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Study on the Influence of Internet Use on Residents' Fertility Intentions

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Abstract

Against the dual backdrop of China's persistently low fertility rate and the rapid increase in internet penetration, exploring the impact of internet use on fertility intentions and its underlying mechanisms holds significant practical importance. Based on data from the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) 2021, this paper empirically analyzes the impact of internet use on residents' fertility intentions using a Poisson regression model. The results show that internet use significantly reduces residents' fertility intentions, and this effect exhibits significant heterogeneity across different groups. Mechanism analysis indicates that internet use significantly weakens the "raising children for old age " norm, and the weakening of this norm contributes to the reduction in fertility intentions. The findings of this study provide insights for understanding changes in residents' fertility intentions in the context of the internet era. To enhance and stabilize fertility intentions, online content should be more fertility-friendly rather than the opposite.

Keywords

Internet Use; Fertility Intentions; Raising Children for Old Age.

1. Introduction

In recent years, China's fertility rate has continued to decline. Relevant data indicate that the total fertility rate dropped to 1.3 in 2020, already below the internationally recognized "low fertility trap" warning line of 1.5. By 2022, China's total fertility rate had fallen further to 1.09, the lowest level among countries with a population exceeding 100 million. The problems of population aging and low birth rates are becoming increasingly severe. The continuously declining fertility rate not only has a profound impact on the population structure but also poses challenges to the long-term sustainable development of society and the economy. Against this backdrop, how to enhance residents' fertility intentions has become a core issue of common concern for both academia and policymakers. Simultaneously, with the rapid development of internet technology, the internet has gradually integrated into residents' daily lives. By 2023, the number of internet users in China had reached 1.079 billion, with an internet penetration rate as high as 76.4%. Its influence on socio-economic life has penetrated into the realm of family fertility decision-making. The internet has not only changed the way information is acquired and disseminated but has also reshaped people's values and behavioral patterns. Existing research has explored the influencing factors of fertility intentions from perspectives such as economic costs, gender equality, and cultural attitudes, but no consistent conclusion has been reached regarding the relationship between internet use and fertility intentions. Internet use may affect fertility intentions through various channels: on one hand, the internet provides abundant parenting knowledge and resources, potentially alleviating parenting anxiety and enhancing fertility intentions; on the other hand, the internet may also suppress fertility intentions by disseminating negative information about childbirth and reinforcing individualistic values. However, whether internet use suppresses fertility intentions and the

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specific pathways through which it operates require further in-depth research. Based on existing studies, this research utilizes data from the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) to analyze the impact of internet use on residents' fertility intentions and to test whether internet use affects fertility intentions by altering the "raising children for old age " norm. The conclusions of this paper not only contribute to deepening the theoretical understanding of fertility decision-making mechanisms in the internet era but also provide empirical evidence for the implementation of fertility support policies in the context of population aging.

2. Literature Review and Research Hypotheses

2.1. Literature Review

As a core component of family decision-making, fertility intentions are influenced by complex and diverse factors, making them a persistent research focus in demography, sociology, and economics. Existing literature primarily explores these influences from two aspects. The first strand of literature focuses on the impact of economic factors on fertility intentions. Regarding income level, some scholars have found that high-income groups, due to sufficient childcare resources, are more inclined to have more children [1], and income level significantly promotes residents' fertility intentions [2]. In contrast, low-income groups may have suppressed fertility intentions due to economic pressure [3]. Van Wijk (2024), based on full population registry data from Statistics Netherlands, found that the association between high income and higher fertility has gradually strengthened over recent decades [4]. Regarding housing costs and childcare services, studies indicate that housing ownership, housing price fluctuations, and the accessibility of childcare services significantly influence fertility intentions. For example, Li Baoli and Shao Shuai (2022) found that the fertility intentions of young people who own housing are significantly higher than those who do not, and the public service access attribute of housing increases the fertility intentions of homeowners [5]. International comparisons further corroborate this view; Japaridze and Sayour (2024), based on analysis of US data, showed that excessive housing burdens lead to reduced fertility intentions among young families [6]. Shi Zhilei and Teng Congbo (2023) found that enhanced accessibility of childcare services can, to some extent, increase the fertility intentions of urban and rural families [7]. However, some scholars hold the opposite view regarding the role of childcare services, arguing that market-based childcare services do not significantly increase women's intentions to have more children and may even have a certain suppressive effect [8].

The second strand of literature focuses on the impact of socio-cultural factors on fertility intentions. Some scholars have studied the relationship between the fertility intentions of people of fertility age and gender role attitudes, finding that more egalitarian gender role attitudes can suppress fertility intentions [9], although other scholars hold the opposite view [10]. Additionally, some have explored the impact of the motherhood penalty [11] on fertility intentions.

