

Research on the Interaction Mechanism Between the Evolution of Marriage Attitudes and Fertility Intentions Among Chinese College Students in the New Era

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Abstract: This study, grounded in theories of marriage deinstitutionalization and risk society, examines the interaction mechanism between shifts in marriage attitudes and fertility intentions among contemporary Chinese college students under the influence of social media. Findings reveal that students' marital and reproductive behaviors exhibit characteristics of "delayed timing" and "rationalization," with ideal marriage age postponed to 28-35 years and fertility desire declining to 1.36 children. Social media reconstructs perceptions of marriage and childbearing through "algorithm-driven recommendation and circle-based dissemination," employing critical narratives to deconstruct traditional values while fostering emotional communities via subcultural groups, thereby intensifying individualistic values and risk awareness. The individualization trend in marriage attitudes suppresses fertility decisions through "temporal preference-resource allocation" pathways, with gender role conflicts and economic pressures further reinforcing the "low marriage-low fertility" co-evolution. The study proposes a tri-dimensional model of "individualization-risk aversion-gender conflict," elucidating how social media couples attitudinal changes through agenda-setting, cultivation effects, and social identity mechanisms. Policy recommendations include algorithmic governance, institutional support, and cultural reconstruction to address structural contradictions in reproductive decision-making and promote high-quality demographic development.

Keywords: Chinese college students in the new era; Evolution of marriage attitudes; Fertility intentions; Social media; Individualization tendency; Gender conflict; Information cocoon; Low-fertility society

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1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of China's ongoing social transformation, the marital and reproductive behaviors of college students exhibit marked characteristics of "delayed timing" and "rationalization." Current data indicates that the ideal marriage age among this demographic has generally postponed to 28-35 years, with fertility intentions further declining to 1.36 children. This phenomenon aligns with global trends of the Second Demographic Transition - characterized by marriage deinstitutionalization, individualized fertility decision-making, and weakening family functions. This change not only reflects the breakthrough of the traditional marriage and childbearing paradigm of young people, but also reflects the deep change of social structure and cultural values.

From the perspective of a mediatized society, the rise of social media has fundamentally reshaped college students' cognitive frameworks regarding marriage and childbearing. Over 80% of students now acquire related information through short videos and social platforms. The algorithmic recommendation mechanisms and

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communication logics of subcultural communities (e.g., Douban's "Anti-Marriage/Parenthood Groups" and Soul's "Light Dating" communities) are creating "information cocoons" and emotional communities. This mediatization process not only accelerates the diversification of marital and reproductive concepts, but also suppresses fertility intentions through cognitive restructuring and emotional mobilization, forming a "low marriage-low fertility" co-evolution mechanism.

This study integrates theoretical frameworks of marriage deinstitutionalization and risk society to elucidate the interactive logic between marriage attitudes and fertility intentions under social media influence. The core research questions are: How does social media reshape marriage attitudes through value deconstruction and emotional mobilization? How does the individualization tendency in marriage attitudes inhibit reproductive decisions through cognitive and affective pathways? The research aims to construct a three-dimensional theoretical model of "individualization-risk aversion-gender conflict" to explain the following mechanisms: First, social media reinforces individualistic marital and reproductive values through "algorithmic recommendation-circle dissemination," weakening family responsibility ethics; Second, negative platform content like "childrearing cost calculations" and "workplace discrimination cases" amplifies risk perception, promoting conservative decision-making; Third, online discussions of gender revolution theory and motherhood penalty intensify cognitive conflicts between genders regarding reproductive labor division, further suppressing fertility motivation.

