

The Role of Social Media in Shaping Fertility Intentions Among Young Women in East Asian Cultures

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Abstract. This study investigates the influence of social media on the fertility intentions of young women in East Asian societies. It focuses on how various aspects of social media, including exposure to images of children, sharing of personal parenting experiences, and discussions around early childhood education, shape women's thoughts and decisions about having children. The paper identifies a significant impact of social media in either encouraging or deterring young women from pursuing motherhood, highlighting the platform's role in conveying both positive and negative aspects of parenting. A key finding of the research is the dual nature of social media: while it offers a sense of community and support, it also imposes pressures and sets unrealistic standards, especially regarding motherhood and family life. The study further explores the growing influence of individualistic and feminist viewpoints within social media narratives, examining how they interact with cultural norms to affect fertility choices among young women. This research offers valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and healthcare providers, suggesting the need for more supportive and realistic approaches to family planning and maternal health in the context of a digitally connected world.

Keywords: Social Media; Fertility Intentions; Young Women.

1. Introduction

In the era of digital interconnectedness, social media platforms have emerged as pivotal influencers in shaping public opinion and personal choices. The ubiquity of social media is undeniable, with platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter becoming integral to daily life (Smith & Anderson, 2018). These platforms not only facilitate communication and information sharing but also play a significant role in shaping perceptions and attitudes on various life aspects, including health, lifestyle, and family planning.

Fertility intentions, a term that encapsulates an individual's desire or plan to have children, are a critical component in understanding not only personal life trajectories but also broader demographic trends. The concept of fertility intentions is multifaceted, encompassing various aspects such as the desired number of children, the timing of childbearing, and the conditions deemed necessary for parenthood (Miller, 2011). Understanding these intentions is crucial as they often serve as a predictor of actual fertility behavior, thereby influencing population growth and demographic shifts.

The significance of studying fertility intentions extends beyond mere demographic interest. It intersects with issues of gender equality, economic development, and social welfare. For instance, women's fertility decisions are closely linked to their participation in the workforce and their overall economic empowerment (Bloom, Canning, & Sevilla, 2003). Furthermore, fertility intentions and their realization (or lack thereof) have profound implications for social policies, particularly in areas related to family planning, maternal health, and child welfare.

The factors influencing fertility intentions are diverse and complex. Socio-economic status, for instance, plays a crucial role; individuals with higher levels of education and income often have different fertility patterns compared to those with lower socio-economic status (Beaujouan, 2016). Cultural norms and societal expectations also significantly shape fertility intentions. In many societies, there is a strong societal expectation to have children, which can exert considerable pressure on individuals, particularly women (Balbo & Mills, 2011).

Personal values and experiences are equally influential. The desire to have children can be rooted in personal fulfillment, the continuation of family lineage, or perceived societal obligations.

Conversely, concerns about the environment, the challenges of parenting, and the desire for personal freedom and career advancement can lead to lower fertility intentions (Testa, 2012).

In recent years, the role of digital media, particularly social media, in shaping fertility intentions has emerged as a new area of interest. The pervasive nature of social media means that it can significantly influence individual perceptions and decisions regarding childbearing, either reinforcing existing societal norms or challenging them (Manovich, 2017). This influence is particularly pronounced among women, who often bear the brunt of societal expectations regarding fertility and motherhood.

Social media platforms can offer a plethora of information and perspectives on parenthood, child-rearing, and family life, potentially influencing users' perceptions and decisions regarding childbearing (Manovich, 2017). However, the nature of this influence is complex and multifaceted. On one hand, social media can provide support, advice, and a sense of community for those considering parenthood. On the other hand, it can also propagate unrealistic expectations and pressures, particularly around the ideals of motherhood and family life (Chou & Edge, 2012).

Despite the growing importance of this subject, there remains a significant gap in understanding the nuanced ways in which social media impacts women's fertility intentions. This paper aims to bridge this gap by providing a comprehensive overview of existing research on the topic, exploring both the positive and negative influences of social media on women's decisions and attitudes towards childbearing. By doing so, it seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on the intersection of digital media and personal life choices in the modern age.