With the proliferation of digital technology, the internet has become an important factor influencing individual attitudes. Domestic and international scholars have begun to pay attention to the relationship between internet use and fertility intentions. Some studies have found that internet use can help women better balance career and family, thereby promoting fertility intentions [12]. Li Shun pointed out that internet use suppresses women's fertility intentions through two pathways: increasing income levels and reducing marital stability [13]. Other research has found that internet use lowers residents' fertility intentions by influencing traditional norms [14]. A review of the relevant literature reveals that studies focusing on internet use and fertility intentions are relatively scarce and have the following shortcomings: First, there is still debate about whether the impact of internet use on fertility intentions is positive or negative, and few studies use recent microdata, making it difficult to fully reflect the

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latest trends in internet penetration and changes in fertility intentions in recent years. Second, the impact of internet use may vary depending on group characteristics, but existing studies have not fully explored differences between groups. Third, existing literature lacks sufficient exploration of the mechanisms through which internet use affects fertility intentions, with few scholars studying the indirect effect via the influence on the "raising children for old age " norm. Based on this, this paper uses relatively new micro-survey data to reveal the suppressive effect of internet use on fertility intentions, analyzes heterogeneity from multiple dimensions, and tests the mediating role of the "raising children for old age " norm, revealing the transmission mechanism of "internet use → raising children for old age → fertility intentions," thereby addressing the insufficient discussion of mediating mechanisms in existing literature. Compared to existing studies that mostly use older data, the data used in this paper can more accurately capture the dynamic changes in fertility decisions in the current context, providing new empirical evidence for understanding the low fertility phenomenon. Simultaneously, the research conclusions offer more timely references for formulating fertility support policies.

2.2. Research Hypotheses

In the context of the internet era, changes in information dissemination methods have exerted a certain influence on residents' fertility intentions. Information dissemination theory emphasizes the impact of the source, content, and channels of information on individual behavior and values. As a key platform for modern information dissemination, the internet provides information that includes both fertility-friendly content such as parenting knowledge and resources, as well as negative information that may hinder childbirth, potentially increasing residents' worries and anxieties about fertility, thereby suppressing their fertility intentions. Social cognitive theory posits that individual behavior and attitudes are influenced by their perception and evaluation of the social environment. Internet use alters residents' perception of the social environment, broadens their ways of understanding social progress, and provides them with more opportunities to encounter new things, thereby helping to break down self-enclosed and limited views, fostering open-mindedness and modern ways of thinking [15]. Consequently, it may reduce their identification with the traditional "raising children for old age " norm, leading them to seek other forms of old-age support, such as social pensions or personal savings. This change in attitudes may influence residents' views and behaviors regarding fertility, thereby indirectly affecting their fertility intentions.

Based on the literature review and the above analysis, this paper proposes the following research hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Internet use will significantly suppress residents' fertility intentions.

Hypothesis 2: Internet use indirectly affects residents' fertility intentions by weakening the "raising children for old age " norm.

3. Data Source, Variable Definitions, and Econometric Model

3.1. Data Source

The data for this research are mainly derived from the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) database. Since its inception in 2003, the CGSS project has been dedicated to systematically collecting comprehensive data on Chinese society. It adopts a rigorous random sampling methodology, ensuring coverage of all 31 provincial-level administrative regions in China's mainland, including provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities. The survey captures multi-dimensional information at the individual, household, and societal levels, encompassing respondents' basic demographics, educational backgrounds, occupational status, family structures, and social attitudes. As a pivotal data resource for studies on Chinese society, the CGSS facilitates the analysis of evolving trends and salient issues across economic, educational,

ISSN: 2688-9323

political, and cultural domains.As the 2021 wave of the CGSS contains specific data on fertility intentions and internet usage behavior, this study selects the 2021 dataset as its primary sample. During data processing, to ensure sample integrity and analytical validity, observations with non-substantive responses such as "don't know," "refuse to answer," or missing values were excluded. The final cleaned dataset comprises 5,840 valid observations, which satisfies the analytical requirements of this study.

3.2. Variable Definitions

The dependent variable in this paper is residents' fertility intentions. Drawing on relevant literature and considering the research purpose, this paper selects the response to the question in the CGSS2021 questionnaire: "If there were no policy restrictions, how many children would you like to have?" to measure residents' fertility intentions. This measurement method has been applied in existing research on fertility intentions [16].

