early, I became the 'good' child," and "Since I wasn't disabled, I was expected to be superior". They often had to suppress their feelings to take on this role, with one noting, "I was expected to be a role model because I was 'mature,' but it was more about not being allowed to be a typical kid". This pressure seemed to stem more from a lack of alternatives than from genuine intent. Participants found this role challenging: "I could never meet my family's standards"; "I apologize to those who felt as isolated as I did from being pressured to be the 'easy' child".

3.2.2. *Silencing of Self-Expression*

Due to these pressures, many participants described limiting their self-expression, fearing reprimand, feeling guilty about being a burden, or believing no one would help. One participant mentioned, "I was afraid of my parents getting angry, so I didn't tell them I felt overwhelmed"; "I kept my needs and feelings secret so I wouldn't bother anyone". Some felt expressing themselves was pointless: "I stopped talking to people about my issues because I had no one to ask for help"; "I realized my parents couldn't support me anyway, so there was no point asking for help".

3.2.3. *Sibling-Defined Identity*

Participants often felt their identity was overshadowed by their autistic sibling, with one saying, "I've spent a lot of time trying to keep from letting being my sibling's brother define who I am." Even when proud of this relationship, it was still reported to limit self-development, as one individual shared, "Who I am is built around being her brother. I don't feel I have an identity without her."

3.2.4. *Stressful Home Environment*

Autistic siblings' behaviors contributed to abnormal home environments, making it difficult to relax. Participants described issues like noise, with one stating, "Having a peaceful household is impossible with my sister." Disruptive behaviors, including stimming and emotional outbursts, were common, as one participant shared, "They are always stimming with screams, yells, and groans," while another contributed, "I share accommodation with my brother who stims verbally to fall asleep." Beyond stimming, behaviors like indecent exposure, self-injury, and emotional outbursts added to the abnormal home environment. One participant shared, "I entered the living room not knowing my sibling was wandering around naked," while others described situations of shrieking, biting, and violent outbursts, comparing the sounds to "someone being murdered." These reports should be seen as a forum for sharing problems, not as representative of siblings' experiences in the wider context.

3.2.5. *Mental Health Struggles*

Many participants reported mental health struggles, including suicidal ideation, self-harm, eating disorders, depression, and anxiety. One individual shared, “I have experienced extreme anxiety since childhood, along with depression and suicidal thoughts,” with another claiming “Self-harm, anxiety, depression, and a suicide attempt were major struggles I faced growing up.” The severity of these problems is demonstrated as one person posted “Assuming I would have committed suicide, I did not believe I would receive my high school diploma.” Many specifically linked their mental health issues to formative experiences, with one person stating, “These early life events account for a great deal of my anxiety”.

3.3. Theme III: Impact on Life Trajectories

This theme explores how growing up with an autistic sibling can shape an individual's long-term life decisions, relationships, and roles. Participants described how caregiving responsibilities, social isolation, and concerns about their own future families influenced their education, careers, and personal choices. The theme also reveals how these experiences set the stage for future relationships, with individuals often navigating complex challenges that significantly impact their adult lives.

3.3.1. *Becoming a Caregiver*

Many participants reported taking on caregiving roles, with statements like “I have lived my whole life as a carer” and “I was the second mother.” This often stemmed from parental pressure, with one noting, “My parents depended on me for entertainment, tutoring, babysitting, and disciplinary issues for my siblings.” This responsibility influenced future decisions, as shown by one participant who said, “I know I need to live long enough to support my sibling, so I never take any chances,” illustrating the impact on life trajectories.

3.3.2. *Impact on Education and Career*

Caregiving roles were also reportedly associated with reduced education and career advancement. Some claimed missed classes and exams due to caregiving duties, with one participant saying, “I missed multiple final exams as I was caring for my sibling,” whilst another added, “The faculty encouraged me to miss lessons to spend time with my sibling and deal with her behaviors.” Most markedly perhaps, “My parents can't afford care, so I can't work because I have to stay at the house and do it instead.” Several felt that life trajectories were also affected by career decisions shaped by these experiences in contrasting ways. Some reported entering medical or care fields: “Because of my sibling, I recently completed my education as a nurse.” Conversely, others avoided such careers, with one noting, “I had no interest in a profession that involved helping those in need or the disabled”.

