

# Declining Fertility Intentions Among Young People in Beijing and Shanghai: A Media-Driven Analysis of Social and Cultural Factors

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## Abstract

*This research delves into how media narratives impact the reproductive aspirations of young urban dwellers in Beijing and Shanghai. China's urban fertility rates have dropped significantly, below the replacement level. Through media content analysis and qualitative interviews, key themes like aspirational stories, evolving gender roles, and economic hardships emerge. Media, such as WeChat and Xiaohongshu, not only reflects but also strengthens these factors, normalizing childfree lifestyles and deterring young people from parenthood. The study also emphasizes the generational gap in family values. It suggests more nuanced media portrayals to bridge the divide. The findings can assist policymakers and media professionals in formulating effective policies to tackle urban demographic issues.*

**Keywords:** Media narratives, Fertility intentions, Urban China, Individualism, Gender roles

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The last decade has seen a new demographic issue arise in China's urban regions, which is a fertility rate that is falling. Estimates calculate China's TFR to be well below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman, reaching an estimated 1.3 in 2020 and much lower in China's major cities, such as Beijing and Shanghai (Chen et al., 2024). These are typical examples of the demographic changes affecting a large proportion of China, such as high-cost-of-living cities with professional environments that have become competitive, and dominant social relationships that reflect individualism. The sharp decline in fertility rates is worrying in terms of its implications on economic development and social balance; it also reflects the sustainability of welfare systems. Several factors explain the decline in fertility intentions, with media being among the most substantial in terms of garnering recognition as a powerful influencer of cultural attitudes and personal actions (Bernardi & Klaerner, 2014). Traditional as well as social media play important roles in forming cultural discourses on family and gender roles as well as the choice of lifestyles. For the young urbanites in Beijing and Shanghai, who are highly involved with digital media, these stories often challenge prevailing norms and propose alternative values, such as career advancement, pursuit of personal fulfilment, and growing visibility of the "DINK" (Dual Income No Kids) lifestyle (Wong & Guo, 2020). These changes in media culture reflect wider societal changes, such as delayed marriage, delayed parenthood, and, in some cases, a decision to forgo children altogether. This research examines the role mass media plays in reproductive choices of youths in both Beijing and Shanghai. This argument stands strongly for both cities. They are the most populous regions in China and lead the country's list on economic development. In addition, they are markers of greater social and cultural changes happening in the nation. The high cost of living, child-care services availability, and harsh working conditions prevailing in these cities also contribute to other factors that can influence fertility choices (H. Wang, 2023). In addition, the complex nature of media systems in Beijing and Shanghai offers substantial context for testing the relationship between media discourses and individual-level decision-making.

The parameters of this research include traditional media forms, such as television and news sources, in addition to newer digital platforms like WeChat, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu, which have been found to be increasingly popular among younger demographics. Such platforms not only disseminate information but also encourage user-generated content and peer-to-peer interaction, thereby amplifying their impact on social norms and individual choice-making. For example, the content that is developed in these channels mostly deals with cost implications related to having children, individualism pursuits, and several lifestyles, all of which define the perceptions of young urban people about bringing up children. This paper answers a central research question: How do media discourses influence fertility desires among young city dwellers in Beijing and Shanghai? This question is of utmost importance in the context of the growing recognition of the media's impact on perceptions concerning family life and reproductive

decisions. This study examines media content alongside qualitative interviews to explain the major themes and messages that shape decisions about fertility.

The research also presents the following sub-questions:

1. What are the dominant media narratives about fertility, parenthood, and lifestyle priorities in Beijing and Shanghai?
2. How do young urbanites make sense of these stories in relation to their own lives?
3. How much does media-driven cultural change influence family values, with implications for decreasing fertility plans?

Through these questions, this research seeks to provide some contribution regarding how media interfaces with broader social and cultural factors in influencing fertility behaviours. More concretely, insights from this research may be available for policymakers, urban planners, and media practitioners to better understand what is dynamically changing the fertility drop in urban China.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview of Fertility Trends in China