The core explanatory variable is internet use, measured using the question from the survey questionnaire: "In the past year, how often have you used the internet?" Specifically, the frequency of internet use - "Never," "Rarely," "Sometimes," "Often," and "Very Frequently" - is assigned values from 1 to 5 respectively, with higher numbers indicating higher frequency of internet use.

Referring to [17], this paper controls for age and its square, gender, ethnicity, household registration, religious belief, political affiliation, education level, marital status, personal annual income, whether the respondent already has children, the interior floor area of the current residence, whether the household owns a car, and the level of the family's economic status in the local area. Definitions and descriptive statistics of the main variables are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Variable Definitions and Descriptive Statistics

variable	Variable Definition	mean	standard error
fertility intention	Ideal number of children	1.997	0.893
Internet Use	Frequency: Never=1, Rarely=2, Sometimes=3, Often=4, Very Frequently=5	3.485	1.612
Age	Continuous value of respondent's age	50.416	15.822
Age Squared	Square of the continuous value of age	2792.118	1554.346
Gender	Male=1, Female=0	0.472	0.499
Ethnicity	Han=1, Other=0	0.931	0.254
Registration	Non-agricultural household registration=1, Agricultural household registration=0	0.428	0.495
Religious Belief	Has religious belief=1, No=0	0.072	0.258
Political Affiliation	CCP member=1, No=0	0.124	0.330
Education Level	Primary school or below=1, Junior high=2, Senior high=3, College=4, Postgraduate=5, Master's or above=6	3.267	1.276
Married	Married=1, No=0	0.749	0.434
Personal Income	Logarithm of (personal annual income + 1)	8.391	4.059
Has Children	Already has children=1, No=0	0.853	0.354
Housing Area	Logarithm of the construction area of current residence	4.599	0.603
Car Ownership	The family has a car=1,No=0	0.449	0.497
Family Economic Status	Level of family's economic status in the local area, assigned 1-5 from low to high	2.609	0.763

3.3. Econometric Model

Given that the dependent variable, residents' fertility intentions, is a count variable, this paper chooses to construct a Poisson regression model for estimation. The specific form of the Poisson regression model is as follows:

ISSN: 2688-9323

$$P(Yi=y_i \mid x_i)=\frac{e^{-\lambda_i}\lambda_i^{y_i}}{y_i!}$$

In this equation, the dependent variable Y_i represents the fertility intention of resident i, y_i is the observed value, x_i represents a series of factors affecting fertility intentions, and λ_i is the parameter of the Poisson model. The corresponding linear model can be expressed as:

$$\lambda_i = e^{\beta_0+\beta_i internet_i+rcontrol_i+\varepsilon_i}$$

In this equation, the core explanatory variable $Internet_i$ represents the frequency of internet use by individual i, $Control_i$ encompasses a series of control variables at the individual, family, and societal levels; and ε_i represents the random error term.

4. Baseline Regression Results and Related Tests

4.1. Baseline Regression: Stepwise Regression

Table 2. Baseline Regression Results

variable	(1)	(2)	(3)
Internet Use	-0.0657***	-0.0117***	-0.0135***
	(0.0034)	(0.0042)	(0.0042)
Age		0.0036	-0.0036
		(0.0028)	(0.0031)
Age Squared		0.0000	0.0001***
		0.0000	0.0001***
Gender		0.0289**	0.0351***
		(0.0114)	(0.0113)
Ethnicity		-0.1012***	-0.0985***
		(0.0235)	(0.0233)
Registration		-0.1025***	-0.0933***
		(0.0133)	(0.0134)
Religious Belief		0.0762***	0.0717***
		(0.0221)	(0.0221)
Political Affiliation		0.0635***	0.0554***
		(0.0186)	(0.0186)
Education Level		-0.0217***	-0.0212***
		(0.0064)	(0.0064)
Married		0.0881***	0.0421**
		(0.0155)	(0.0172)
Personal Income		-0.0015	-0.0010
		(0.0014)	(0.0014)
Has Children			0.1525***
			(0.0314)
Housing Area			0.0430***
			(0.0096)
Car Ownership			0.0208*
			(0.0122)
Family Econ. Status			0.0080
			(0.0077)
Constant Term	0.9151***	0.5889***	0.4532***
	(0.0127)	(0.0735)	(0.0881)
Observation	5840	5840	5840

Standard errors in parentheses * p <0.1, ** p <0.05, *** p <0.01. Robust standard error is reported in parentheses. The same applies to the tables below.