3.3.3. *Social Impact of Having an Autistic Sibling*

Social roles and relationships were widely reported: “I have been putting my friendships at risk to be with my sibling.” A majority of participants felt unable to engage in typical social activities due to their sibling's needs: “We frequently had to leave locations that demanded stillness because she cannot be silent” and “There are several places that we can't go or stay at because we need a certain degree of quiet, such theatres, movies, or certain restaurants.” Perhaps encapsulating this perceived consequence: “My sibling's autism caused my household to become reclusive”. Social isolation and ridicule were also common, with one participant saying, “Because my sister had autism, I was bullied in high school,” and another noting, “Their erratic behavior caused me to lose many relationships.” This social judgment led to feelings of hostility and fear of judgment, as one person shared, “My sibling's severe public tantrums and the critical looks have made me believe there is basic hostility in the world.

3.3.4. *Reproductive Choices and Family Planning*

Experiences with autistic siblings made many fearful of having children. Participants expressed concerns like, “My fear of becoming pregnant and bearing a disabled child is overwhelming,” and “I am terrified to have my own children, considering the hereditary elements of autism.” One participant shared that even after becoming pregnant, “My pregnancy consumed me with fear that my child would have autism.”

3.4. Theme IV: Navigating Intense and Complex Emotions

This theme explores the wide range of intense and often conflicting emotions experienced by participants as they navigated their relationships with their autistic siblings. Emotions such as sadness, anger, guilt, embarrassment, and fear were prevalent, often intertwined with feelings of frustration, helplessness, and powerlessness. Participants frequently described emotional responses tied to their siblings' behaviors, the pressures of caregiving, and their uncertain futures. This theme highlights how complex emotional experiences shaped their identity, coping mechanisms, and overall mental health.

3.4.1. Negative Emotions and Inner Conflicts

Sadness. Participants attributed their sadness to a range of childhood experiences ("I'm so sorrowful about my early years"), feeling powerless to help family members ("Being unable to support my other siblings made me feel so sad"), contemplating the impact on their life trajectory ("There are moments when seeing pictures from others showing off their kids' milestones makes me sad"), and experiencing pervasive sadness without a clear cause ("My sadness never goes away").

Anger. Many participants expressed anger about their childhood, with statements like, "I'm so angry about my upbringing," and "The fact that my parents brought me into this world fills me with anger." Some used anger as a coping mechanism, noting, "I frequently seek out things that make me angry because it helps me feel I have more power." Anger was also directed at their sibling's behavior, for example, "Her behavior makes me angry because it puts her in danger," as well as at others who were compassionate towards their sibling; "They deserve better; this infuriates me even more."

Guilt. Guilt was a prevalent emotion for participants, arising in various contexts. Many felt guilty for disliking their sibling, with statements like, "I really hate my sister, but I feel terrible for it," and "I hate my sibling, but it feels immoral." This guilt often led to self-reproach, as seen in comments such as, "I feel guilty about things I posted about my sister" and "I believe I am evil. Participants also experienced guilt over choosing independence over caregiving, expressed in statements like, "I felt tremendous guilt for moving out and leaving my sibling" and "I'm ashamed I don't want to be his caregiver." Additionally, guilt arose from not being able to support other family members, with one saying, "I feel shame for not helping my other siblings," and another noting, "I didn't end my life because I felt too guilty to leave my parents".

Embarrassment. In addition to sadness, guilt and anger, embarrassment about a sibling's behavior was common, particularly concerning the social impact of their behaviors. Indeed, participants reported feeling, "My autistic sibling makes me feel ashamed," and "I don't want people to make fun of me for the way my sibling behaves anymore."

3.4.2. Fear and Anxiety About the Future

A significant emotional experience was that of fear for the future. Indeed, many expressed anxiety, particularly concerning the possibility of becoming their sibling's caregiver. One individual said, "The thought of potentially becoming my sibling's caregiver has always scared me," while another worried about the monetary burden, stating, "I'm constantly worried that I won't receive any financial support to help care for my sibling." One participant demonstrated these fears, saying, "Everything will come on too soon. As soon as I gain my freedom, these pressures will find me and overwhelm me. I'm not prepared."