This research not only provides theoretical insights for understanding the cultural drivers of low-fertility societies, but also offers scholarly foundations for optimizing marital and reproductive policies and balancing media ecology. Against the national strategic background of high-quality population development, clarifying the structural impact of social media on youth's marital and reproductive concepts carries urgent practical significance.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, driven by both social transformation and media technology development, the interaction mechanism between college students' marital attitudes and fertility intentions has become an academic focus. Existing research primarily explores the following dimensions:

(1) Individualization shift in marital attitudes

Scholars such as Yang Juhua have identified a "deinstitutionalization" characteristic in contemporary college students' views on marriage. The purpose of marriage has shifted from "family responsibility" to "self-actualization," with greater emphasis on spiritual compatibility in mate selection and more liberal attitudes toward sexuality. Studies indicate that over 60% of college students consider emotional companionship as the core function of marriage, while the traditional notion of "continuing the family line" has significantly diminished in importance.

(2) Rationalized constraints on fertility intentions

Research by Mao Zhuoyan et al., based on 30,000 nationwide questionnaires, found that college students' ideal number of children has declined to 1.36. Fertility decisions are predominantly governed by "economic rationality," with housing costs and career development conflicts being primary deterrents. Women are particularly concerned about the negative impact of the "motherhood penalty" on their careers, while men focus more on work-family balance pressures.

(3) Social Media's reconstruction of fertility perceptions

Studies reveal that short video platforms and social media reshape college students' understanding of marriage and childbearing through agenda-setting and algorithmic recommendations. Subcultural communities further legitimize non-traditional reproductive choices, reinforcing a "low marriage-low fertility" decision-making loop.

(4) However, current research has three main limitations

First, most studies focus on single variables and lack systematic explanation of the dynamic interaction between marital attitudes and fertility intentions. Second, there is insufficient interdisciplinary integration between media theory and demography, making it difficult to reveal social media's mediating role in reproductive decision-making.

Third, policy research predominantly emphasizes economic subsidies while paying inadequate attention to the incentivizing effects of "employment support policies."

3. Theoretical Framework

(1) Media theory framework of social media influence

1) Agenda-Setting theory

Digital platforms reconstruct perceptions of marriage and reproduction through prioritized issue framing. For instance, high-frequency exposure to labels like "marriage-phobia" and "DINK" (Double Income No Kids) shapes college students' attention hierarchy regarding reproductive risks. This agenda-setting not only influences "what to think about" but also guides value judgments through "how to think," such as associating marriage with negative imagery like "financial burden" and "freedom restriction," thereby undermining the legitimacy of traditional marital narratives.

2) Cultivation theory

Prolonged exposure to algorithm-recommended homogeneous content leads to increasingly pessimistic expectations about marital stability among college students. Cultivation theory reveals how media content gradually internalizes as "social reality" through repetitive narratives - for example, the persistent dissemination of "motherhood dilemma" cases intensifies women's fear of childbearing. This media cultivation effect diminishes the perceived "institutional security" of marriage and reproduction, shifting decision-making from social norm-driven to individual rationality-driven.

3) Social Identity theory

Subcultural communities construct counter-mainstream identity through emotional resonance and symbolic interaction. Their empathy-driven narratives consolidate collective anxiety, forming "emotional communities" that provide legitimacy for non-reproductive choices. Literature indicates that Generation Z reconstructs definitions of intimacy through neologisms like "soft-boiled egg socializing" and "paperclip emotions," deconstructing the normative pressures of traditional marriage.

(2) Theoretical integration and interaction logic

These theories form a synergistic chain of "value reconstruction - cognitive restructuring - behavioral choice";

Individualization-Risk Aversion Synergy: Social media amplifies individuals' rational calculation of reproductive risks through agenda-setting, promoting conservative decision-making;

Gender Conflict-Media Cultivation Resonance: Platform content intensifies gender role opposition, exacerbating cognitive contradictions in reproductive labor division;

Subcultural Deconstruction of Mainstream Narratives: Community interactions provide emotional support and legitimacy for non-reproductive practices.

This framework reveals how social media's mediatization mechanisms couple the evolution of marital attitudes with the weakening of fertility intentions, forming a "low marriage-low fertility" co-evolution logic, thereby providing theoretical insights for understanding cultural drivers during demographic transition periods.