ISSN: 2688-9323

Based on the variable settings described above, this paper employs a Poisson model to conduct a regression analysis of the impact of internet use on residents' fertility intentions. The regression results are detailed in Table 2. Model (1) shows the regression result without including any control variables, indicating a negative correlation between internet use and fertility intentions, significant at the 1% statistical level. This preliminarily suggests that internet use suppresses residents' fertility intentions. Models (2) and (3) include control variables, and the regression results remain largely consistent with Model (1), indicating that internet use significantly suppresses residents' fertility intentions.

4.2. Robustness Checks

To further verify the reliability and stability of the research results – that internet use suppresses residents' fertility intentions – robustness checks were conducted from the following two aspects.

4.2.1. Replacing the Core Explanatory Variable

To address potential estimation bias due to inconsistent definitions of the core explanatory variable, this paper adopts two alternative methods to redefine internet use. First, recoding the respondents' answers: defining "Never" and "Rarely" as not using the internet (assigned 0), and the remaining options as using the internet (assigned 1). The regression result is shown in Model (1) of Table 3. Second, using another question from the questionnaire, "Do you often surf the internet in your leisure time?" to replace the core explanatory variable. The regression result is shown in Model (2) of Table 3. Based on these tests, it can be concluded that changing the definition of the core explanatory variable yields regression results whose significance and direction are largely consistent with the baseline regression conclusion.

4.2.2. Changing the Regression Model

To address potential bias due to model specification issues, this paper conducts robustness checks by changing the regression model. First, using an OLS regression model to replace the Poisson model used in the baseline regression. The result is shown in Model (3) of Table 3. Second, using a negative binomial regression model. The result is shown in Model (4) of Table 3. The results indicate that the findings obtained after changing the regression model remain largely consistent with the baseline results.

Table 3. Robustness Checks

variable	Replacing Core Explanatory Variable		Changing Regression Model	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Internet Use	-0.0378***	-0.0132***	-0.0280***	-0.0126***
	(0.0144)	(0.0038)	(0.0088)	(0.0042)
Control Vars	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observation	5840	5825	5840	5840

In summary, the research conclusions of this paper are robust.

4.3. Heterogeneity Analysis

Based on the aforementioned findings, this paper further examines the heterogeneity in the impact of internet use on residents' fertility intentions across dimensions of urban-rural differences, gender differences, political affiliation differences, and educational attainment differences. Table 4 presents the heterogeneity test results for Registration type and gender. The results show that in Model (2), the average marginal effect of internet use is significantly negative at the 5% statistical level, whereas in Model (1), this effect is not statistically significant. This indicates that the suppressive effect of the internet on residents' fertility intentions differs between urban and rural areas. Specifically, internet use significantly reduces

ISSN: 2688-9323

the fertility intentions of rural residents. The reason may stem from the stronger hold of traditional norms in rural areas; the internet directly impacts residents' fertility intentions by disseminating modern values, significantly weakening them. In contrast, urban residents are already at a higher level of modernization, where fertility intentions are more influenced by economic factors, and the impact of the internet is weaker. In Model (3), the average marginal effect of internet use is significantly negative at the 10% statistical level, but in Model (4), its average marginal effect is significantly negative at the 5% statistical level. This indicates that internet use reduces the fertility intentions of both male and female groups, but the suppressive effect is more pronounced for females. This is because, relative to males, the dissemination of information about the "motherhood penalty" on the internet directly exacerbates anxiety about fertility among females [18].

Table 4. Heterogeneity by Registration and Gender

variable	Registration		Gender	
	Urban	Rural	Male	Female
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Internet Use	-0.0115	-0.0114**	-0.0124***	-0.0131***
	(0.0073)	(0.0052)	(0.0063)	(0.0056)
Control Vars	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observation	2498	3342	2755	3085

Table 5. Heterogeneity by Registration and Gender

variable	Education Level		Political Affilication	
	Higher Edu.	Low Edu.	Party Member	Non-Party Member
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Internet Use	0.0200	-0.0175**	-0.0073***	-0.0139***
	(0.0160)	(0.0044)	(0.0136)	(0.0044)
Control Vars	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observation	1273	4567	727	5113

Table 5 presents the empirical results of heterogeneity analysis by education level and political affiliation. The analysis reveals that in Model (1), the average marginal effect of internet use is statistically insignificant, whereas in Model (2), it is significantly negative at the 1% level. This indicates a substantial heterogeneity in the impact of internet use on fertility intentions across education levels. Specifically, internet use significantly reduces fertility intentions among individuals with lower education levels. This may be attributed to their relatively weaker capacity to filter and process online information. Consequently, exposure to fertility-unfriendly content on the internet exerts a stronger inhibitory effect on their fertility intentions. In contrast, highly educated individuals generally possess stronger information screening and processing capabilities, enabling them to more rationally assess the credibility and relevance of online information , thereby mitigating the negative impact of fertility-unfriendly content.