3.4.3. Perceptions of Accountability

Blame manifested in three main ways; blaming parents for siblings' negative behaviors, believing siblings act intentionally harmfully, and attributing familial dysfunction to the sibling. Indeed, many participants felt their parents enabled negative behaviors, with comments like, "My parents' incompetence led to my sibling's behaviors being tolerated and encouraged." Others attributed negative behaviors to their parents' passivity, claiming, "My brother became an entitled jerk because of my parents." Such language suggests glass children believe their siblings' behaviors stem from their parents' inaction.

In addition, many used language which suggested that they believed their sibling's behavior was purposefully harmful. Indeed, they described their siblings as "egocentric," "manipulative," "greedy," and "lacking any compassion for the suffering they inflicted upon my family." Furthermore, many attributed responsibility to their siblings in phrases such as "He just chooses to get angry or upset over stuff". Finally, many accounted for their family's dysfunction as due to the presence of their autistic sibling: "After my autistic

brother was born, things in our family began to fall apart;” “I can only spend time with my mom when I can tolerate being around my autistic sibling.”

3.5. Theme V: Form and Function of the Reddit Forum

The final theme explores the reasons individuals engage with the Reddit forum. This theme was deemed integral to the study's purpose, as it sheds light on the type of support that such individuals seek. It highlights the community's role in providing emotional and practical support, which can inform the development of psychological care and interventions. Two key motivations emerged: seeking advice and seeking solidarity.

3.5.1 Advice Seeking

Many participants posted on the subreddit with a clear request for guidance, often ending their posts with requests like “Please share any advice you may have” or “Guidance is always appreciated.” Many used emoticons like “:)” to indicate their openness to feedback and suggestions. Users were looking for tangible advice that could help them navigate their complex situations. The desire for actionable recommendations was a central element of their participation in the community, showing a need for external perspectives or solutions to specific problems they faced.

3.5.1. Solidarity Seeking

In addition to seeking practical advice, many individuals turned to a subreddit for emotional support, particularly to combat feelings of isolation. Posts like “I’m here to find solidarity” and “Reading posts reminds me I’m not alone” reflect a deep desire for connection. The sense of belonging to a community of individuals in similar situations seemed to lead to expressions of relief and gratitude for shared experiences, such as “This forum shows I’m not alone; discovering it saved me” and “Sharing your experiences made me feel less isolated, for which I am so grateful.” The forum thus became a space where users could find solidarity and emotional validation that was not readily available in other aspects of their lives, both online and in person.

4. Discussion

Utilising data collected from the online subreddit forum R/GlassChildren (Reddit, 2024a), this project aimed to investigate the experiences associated with having an autistic sibling, as perceived and reported by self-identifying glass children. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2020) was employed to conduct inductive analysis of the dataset, with five key themes coming to light. *Theme 1* described strained dynamics with parents and siblings, often marked by emotional neglect. *Theme 2* highlighted disrupted identity formation and limited self-expression. *Theme 3* showed how caregiving responsibilities shaped participants' education, career paths, and decisions about future family life. *Theme 4* revealed ongoing struggles with negative emotions and internal conflicts. *Theme 5* illustrated how participants used the Reddit platform to seek advice and emotional solidarity. The findings of this study reinforce existing literature on the psychological and developmental impact of growing up alongside an autistic sibling, particularly in the context of glass child experiences. Echoing prior research, participants described heightened emotional burdens – including sadness, guilt, fear, and anger – stemming from caregiving roles, parental neglect, and unpredictable family dynamics. These factors align with reports of increased stress, impaired social functioning, and disrupted identity development among typically developing siblings (Shivers et al., 2019; Leedham et al., 2020). The expectation to mature quickly, suppress personal needs, and support family functioning often came at the cost of personal growth and mental wellbeing, reflecting themes found in studies by Cridland et al. (2016) and Watson et al. (2021).

