



# A study on how the Little Red Book platform influences young women's fertility intentions

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**Abstract.** In recent years, China's birth rate has hit record lows, and the natural population growth rate has begun a negative growth pattern. Correspondingly, the "fear of marriage and childbearing" among young women of marriageable age in social media has become a group emotion. "The fear of marriage and childbearing has become an emotional bias on the Little Red Book platform, and affects the risk perception and fertility imagination of young female users. In this paper, from December 2022 to December 2023, we searched the Little Red Book platform with a series of keywords such as "fear of marriage and childbearing" and "don't want to have children", and selected 500 notes in order of the number of comments, and analyzed the negative sentiment of the Little Red Book by using the case study analysis method. Using the case study method, we analyzed the transmission mechanism of negative fertility emotions in the Little Red Book. The study found that there are two mechanisms by which social media expressions influence young women's fertility intentions: constructing fertility imagination and magnifying fertility risks. Women have the right to be informed about fertility risks, and it is important to avoid the fertility anxiety trafficked by social media platforms and reduce women's unnecessary fertility anxiety.

**Keywords:** social media; fertility intention; the Little Red Book.

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, China has faced a steady decline in fertility. In 2023, China had 9.02 million births in the year, with a birth rate of 6.39 per thousand. According to the 53rd Statistical Report on the Development of the Internet in China, as of December 2023, China has 1.092 billion Internet users, accounting for 77.5% of the total population<sup>[1]</sup>. Against the backdrop of the highly popularized use of the Internet in China, the Little Red Book platform has an average of 300 million active users per month. This platform has more than 80 million sharers, and women account for nearly 80%. Besides, users in the platform aged 18-34 account for more than 77%<sup>[2]</sup>. Internet use has a significant impact on young women's concepts and behaviors, including the concept of marriage and procreation. Therefore, the topic of "fear of marriage and childbearing" has become very common on the Internet, especially on social media platforms. For example, Chen

P L (2020) found that social media use has a negative impact on women's fertility intentions<sup>[3]</sup>. Xiao Jie (2021) showed that individuals who use the Internet and the higher the frequency of Internet use have lower fertility intentions<sup>[4]</sup>.

At present, academic research on young women's fertility intentions mainly focuses on demography and sociology, with relatively few studies focusing on this topic in the field of new communication. On the whole, the research on social media use and fertility intention by scholars in China is still in the initial stage. Papers studying the relationship between social media use and fertility fear are even more scarce, and most of them focus on old social media such as Micro Blog<sup>[5]</sup>. Based on this, this paper will take the Little Red Book platform as an example to examine the impact of social media use on individual fertility from the perspective of social media use. In conclusion, exploring how social media use affects young women's fertility intentions is very meaningful for women to alleviate their negative emotions.

## **2 Research Methodology**

This paper takes December 2022 to December 2023 as the time frame, searches the Little Red Book platform with a series of keywords such as "fear of marriage and childbearing" and "don't want to have children", and selects 500 notes in order of the number of comments. Using the participatory observation method, we analyzed the communication mechanism of the negative fertility sentiments in the Little Red Book.

## **3 Analysis and Findings**

This article is based on critical theory and employs participatory observation and in-depth interviews to study the phenomenon of paid self-study among urban youth. The collusion between information technology and capital is constantly rewriting the production and lifestyle of modern society in an unprecedented way. The phenomenon of paid self-study has revealed people's hidden concerns about survival in the era of accelerating society and risk society. People's understanding of self subjectivity has deviated, and they constantly train themselves under the dual supervision of themselves and others, investing their faith in digital fetishism into the creation of a perfect self, and falling into the trap of self alienation.

### **3.1 Social Risk Amplification**

Fertility risk refers to the impact of uncertainty in the process of population production on people's reproductive behavior. In 1988, the American scholar Kaspersen and others created the "social amplification of risk framework". In 1988, American scholar Kaspersen and others created the "Social Amplification of Risk Framework", in which the media's dissemination and diffusion have a significant impact on people's perception of risk events.

**Health Risk: Negative Narrative, Emotional Dissemination**

At present, the social media platform is very hot "childbirth is harmful to health" and so on. For example, on the Little Red Book platform, a user said, "I gained nearly 70 pounds during pregnancy, and seven months after giving birth, there are still more than 10 pounds that won't come off." Meanwhile, many women who are married and have children have commented under such statements for empathy. Negative narratives capture the audience's attention, and their experiences add to the authenticity of the story, which is very compelling. In addition, social media, with its powerful algorithmic recommendation function to distribute negative narratives of childbearing, is also creating a large mimetic environment for women who are not married and childbearing, which has an impact on their perceived risk of childbearing.

**Occupational Risk: Maternal Penalty, Paternal Dividend**

Budig and England put forward the theory of "motherhood penalty", which means that once a woman becomes a mother, she will encounter systematic disadvantages in her career<sup>[6]</sup>. A Little Red Book user shared that she became a full-time housewife after giving birth to her eldest daughter, and that she was looking for a job with a monthly salary of only \$2,500 and no time to take care of her family. Images of "full-time wives" such as these on social media magnify the perceived risks of this status for women. In the context of the "motherhood penalty" and "fatherhood bonus" workplace, the reluctance to take the risk of becoming a full-time wife and having their careers impeded because of child-rearing presents the current view of women's fertility after weighing the pros and cons of parenthood.