In Model (4), the average marginal effect of internet use is significantly negative at the 1% level, while it remains insignificant in Model (3). This suggests heterogeneous effects of internet use on fertility intentions based on political affiliation. Specifically, internet use significantly reduces fertility intentions among non-Party members. This phenomenon may stem from the fact that Party members typically undergo more rigorous ideological training and value guidance . Despite exposure to substantial fertility-unfriendly information online, Party members may demonstrate greater responsiveness to national fertility policies. Furthermore,

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Party members show a stronger tendency to acquire information through official channels, which generally disseminate more positive content aligned with traditional values, thereby rendering the overall impact of internet use insignificant for this group.

5. Mechanism Analysis

The above research has found that internet use significantly suppresses residents' fertility intentions, and this effect is robust. Next, to further explore the pathway of this effect, this paper focuses on the mediating mechanism of the "raising children for old age " norm. The primary reason is that traditional old-age support concepts are one of the core motivations for Chinese family fertility decisions, and the "raising children for old age " norm has long been regarded as a core driver of residents' fertility intentions [19]. Therefore, this paper uses the response to the questionnaire item "Who do you think should be mainly responsible for the elderly who have children?" to measure the "raising children for old age " norm. Respondents who believed it is "mainly the children's responsibility" were defined as 1, otherwise 0. The three-step mediation effect test was employed, and the regression results are shown in Table 5. In columns (1) to (3), column (1) shows the baseline regression result. In column (2), the regression coefficient between internet use and the selected mediator variable is significantly negative. In column (3), the selected mediator variable has a significantly positive relationship with fertility intentions, and the absolute value of the coefficient for internet use decreases. This preliminarily verifies that the "raising children for old age " norm has a mediating effect. Furthermore, the Sobel test results show a Z-value of -2.532, significant at the 5% statistical level, confirming the existence of the mediation effect. It can be concluded that internet use weakens the traditional "raising children for old age " norm. The reason may be that the internet gives people more opportunities to encounter new things, making their ideas more open [20], thereby reducing their identification with the traditional "raising children for old age " norm. In summary, although the traditional "raising children for old age " norm has a significant positive impact on fertility intentions, with the increasingly widespread use of the internet, this norm is gradually being diluted. That is, internet use exerts a positive influence on the reduction of fertility intentions by weakening the "raising children for old age " norm.

Table 6. Mediation Effect Analysis of Internet Use on Fertility Intentions

variable	Fertility Intentions	Raising Children for Old Age	Fertility Intentions
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Internet Use	-0.0280***	-0.0197***	-0.0271***
	(0.0088)	(0.0052)	(0.0089)
Raising Children for Old Age			-0.0793***
			(0.0226)
Control variables	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	5840	5781	5781
Sobel Z	-2.532**		

6. Conclusion and Implications

Based on data from the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) 2021, this paper analyzed the impact of internet use on residents' fertility intentions using a Poisson regression model. The study finds that internet use significantly suppresses residents' fertility intentions, and this impact exhibits heterogeneity based on Registration type, education level, political affiliation, and gender. Specifically, internet use significantly reduces the fertility intentions of rural residents, groups with lower education levels, and non-Party members, with a greater

suppressive effect on females. Furthermore, mechanism tests indicate that the "raising children for old age " norm plays a partial mediating role in the impact of internet use on fertility intentions.

Based on the above findings, this study can provide a new explanation for understanding China's low fertility rate, from which the following implications can be drawn: First, the government should strengthen the supervision of online information, establish sound information review mechanisms to ensure the accuracy and scientific nature of fertility-related information. Simultaneously, professional institutions and experts should be encouraged to disseminate high-quality fertility information through internet platforms to help residents better understand fertility issues. Second, guided by socialist core values, multiple channels such as social media, community publicity, and public lectures should be fully utilized to disseminate "fertility-friendly" information to the public. Increased publicity regarding fertility support policies, childcare resources, and family welfare, along with the popularization of scientific knowledge about childbirth, can enhance residents' awareness of fertility and jointly create a "fertility-friendly" social environment. Third, the popularization and wide application of the internet are inevitable trends of development in the current era. Although there is a certain correlation between internet use and low fertility rates, this does not mean that the influence of the internet is entirely negative. On the contrary, through effective policy guidance and intervention regarding online content, the influence of the internet can be transformed into a positive factor for enhancing fertility intentions, thereby promoting long-term balanced population development.

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