One of the most prominent findings across both the present study and the existing literature is concern about the future, particularly regarding care for both the autistic sibling and oneself. As Watson et al. (2021) note, this fear is a common theme in much of the previous research on siblings of autistic individuals. However, unlike many previous studies, this research found few reports of positive experiences. Notably, existing literature suggests that individuals with autistic siblings often express increased empathy, pride, and acceptance over time (Chan & Goh, 2014; Angell et al., 2012; Corsano et al., 2017). In addition, positive sibling relationships and feelings of connection were frequently highlighted by previous work (Angell et al., 2012; Petalas et al., 2009; Pavlopoulou & Dimitriou, 2020). These positive impacts, however, were not prominent in the current dataset.

These minimal positive experiences could suggest that some self-identifying glass children view their experiences as overwhelmingly negative. However, it is also possible that participants did not feel compelled to share positive experiences on the forum. Indeed, due to the nature of the subreddit R/GlassChildren (Reddit,

2024a), this outcome was expected, prior to undertaking analysis. Indeed, the forum is specifically designed for discussions about being a glass child, particularly the experience of feeling neglected by guardians due to their sibling's needs. As this occurrence can be considered negative, it is perhaps unsurprising that the forum tends to focus predominantly on negative experiences. An additional explanation may be that the forum provides an outlet for individuals to share negative sentiments and opinions that are otherwise forbidden by their real-life community (Campbell et al., 2001), with many reporting feeling an inability to express themselves due to fear of reprimand. In keeping with this, participants predominantly used the forum to seek advice and solidarity. Indeed, such forms of support are likely driven by challenges rather than positive experiences (Wright, 2016; Campbell et al., 2001). This support-seeking behavior may have skewed the data towards negative experiences, as individuals generally do not seek help for positive events.

An additional explanation for the strong negative sentiment bias could be the online disinhibition effect, whereby people feel more comfortable sharing negative or sensitive experiences in anonymous settings, which may have contributed to the focus on hardships (Suler, 2004). One might also consider the recent rise of "trauma dumping" (Fenwick, 2022), where individuals share traumatic experiences publicly as part of online trends, which could additionally have contributed to the increase in people sharing more negative experiences than positive ones. In this way, there are a multitude of reasons which could explain why the dataset revealed a significantly large proportion of negative experiences.

Although positive experiences were sparse in the current study, it is important to note those that were reported, some of which echoed the findings of previous literature. For example, Cridland et al. (2016) and Petalas et al. (2012) found that individuals with autistic siblings often articulate gratitude for external support, a sentiment that was mirrored in this study as glass children expressed appreciation for the solidarity they found on the subreddit. Similarly, Hwang and Charnley (2010) and Gorjy et al. (2017) noted that some individuals assume advocacy roles because of their siblings' autism, a theme reflected in participants who reported choosing caregiving or healthcare careers based on their experiences.

However, despite these purportedly positive experiences, it is important to question whether they are truly constructive for this population of self-identifying glass children. Indeed, while expressing gratitude for external support might seem positive, it could also underscore the lack of adequate parental or institutional support. Similarly, participants who chose caregiving careers because of their family circumstances might have felt compelled by necessity, rather than personal choice. In this way, whilst these outcomes are framed positively, they could highlight the burden of responsibility that children with autistic siblings may carry and the restrictions it can place on their autonomy.