**Economic Risks: Willingness to Give Birth in the Face of High Reproductive Costs**

According to the 2024 edition of China's Fertility Cost Report, it costs 538,000 RMB to raise a child to adulthood. Therefore, the economic risk of having a child is also an important criterion that affects fertility intentions. Harvey Leibenstein put forward the famous "cost-utility theory", which argues that "whether families have children or not, the number of children they have, and their gender preferences are mainly based on a rational accounting of the costs and utility of childbearing." In short, if the costs that parents invest in childbearing are less than the benefits that they can get from their children, people's willingness to have children is strong; on the contrary, people's willingness to have children is weak<sup>[7]</sup>. According to the user of the Little Red Book, "Mushroom, go home when it's dark", it costs at least 5,000 yuan per month, or 60,000 yuan per year, to raise a child. This shows that the financial cost and risk of raising a child is high. In face of higher economic risks, it is a good idea for women to reduce their desire to have children to avoid harm.

**Environmental Risks: Lack of Social and Family Support**

The environmental risk of female childbearing mainly comes from two aspects, one is social support and the other is family support. In recent years, topics such as "widowed parenting" and "inter-generational conflicts" have emerged on social media plat-

forms, triggering heated debates among netizens. As Papi Jiang said, "Men are not natural fathers" and women are not natural mothers. If there is no strong social and family support to create a suitable atmosphere for women of the right age to give birth, the willingness of young women in China to give birth will not increase, and they will not be able to give birth or dare to give birth children.

### **3.2 Fertility Imagination in Mimetic Environment**

Fertility imagination is the imagination of infertile women about pregnancy, childbirth and raising a newborn, and in 1968, the Japanese scholar Hiroshi Fujitake explicitly proposed the "environmentalization of the mimetic environment" on the basis of the "mimetic environment" proposed by Lippmann. According to Hiroshi Fujitake, because people recognize the environment and take actions to adapt to it based on the information provided by the media, these actions act on the real environment, making the real environment more and more characterized by the "mimetic environment". Social media provide infertile women with relevant general knowledge and representations of reproduction, forming a mimetic environment for reproduction, and constraining infertile women's behaviors through their environmental cognitive activities, lowering the infertile women's willingness to have children.

#### **Identity and Empathy**

Sheldon Stryker proposed the identity theory, which suggests that there is a significant link between emotional triggers and identity. When faced with negative narratives of childbearing, childless women often construct themselves as mothers with the identity mission of raising children. Subsequently, infertile women perceive the viability of their motherhood in context<sup>[8]</sup>. Negative symbols about childbearing in social media, such as "mother = great", influenced the childbearing tendencies of young infertile women. The Little Red Book user "Milk Jelly Cat" said, "Why do I have to be strong when I become a mom? Don't deprive me of my right to be vulnerable. Can't I just cry when I'm sad and broken?" Many infertile women feel they are unable to complete their motherhood.

#### **The Imagination of Losing Reproductive Dominance**

Theodore Kemper's affective model of status and power suggests that when individuals lose power or status, they experience anxiety, fear, and loss of self-confidence. On the one hand, since the implementation of the "one-child policy" in New China in 1980, the issue of reproduction has become a public issue. Since the implementation of the "one-child policy" in New China in 1980, fertility has gradually been socialized as a private right, and the issue of fertility has become a public issue. From the slogans of the family planning period, such as "If one person has too many children, the whole village will be ligated" and "It is good to have only one child, and the government will take care of the elderly", to today's slogan after the implementation of the "three-child policy", such as "One child grows old alone, three children can take care of the elderly". "One child grows old alone, three children can retire", "Conceive, give birth to

and raise up, just can't fight down", we can easily see that the needs of the times are changing, and that today's times need women to give birth to more children, in order to slow down the pressure of an aging population. We can easily see that the needs of the times are changing.

At the same time that society has undergone such a drastic change in its attitude towards reproduction, women have gradually been "disempowered". The childless woman wants to take back her uterus and even the dominant power in her life because she is disgusted with the "birth machine", and thus chooses to be "afraid of marriage and childbearing".

On the other hand, "status" in the power-status model emphasizes the transformation of social roles. That is to say, as an independent subject, the childless woman is transformed to the role of "mother"<sup>[9]</sup>. As mentioned above, unmarried women live in the reproductive mimicry environment constructed by social media, and their cognition will be constructed as a mother's whole life, i.e., the continuous "disempowerment" process of pregnancy, childbirth, and parenting.

### **Consumerism and the Alternative Imagination of Symbolic Construction**

In Baudrillard's Consumer Society, he argues that we should not only consume the material itself, but more importantly, the meaning of the objects. As a user "Ruan Fuzhou" said, "The most important reason why I don't want to have children is that I don't think I have enough money to spend on myself. I want to try all kinds of hobbies. But raising kids is a lot of money." Girls develop hobbies, which are spending for themselves, and the meaning behind the spending is still the desire for good. However, having children reduces the cost of budgeting for consumption for themselves, which reduces the willingness to have children. "For some young people, especially young women, the value of childbearing is also far less than the value of spending on entertainment and hobbies.

## **4 Conclusion**

In the current social media, "fear of marriage and childbearing" has become the mainstream view. Women need correct and objective fertility knowledge to guide them in choosing whether or not to have children, rather than subjective and emotional fertility "science" that spreads anxiety.

From a demographic point of view, research on the impact of social media expression on young women can be of great benefit to increasing the fertility rate of the population and easing the pressure on society to provide for the elderly. As Kant said, "Man is not an instrument, but an end in himself", and whether or not a woman chooses to get married and have a child is a matter of her own considerations of her own development and progress. Instrumental rationality cannot take away the value of human beings, and the significance of human existence cannot be completely lost.

The world is born from under her skirts, and let her skirts flutter in the breeze.

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