The fertility landscape of China has drastically changed over the past few decades. From the one-child policy in 1979 to its eventual relaxation in 2016 and the introduction of the three-child policy in 2021, the country has experienced unprecedented demographic shifts (Zhang & Sobotka, 2021). Although such policies have been implemented, fertility rates are still alarmingly low, particularly in cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, whose TFR is much lower than the national average (Gao, 2023). Urbanisation, economic pressure, and changes in cultural values are all suggested to be primary factors in the decline. The high cost of living, high stress at work, and scarce childcare make parenting in metropolitan cities even more daunting. The demographic study has indicated that the younger generation is not to mother or postpone the raising of children due to the uncertainties in the economy and society. The trend of rising age of first-time mothers and low marriage rates signal the broader societal trends in family formation attitudes (Lo, 2022). Furthermore, due to decades-long restrictive population policies, the notion of having small families remains influencing fertility decisions today. These two trends are made worse by those of gender. Women are given disproportionate expectations where they need to have a career with family responsibilities set against them (Gauthier & Gietel-Basten, 2024). The entanglement creates a complex reality for understanding the fertility intentions of urban young people.

### Media's Role in Shaping Social Norms and Individual Behaviour

Media plays a great role in setting up society's norms and decision-making skills in an individual. For instance, regarding fertility intentions, the media shapes views of parenthood, lifestyle choices, and gender roles. The current section provides the theoretical basis that supports media's impact on behaviour through agenda-setting, cultivation theory, and social learning theory. Media, according to agenda-setting theory, does not inform people of what to think, but rather of what to think about (Russell Neuman et al., 2014). For fertility, the narrative of the financial burden of childbearing or that of an alternative lifestyle, like the "DINK" model, which means Dual Income No Kids, sets the tone in societal discourse and influences the attitudes of individuals. For example, news stories regarding housing costs, childcare expenses, and workplace discrimination against parents help build a story that discourages family formation. Agenda-setting theory is particularly applicable to this study because it can explain how media shapes public discourse on fertility-related issues by highlighting certain narratives such as economic constraints or alternative lifestyles over others. In Beijing and Shanghai, where the level of consumption is high, the media offers a model to explain the internalisation of such messages within the choices of young urbanites about bearing children. Based on such issues as the burden on finance and individualism that have been highly coveted, agenda-setting theory underlines that such media maintains such attitudes that result in declining rates of bearing children among urbanising populations.

Theoretical frameworks can be valuable tools for illuminating the dynamics involved in media's influence on social culture and individual action, particularly the formulation of fertility intentions among Beijing and Shanghai's young urban residents. According to the cultivation theory, put forth by Gerbner and Gross (1976), mass exposure to a constant stream of messages over an extended period is supposed to reshape reality as the viewers perceive it, according to Shrum (2017). The normalisation of individualism and the delay in parenthood is thus underpinned by presentations on social media platforms, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu, where there are sophisticated, childless lifestyles (Jia & Geng, 2023). This phenomenon will thus create a new cultural aspect that gives paramount importance to the satisfaction

of one's fulfilment over the long-held desire to have a 'normal' family setup. The cultivation theory is most relevant to this study because it shows how, over time, extended exposure to media narratives can mould both collective and individual values. In the context of Beijing and Shanghai, the theory highlights how continuous exposure to social media to child-free lifestyles and individualism is shaping the success and fulfilment criteria of young urban residents. This way, cultivation theory provides a conceptual lens to discuss the role of the media in affecting the attitudes that contribute to lower fertility intentions by normalising delayed or alternative strategies for family formation. Social learning theory is the learning of new behaviour through observation and imitation (Maskaly & Donner, 2015). Most regular users of WeChat are exposed to such content through channels that encourage certain behaviours and attitudes through peer narratives. For instance, social media posts by influencers or acquaintances praising the freedom and financial advantages of having no children may inspire young city dwellers to make the same decisions (Bajaj & Stade, 2023). Social learning theory applies to this research because it explains the mechanisms of learning and adopting behaviours and attitudes through observation and imitation of others, particularly in the context of social media. In the cities of Beijing and Shanghai, peer-generated content that praises child-free living becomes a model for young urban residents to follow, thus focusing on the value of personal autonomy over parenthood. This theory thus points out the role of observable behaviours in social networks and focuses on the role of media in changing fertility preferences through imitation and social approval mechanisms.