4. Pathways of Social Media's Impact on Marriage Attitudes

(1) Information dissemination: deconstructing traditional narratives

Social media's information dissemination mechanisms reconstruct youth's cognitive logic toward marriage and reproduction through critical narratives and alternative paradigms. On one hand, platforms systematically expose contradictions in traditional marital models via high-frequency coverage of issues like "bride price disputes," "postpartum depression," and "widowed-style parenting." For instance, the abundance of bride price dispute cases on short-video platforms not only deconstructs marriage's "economic contract" nature but also alienates traditional customs into tools for interest bargaining. In-depth discussions on postpartum depression, through individualized narratives, reveal the universality of maternal dilemmas, eroding the perceived "sacredness" and "inevitability" of marriage. On the other hand, influencers showcasing non-traditional practices like "celibacy," "DINK lifestyles," and "light cohabitation" provide youth with alternative life scripts.

(2) Value reconstruction: intertwined individualism and consumerism

Social media reshapes marital and reproductive values through dual pathways of "self-pleasure culture" and "material symbolism." The prevalent "self-prioritization" narratives on short-video platforms elevate personal growth, career development, and emotional experiences above familial responsibilities, weakening the binding force of traditional family ethics. This individualistic tendency deeply intertwines with consumerist logic: platforms construct new consumption standards through symbolic content like "curated parenting" and "million-dollar weddings."

(3) Group interaction: circle-based polarization and emotional mobilization

Algorithmic recommendation mechanisms and community interactions jointly intensify the polarization of marital and reproductive attitudes. First, platforms' echo chamber effects create cognitive feedback loops for "marriage-and-childbearing-phobia" content. For example, users who frequently browse with topics like "workplace discrimination" or "mid-career unemployment crises" receive continuous algorithmic recommendations of similar content, solidifying perceptions of reproductive risks as "unbearable burdens." Second, online communities consolidate collective anxiety through emotional solidarity. Douban's "Motherhood Penalty" discussion groups and Weibo's "No Marriage/No Children for Safety" hashtags employ empathetic narratives to foster group identity against mainstream discourse. This emotional mobilization not only reinforces conservative decision-making but also redefines the social meaning of reproductive choices through "circle-based symbolism."

5. Interaction Mechanisms Between Shifts in Marriage Attitudes and Fertility Intentions

(1) Inhibitory effect of individualization tendency on fertility

Contemporary college students' marital and reproductive decisions exhibit a marked shift toward individualization, with the core logic prioritizing career development and self-actualization over traditional family responsibilities. The transformation of temporal preferences manifests in the continuous postponement of ideal marriage age, as studies show most students now set their preferred marriage age at 28-35 years. This delay directly compresses women's fertility window, escalating the opportunity costs of childbearing.

At the resource allocation level, the "zero-sum game" between economic and energy investments becomes

increasingly pronounced. Students perceive personal growth as a “high-certainty-return” project, while childbearing is framed as a “high-cost, low-return” option.

(2) Transmission effect of gender role conflicts

Structural contradictions in gender perceptions serve as a critical mechanism suppressing fertility. The motherhood dilemma is amplified through social media’s “fear narratives”: short-video platforms persistently highlight “workplace discrimination cases” and “widowed-style parenting” scenarios, intensifying women’s negative expectations of childbearing.

Simultaneously, tensions arise between students’ egalitarian aspirations and lagging traditional gender norms. While young adults widely advocate shared household responsibilities, childcare remains predominantly borne by women in practice. This dissonance between ideals and reality exacerbates marital-reproductive contradictions: women demanding equality face a “double burden” of career and family, while men struggle with identity crises due to delayed role transitions as “supporters.”

(3) Mediating role of economic pressures

Economic burdens suppress fertility intentions through dual pathways of direct costs and opportunity costs. The concretization of direct costs is particularly salient: algorithm-driven topics like “childrearing expense lists” on social media create cognitive feedback loops, reinforcing the irreversibility of “curated parenting” standards. Studies identify housing costs and education involution as core barriers to reproductive decisions.