2. Factors of Impacting Fertility Intentions

2.1 Exposure to Babies' Pictures

Research has consistently shown that stated desires and intentions to have a baby are strong predictors of actual fertility outcomes (Miller, Severy, & Pasta, 2004). A key factor influencing these desires is the daily exposure to children, which can significantly shape one's inclination towards parenthood. In the contemporary digital age, social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter have become pivotal in facilitating this exposure (Gross, 2004, Lenhart et al., 2010). Young women, who are extensive users of these platforms, are often exposed to a barrage of content featuring children's endearing moments (Brase & Brase, 2012). This is further amplified by a trend where parents create dedicated accounts to showcase their children's lives. The phenomenon, termed 'baby copying' (Hensvik, 2010), suggests that complex family planning decisions, such as the choice to have children, may be influenced by social information gleaned from these digital interactions. Given the pervasive nature of social media in spreading and sometimes exaggerating information, it is plausible that such platforms play a significant role in shaping fertility intentions among young female users. This influence is likely mediated by the vicarious experiences of parenthood shared within one's social network, encompassing acquaintances, friends, and family.

2.2 Personal Experience

While the portrayal of child-rearing as a source of happiness on social media positively influences women's desire to have children, the other side of this phenomenon is the frequent depiction of negative experiences related to childbirth and parenting on these platforms, which can deter many women from pursuing motherhood. Posts related to personal experiences also wield significant influence over fertility intentions. The way individuals articulate their bodily sensations can profoundly shape others' attitudes. These firsthand experiences serve as compelling evidence, among the most reliable sources available. Details about changes in body weight, the appearance of scars on the abdomen, the emergence of stretch marks, and the impact of estrogen on physical appearance all constitute first hand evidence. Additionally, they share about how taking care of newborn babies has

deprived them of their sleeping time. Whether portraying negative or positive attitudes, these accounts serve as vital references for young women interested in fertility.

2.2.1 Women's feelings about their body

The multifaceted challenges faced by women in the context of childbirth and child-rearing extend beyond the physical and emotional strains commonly discussed. Notably, childbirth-related issues often exacerbate marital discord and mother-in-law/daughter-in-law conflicts, further intensifying the perceived parenting stress among women. This phenomenon is well-documented in the literature. For instance, a study by Lawrence, Rothman, Cobb, Rothman, and Bradbury (2008) highlights how marital satisfaction declines after the birth of a child, which can contribute to increased stress and anxiety among mothers. Similarly, Pilkington, Milne, Cairns, Lewis, and Whelan (2015) discuss the complexities of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship in the postpartum period, noting that these tensions can lead to heightened feelings of inadequacy and stress in new mothers.

Furthermore, the role of social media in shaping and reflecting these experiences cannot be overlooked. Women often turn to social media platforms to express their struggles and seek support. However, as observed by Bartholomew, Schoppe-Sullivan, Glassman, Kamp Dush, and Sullivan (2012), the portrayal of these challenges on social media can sometimes lead to a cycle of negative emotional expression and reinforcement among women. They argue that the frequent exposure to posts depicting life difficulties and negative emotions related to child-rearing can perpetuate a sense of despair and inadequacy among women, potentially influencing their mental health and well-being.

2.2.2 Postnatal Center

Additionally, posts detailing the birthing environment hold considerable sway. As technology advances, human emphasis on life quality grows. Consequently, the birthing environment gains immense importance. Social media abounds with posts or videos sharing experiences and emotions regarding stays at postnatal centers. These centers offer specialized care for women after childbirth, facilitating recovery while tending to their infants. Present-day postnatal care has matured, providing a more nurturing environment. This includes specially designed meals, postpartum exercise classes like pilates for maternity recovery, and educational programs for the families of new mothers. These portrayals of life within postnatal centers can significantly alter young women's perceptions or apprehensions regarding fertility.

2.2.3 Emotion Change of Women After Childbearing.

Moreover, posts describing the treatment women receive from their families during childbirth also impact the fertility intentions of young women. Fear often surrounds how families may treat them—whether they'll be left alone with the children or receive assistance and companionship. Depictions of caring families in these posts alleviate young women's fears about pregnancy. Conversely, accounts depicting loneliness and lack of familial support diminish young women's fertility intentions. Research has shown women who receive parenting help from their family members are more likely to have stronger fertility intentions, since they can rely on other people. (Aassve et al., 2012).

3. Importance of Early Childhood Education

With the development of the economy, parents place a higher value on children's education. Especially in East Asian culture, parents hold an exceptionally high regard for their children's education, considering it a cornerstone for success and a pathway to a better future. Education stands out as a top priority, often demanding significant investments of time, resources, and effort. Families consistently instill in their children a deep respect for learning, emphasizing rigorous study habits and discipline from an early age. Achieving academic excellence is not only a personal goal but also a reflection of family honor and societal expectations. Consequently, parents frequently make considerable sacrifices to afford their children the best educational opportunities available, recognizing it as an invaluable asset that opens doors to greater prospects in life. Parenting plays an

important role in the development of early childhood achievement differentials. Children's career path, and future life style depends a lot on how parents educate them. In this perspective, parenting become extremely essential to both parents and children.