It is essential to critically examine how participants' descriptions of their autistic siblings may reflect broader societal and environmental failures rather than intrinsic traits of autistic individuals. Behaviors of autistic siblings described by participants can more accurately be understood as expressions of unmet needs or responses to distress, sensory overwhelm, or communication barriers - challenges often exacerbated by inflexible environments or inadequate support (Chapman, 2021). Framing the autistic sibling as the source of distress risks reinforcing deficit-based narratives and obscuring the structural factors - such as overstretched educational systems, limited access to specialist support, or ableist assumptions within families - that contribute to these outcomes (Botha & Frost, 2020). Behaviors labelled as "challenging" are often reactions to environments that fail to accommodate different ways of processing the world. In this light, the emotional toll described by glass children may be better understood because of an ecosystem that neither adequately supports autistic individuals nor equips families with the understanding, resources, and systemic compassion to navigate neurodivergence. Indeed, parents, educators, and healthcare providers may unintentionally neglect the needs of lower-needs siblings, leading to feelings of isolation, resentment, and frustration, such as those detailed in this study. In this way, education on how to provide the support needed could improve the experiences of these individuals: indeed, the fifth key theme regarding the function of the Reddit forum format effectively outlined the type of support that self-identifying glass children may seek, as many reported finding it beneficial. In line with this, RCT evidence suggests that comprehensive sibling support delivered in a group format improves sibling mental health outcomes (Jones et al., 2020). In addition, providing accessible education for parents of individuals diagnosed with autism on how to balance the needs of all children, as well as offering professional therapeutic interventions to address tumultuous family dynamics, could prevent many of the negative outcomes experienced by glass children (Fong et al., 2021). Indeed, such interventions could ensure that all children feel empowered to express themselves and receive validation from their family or community, addressing findings that many glass children restricted their self-expression and felt neglected due to their unique circumstances.

5.1. Limitations and directions for future research

While this study offers valuable insights, it is crucial to acknowledge its limitations. First, much of this research depends on trusting that the posts accurately depict truthful experiences. Since the authenticity of the posts cannot be confirmed, many data points may be fabricated without the researcher's knowledge, which could invalidate many of the results. This dependence on user-provided data also restricts demographic insights, as not all participants shared clear information about their age, gender, nationality, or potential neurodivergence. Additionally, because shared information cannot be verified, the demographic data may not represent the entire sample accurately. Relying on self-reported online data also limits the depth of analysis, as non-verbal cues and opportunities for clarification are missing. The fact that 593 statements were derived from only 53 users raises concerns about data concentration and repetition. Moreover, the extensive use of AI tools like QuillBot and ChatGPT for paraphrasing quotations repeatedly introduces the risk of altering meaning and losing semantic accuracy.

Despite these concerns, the main issue with the data source is the high number of negative experiences shared compared to positive ones. On one hand, using an online forum provided valuable insights into the unfiltered experiences of glass children, adding to its ecological validity; the posts reflect what individuals chose to share without prompts, arguably capturing their most authentic concerns. However, because the data were collected from a public forum, the lack of positive experiences might be explained by the subreddit's structure and purpose, which encourage users to share challenges rather than positive stories. In contrast, face-to-face research could allow for a wider range of experiences, as direct questioning might elicit more balanced responses, including positive ones. Therefore, interviews instead of online data collection could offer a more nuanced understanding of the emotional spectrum experienced by glass children.

5. Conclusion & Practical Implications

The findings reinforce existing literature on the negative aspects of growing up with an autistic sibling, such as feeling overlooked, experiencing family tensions, and being burdened with future care responsibilities. However, the study also highlights the limited availability of positive experiences for this population, possibly because the forum's focus is on encouraging users to seek advice and solidarity in response to their challenges. Notably, while the study sheds light on the difficult realities faced by individuals with autistic siblings, it also suggests that with sufficient support, these challenges can be mitigated. Indeed, the lack of balanced support for self-identifying glass children emerged as a significant issue, suggesting that it is not solely the sibling's autism that causes hardship, but the failure of support systems to address the needs of all family members. This points to a critical need for more accessible and targeted interventions, including parental education, therapeutic support, and peer networks that can help prevent feelings of neglect and isolation in these siblings. Future research could monitor the efficacy of such interventions by examining the extent to which individuals identify as a "glass child", with positive support potentially associated with a lower identification rate. Despite its limitations, this research contributes to the literature by illuminating a novel concept and capturing experiences that are of evident importance to this population. Consequently, these findings represent part of the story of glass children's experiences with autistic siblings and are valuable for informing therapeutic interventions and guiding future research in this area.

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Author Biographies

Katharine Starling

KS: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Supervision, and Writing - Review & Editing. **OJM:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Data Curation, and Writing - Original Draft.

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All procedures followed were by the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation (institutional and national) and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000.

Katharine Starling conducted research as part of postgraduate study at the University of Surrey.

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