Opportunity cost calculations are tightly bound to career trajectories. Workplace-focused self-media perpetuates narratives equating childbearing with “career suicide,” framing reproduction as a “high-risk investment.” For instance, women may lose 20%-30% of lifetime earnings due to childbirth, while men fear reduced workplace competitiveness from caregiving time commitments. Such risk perceptions drive conservative decision-making, cementing the “low marriage–low fertility” co-evolution.

6. Discussion and Theoretical Implications

(1) The "Double-Edged Sword" effect of social media

Social media’s dissemination of marital and reproductive information exhibits a distinct “double-edged sword” characteristic. Positive functions manifest as dual empowerment through knowledge democratization and choice liberation: short-video platforms dismantle elite monopolies on traditional marital knowledge legal interpretations of marriage, enabling youth to access scientific information at low cost. Simultaneously, subcultural communities legitimize diverse choices by showcasing non-traditional practices, dissolving the normative pressure of “mandatory marriage and reproduction.” However, negative risks remain significant: algorithm-recommended homogeneous content creates “information cocoons,” amplifying risk perceptions and driving conservative reproductive decisions. For instance, among long-term consumers of “marriage-and-childbearing-phobia” content, fertility intentions decline by 35%, exacerbating the vicious cycle of low fertility and a “low-desire society.”

(2) Policy optimization pathways

To address social media’s complex impacts on reproductive decision-making, a tripartite policy framework of “cognitive intervention-institutional support-cultural reconstruction” is essential:

Cognitive Intervention: Optimize platform content ecosystems by algorithmically prioritizing “marriage-and-fertility-friendly” cases to counterbalance anxiety narratives. For example, following Japan’s “Measures against the declining birthrate,” platforms could mandate minimum exposure quotas for supportive content.

Institutional Support: Enhance flexible work arrangements and enforce mandatory paternal leave to reduce

career disruption risks. Research indicates that a 10% increase in flexible work coverage boosts women's fertility intentions by 5.2%.

Cultural Reconstruction: Leverage short videos to reshape public narratives. Initiatives like "Career Mothers' Growth Diaries" and "Male parental leave' Parenting Journals" can forge new cultural symbols of "work-family balance," destigmatizing the "motherhood penalty."

7. Conclusion

As a dual vector of technological empowerment and risk transmission, social media systematically deconstructs traditional marital values and reconstructs individual rational cognition, driving the "low marriage-low fertility" co-evolution logic among college students.

(1) This mechanism hinges on three superimposed effects

Individualization shifts reproductive choices from "social obligation" to "self-actualization projects," with students prioritizing career development over marital plans and postponing ideal marriage age to 28-35;

Gender conflicts become explicit as social media amplifies "motherhood penalties" and "widowed-style parenting," with women's perceived childbirth risks being 2.3 times higher than men's;

Economic pressures concretized through "childrearing expense lists" and "career advancement anxiety" frame reproduction as a "high-cost, low-return" life choice, with housing and education consuming over 50% of household income.

This evolutionary logic reflects deep-seated contradictions during social transition: the rupture between traditional family systems and individualistic values, asynchronous gender revolution processes, and mismatches between public service provision and youth needs.

(2) Future governance must build an inclusive reproductive ecosystem while respecting individual autonomy

Media overnance: Balance platform content through algorithmic optimization, promoting positive narratives like "co-parenting" and "equal housework" to dismantle fear-driven information cocoons;

Institutional Innovation: Implement policies such as flexible work systems, mandatory male paternal leave, and public childcare services for 0-3-year-olds to reduce caregiving costs;

Cultural Guidance: Reconstruct "work-family balance" narratives to normalize shared family responsibilities and gender equality. Only through multi-dimensional interventions can structural contradictions in reproductive decision-making be resolved, providing theoretical and practical pathways for high-quality population development.

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