3.1 Time Investment

The length of time invested in children's education has long been recognized as important in past research. How much time parents should spend on their children's education has also become a controversial topic in today's society. Due to the reason that young people are so busy with their work, they can hardly allocate or spend their free time on children's education. But under east asian culture, education is a thing that parents can't and shouldn't ignore if they want to be "responsible and good parents". For young females who are in east asian culture, taking care of children seems to be their natural responsibility. Working and parenting at the same time can pose a heavy pressure on them. After seeing posts about how other new mothers' lives have struggled on social media, females will have their own interpretation about their future after having a baby. This will decrease their fertility intentions.

3.2 Financial Investment

Previous research has shown that family income is related to children's development and youth. Instead of only investing their time, parents also put large amounts of money into their kids. Posts about how many extracurricular classes, and how much money they put into their kids have caused a lot of anxieties. Sports classes for children's health, instrument classes for children's talents, school related classes for their academics have cost so much money. Especially for families who live in a metropolis. For example, in 2014, parents in the top decile of earners spent nearly \$600 per quarter per child on financial investments in children. The large amount of money being a parents need to spend on their children was revealed on social media, and more young females have seen the truth that raising children and being a good parent isn't an easy job.

4. Conclusion

In East Asian culture, there is a longstanding belief that education represents the swiftest path to altering one's destiny or social standing. However, with the global economy nearing a stable phase, social classes have become more entrenched and less mutable. Consequently, individuals must invest more money, time, and effort to effect change, leading to a troubling cycle of intense internal focus. Furthermore, there has been a notable increase in the average education level in recent years, resulting in a depreciation of the value associated with higher educational degrees. Despite this shift, East Asians continue to uphold the fundamental belief in education's transformative power over one's fate. The media consistently reinforces this belief, perpetuating its significance. Consequently, young women, already grappling with the challenges of pursuing careers or education independently, face additional pressures. Content highlighting the immense financial, temporal, and emotional demands of raising a child induces fear and apprehension, dissuading many from embracing parenthood and its substantial responsibilities. Another intriguing trend emerging on social media nowadays is the connection being drawn between pregnancy and feminism. Previous research has highlighted how 'Social media today serve as crucial instruments of political expression and participation for human rights groups and disadvantaged communities in China to 'get their messages heard'.' Feminism has evolved into a contentious and heated topic within today's social media landscape. Young women constitute the most active and significant group on these platforms, gaining a better understanding of feminism and asserting their empowerment. However, interpretations of feminism's values vary widely among individuals. Some believe that pregnancy does not represent a woman's independence or membership in feminism.

The decision to have a baby or not should be an individual choice for women and should not be associated with the principles of feminism. Simply put, feminism does not equate to infertility. Social

media have introduced a misguided perspective on pregnancy behavior, where fertility intentions hold more social value than individual choices. This phenomenon is leading to a decline in fertility intentions among young women, as they strive to embody a feminist role model.

However, why does East Asian social media perpetuate this distorted view of feminism? This could be attributed to the region's long history of patriarchal society. Women in East Asian cultures have long endured the damage and disrespect inflicted by male family members or individuals outside their families. Male used to have control over the females' fertility intentions. Hence, in their eyes, pregnancy might be seen as a sign of dependence on males or sacrificing their own lives for the family. Moreover, they believe that contraception and denial of maternity is a way to control their lives and live the life they want. Take South Korea for example, the necessities of marriage dropped from 47% to 22.4% in one decade.

In examining the radical feminist movements in contemporary East Asian societies, it's crucial to understand the deep-seated aversion to childbirth, a sentiment deeply rooted in the region's cultural and historical context. This resistance is not merely a reaction to patriarchal norms but also a critique of the longstanding cultural glorification of fertility and the oppressive valuation of women primarily for their reproductive roles. Historically, East Asian societies have placed immense value on the concept of 'more children bring more happiness,' a belief that has often translated into an overbearing expectation on women to prioritize childbirth and family over personal aspirations.

In such a context, the advent of social media has provided a platform for these complex issues to be discussed and debated. However, these platforms often inadvertently amplify gender conflicts. Objective discussions about women's reproductive roles are frequently entangled with broader debates about gender equality, leading to polarized views. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the way modern feminist movements in these societies are navigating the balance between advocating for women's rights and challenging deeply ingrained cultural norms.

For example, in South Korea, the influence of feminist ideologies has been profound, as evidenced by the dramatic decline in the perceived necessity of marriage, dropping from 47% to 22.4% in just a decade. This shift is indicative of a larger transformation in societal attitudes towards traditional gender roles and reproductive autonomy. Women are increasingly seeking control over their lives, which includes making decisions about if and when to have children, free from societal pressures and expectations.