### **Previous Research on Urbanisation, Modernity, and Fertility Intentions**

Urbanisation and modernity have profoundly impacted fertility intentions in China. With Beijing and Shanghai increasingly becoming economic and cultural hubs, they are also major centres of demographic change. The cost of living is relatively high, coupled with scarce, unaffordable housing and childcare options, which form significant barriers to parenthood for the residents of the cities (H. Wang, 2023). In addition, the demands of the modern workplace with long hours of work and great competition hardly find time for family interaction, especially among women working both outside and inside the house. The notion of modernity also introduces new aspirations in lifestyle that are often inconsistent with conventional family values. Research shows that young people in cities increasingly pursue career advancement, self-actualisation, and adventure such as travelling before establishing a family (Friedman, 2023). Representations in media of success and happiness further strengthen these transitions as they fail to represent or even trivialise the importance of childbearing. Characters of social media personalities and those in television serials depict the childless, independent woman as a role model against the commonly followed gender roles and family formations. In reality, apart from the economic and cultural determinants, fertility expectations are mainly influenced by societal expectations. Established cultural norms that prioritise familial structures and procreation remain prevalent, especially within older demographic cohorts (Bau & Fernández, 2021). Nonetheless, these societal expectations frequently conflict with the ambitions of younger individuals residing in urban areas, thereby engendering friction and increasing deterrents to parenthood. This interaction elucidates the intricate relationship between urban development, contemporary influences, and shifting social values in influencing reproductive intentions. Such transitions require a general understanding of the factors that affect such transitions and specific interventions that harmonise traditional expectations with contemporary ambitions.

### **Gaps in Existing Studies Linking Media Narratives to Fertility Behaviour in China**

While previous studies have discussed the demographic and sociological aspects of low fertility, the specific role of media in shaping fertility behaviour is not well studied. Most studies are based on economic and structural factors, such as housing costs and workplace discrimination, with less attention to the cultural and psychological dimensions shaped by media narratives (Voldby et al., 2022). Moreover, the studies mostly tend to neglect the variety of media and the unique ways digital and social media affect individual perceptions and behaviours. The second area is at the nexus of gender, media, and fertility, as several studies are showing the unequal load women bear between work and family responsibilities but less is done to see how the media narrative reifies or resists such expectations of gender. For instance, social media increasingly portray childfree women as self-assured and successful, and the implications for fertility intentions from such portrayals are largely left unexamined. Furthermore, much of existing research takes an aggregate approach: focusing on larger trends rather than the decision-making processes of the individual. This calls for more qualitative research where young people's interpretations of media narratives in the contexts of their lives are explored, especially in urban China. Such studies could have great value for understanding the psychological and emotional influences on fertility choices. This

research fills the gap by combining media analysis (journal articles) with qualitative interviews. In doing so, this research attempts to put forth a layered understanding of the role of media in shaping fertility intentions by examining themes and messages within media content and how young urbanites interpret such narratives. Therefore, the findings will feed into the general debate on the issues of urbanisation, modernity, and demographic change in China.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### Research Design

This study embraces a multi-methods approach which integrates media content analysis and qualitative interviews (see Appendix) that will explore media influence on fertility intentions among young urban residents in Beijing and Shanghai. By combining quantitative with qualitative insights in the mixed-methods design, the research can provide a broad understanding of the research problem. The analysis of media content provides insight into the common narratives and themes prevalent in the digital space while interviews elicit the subjective perception and interpretation of those narrations as understood by the individual. Collectively, these methodologies create a comprehensive framework for understanding the interface between the discourse of media and personal decision-making.

#### Data Sources

**1. Journal Articles:** The content analysis would be based on journal articles, which discuss the most popular digital platforms commonly used by young urban residents, which include WeChat, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu. These are the most important digital platforms in modern Chinese digital culture and are the most important channels for information dissemination and the formation of social norms. Analysis will be done intentionally on topics that shed light on economic challenges, gender roles, lifestyle priorities, and family planning.

**2. Qualitative Interviews:** With the young people aged between 20 and 35 years who are living in Beijing and Shanghai, semi-structured interviews will be conducted. Diverse views of participants recruited from social media and other online communities will be ensured. Questions for interviews revolve around each participant's opinion about fertility and parenting, the perception of media discourses, and broader societal and economic factors that influence their decisions.

#### Analytical Framework

The analytical framework integrates a thematic analysis of media content alongside qualitative responses to discern significant patterns and synchronise findings across various data sources. Scholarly articles will be examined to identify persistent themes, including economic difficulties, evolving gender roles, and aspirational lifestyles. These themes will be juxtaposed with participants' interview responses to evaluate the extent to which media narratives affect personal attitudes and decision-making processes. It, therefore, aids in a sophisticated understanding of how media discourse intersects with fertility intentions.