This trend reflects a broader reevaluation of what it means to be a woman in modern East Asian societies. The feminist discourse is not just about rejecting the patriarchal control over women's fertility but is also a challenge to the cultural narratives that have historically dictated women's roles and value in society. As such, the resistance to childbirth in these feminist movements is a powerful statement about reclaiming autonomy and redefining womanhood on their own terms.

Undoubtedly, varieties of information on social media have generated a huge impact on young females, under the background that young females are the primary users. Negative impact of social media posing on young females' fertility intentions seem more obvious than positive impacts. By reinforcing the opinion that having a baby can have benefits or losses on young females as a person, young females' ideas are switched and become different with traditional values. In the past, more centralized under East Asian culture, fertility was seen as one of the essential social rules that deeply entangled with the whole family's benefits. Women should also be responsible for maintaining the continuity of their husbands' families. Fertility is more collectivism. But now, bearing children is more like a personal choice which has less connection with collectives than individualism. Young females themselves value their own feelings and benefits more than the past.

It seems like there is so much change in young females' fertility intentions by the exposure of social media. But, social media is not the reason which changes the benefits or losses of bearing a child. This paper has shown that the reason why there is impact on young females' fertility intention is because, firstly, although it is not directly related to the costs of bearing a child, it affects young females' feelings of what it will be after having a child. The truth of having a child has been revealed to them. Secondly, the rising of feminism and also individualism on young females, individual

benefits are now prior to family benefits. Media is a tool to express the mainstream values of society. It represents collectivism and aims to reinforce audiences' recognition of shared values. Social media, which explains to us what personal values are, have changed the way people think of individual benefits. Social media gives every user a chance to express themselves, and they have the opportunity to detach from mainstream values, and see other individuals' perspectives. Social media has outsized the impact of different ideas. Now, by using social media, they have chances to change their life choice based on seeing other users. Lastly, young people focus on short term happiness nowadays, but value long term benefit less important than the past. However, bearing a child is a long term benefit. It might be one of the impacts that covid era brought to people that they had so many uncertainties during covid era.

5. Discussion

The main focus of this paper is a reflection on how individualism is embedded within the realm of social media and young females' fertility intentions. The paper has elucidated the profound impact and logical chains depicting how social media has altered young females' fertility intentions.

Under the protection of freedom of speech, different ideas regarding fertility intentions and the expression of personal ideas represent the openness of society. When multimedia environments impact people's ideas, we can intervene in people's fertility intentions by manipulating public opinion. However, doing so may only cover up the problem without solving it. When facing the impacts of media on young females' fertility intentions, this article can be referenced to provide suggestions for constructing a fertility-friendly society.

Considering the complaints about the cost of childbearing expressed on the Internet, as well as the anxiety about childbearing catalyzed by the perception of high childbearing costs, the Government should focus on constructing and improving the social support system. It should enhance social support for childbearing and childcare by further expanding the coverage of universal child care institutions, increasing subsidies for childbearing, and improving the construction of public infrastructure related to motherhood, infancy, and childcare. In addition, regarding the implementation of the maternity subsidy policy, it is necessary to insist on accurate identification and delivery, expand the impact of the policy, and improve the actual operational efficiency of the subsidy program.

Developing and designing collectivist and mutual-help, understanding and empathy-oriented family intervention support programs centered on family dilemmas and conflicts during the childbearing process would promote the formation of a harmonious and loving family culture. It would increase fathers' participation in household chores during the child-rearing period, enhance positive communication and interaction among family members, minimize conflicts and contradictions caused by child-rearing, and provide strong support for new parents to alleviate their emotional stress and transition into their new roles more effectively.

The mainstream media should pay attention to promoting policies and public opinion by emphasizing the long-term rewards of parenthood and childbearing for individuals. This would create an atmosphere of public opinion that encourages childbearing. It is important to note that, at present, most of the policy propaganda for encouraging childbirth in East Asian societies remains at the level of vague slogans and social public values. Such propaganda is very likely to trigger young people's skepticism and further define childbirth as an act of sacrifice that deprives individuals of their values and threatens their interests. This sense of deprivation and sacrifice will undoubtedly deepen the revulsion and disgust among young people who cherish individualism.

Therefore, considering the important influence of individualism and presentist thinking on reproductive decision-making as revealed in this study, reproductive propaganda in the new era should pay more attention to the value and significance of procreation to the individual's life itself. It should encourage young people to understand the multi-level impact of procreation on the individual, including the continuity of the bloodline and the connection between life and life.

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