### 4. MEDIA ANALYSIS: THE INFLUENCE ON FERTILITY INTENTION

#### Economic Discourses in Media

An inevitable theme as found through the journal articles mainly revolves around economic constraints that dictate fertility intentions among young urban inhabitants of Beijing and Shanghai. Material on Xiaohongshu and Douyin often involves high rearing costs with regard to such aspects as real estate, schools, and other healthcare-related costs. Child-rearing has been described many times in articles with monthly charges broken down meticulously, from children's daycare through extracurricular activities and so on; this is one of the recent studies by Li (2024). These representations underscore the unaffordability of parenting, particularly for young couples already burdened by housing unaffordability and job insecurity. Interviewees were unanimous in expressing similar views. The cost of living here is so high—housing, education, even daily expenses, one interviewee said. It feels overwhelming when I think about having children. This is made worse by media content that pits the financial stress of raising a child against the stability that a child-free lifestyle offers. Narratives pushing for the "DINK" model, which means Dual Income No Kids, would focus on how being childless can make someone have a much more comfortable and freer economic life with enough resources to fund personal ambitions like travelling or even advancing one's career (Lu et al., 2023). In that regard, such narratives are both justifying economic concerns by young urbanites but also giving the culture a push toward normalisation of child-free lives. As financial pressures continue to dominate public discourse, the decision to forgo parenthood becomes framed as a rational and pragmatic choice. Alleviating these perceptions will require comprehensive policy

measures and media strategies that alleviate economic burdens while promoting the benefits and support systems available for family life.

Media outlets often report on the housing pressures that affect fertility choices. Reports reveal the unavailability of affordable housing in cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, which is often presented as a necessary condition for family building (Yu & Xu, 2021). These stories strongly resonate with urban young people, who view homeownership as an unattainable milestone that further delays or discourages parenthood. For instance, articles and social media discussions compare housing prices with average incomes, showing the widening gap that makes starting a family seems financially impossible (Alm et al., 2021). Economic discourses in media also extend to the perceived inadequacies of social welfare systems. Narratives highlighting the lack of affordable childcare services, limited maternity leave, and inadequate parental support create additional deterrents to parenthood (Alm et al., 2021). Media stories exaggerating these problems often cast parenthood as an undertaking involving heroic sacrifices, reinforcing fears and anxieties over the possibility of raising children in urban environments. Such media stories feed into the growing sense of uncertainty and insecurity among young residents of cities, making parenthood increasingly unattainable. By framing housing and welfare challenges as insurmountable, the media amplifies the perception that starting a family is incompatible with urban living. These issues therefore need to be addressed by such specific policy interventions and media campaigns that will portray, in realistic ways, how the barriers can be overcome and family formation supported.

### **Depictions of Parenthood and Gender Roles**

Media content is double-edged, either reinforcing or challenging traditional family norms. Traditional media outlets usually reinforce the idea of parenthood as a social responsibility, showing the significance of family and reproduction (Zou & Liu, 2023). However, digital media platforms such as Douyin and WeChat offer a much more diverse range of narratives, some of which challenge these conventions. For instance, career-oriented narratives on these platforms commonly depict women focusing more on career success than roles as mothers and caregivers (Ye & Krijnen, 2024). Influencers and content creators narrate the dilemmas women are faced with between career aspirations and societal expectations over parenthood; childbearing often being portrayed as a barrier to personal and professional development. One interview participant echoed this sentiment, citing the sociological pressures on women to juggle both a career and family, which she thinks is highly unfair and that sometimes the media perpetuates these sexual stereotypes, which are strongly at odds with my thoughts. Such conflicting stories create a conflicted landscape, where the modern aspirations of the future and the old traditional expectations constantly confront each other, driving people into internal conflict over their choices. For that reason, media outlets must bring to the attention of the audience diverse family models and shared responsibilities, which enables individuals to define parenthood on their terms.

Some media narratives also work to subvert the traditional family model by featuring non-traditional family forms or highlighting the male's involvement in childcare. For instance, there are stories about fathers' involvement in child care on Xiaohongshu, though rare, where it is shown that family responsibilities can be shared between the couple (Gao & Wu, 2024). These images are less common but help shift perceptions of gender roles in family life. However, because of their relatively low prevalence, traditional expectations remain dominant, especially in the discourse of society that is influenced by older generations. The interplay between these two contrasting narratives creates a complex media landscape that influences fertility intentions in layered ways. Women, in particular, grapple with conflicting messages about the importance of family versus personal aspirations, often feeling torn between societal pressures and their own goals. Further, stories that tend to emphasise the sacrifices made to be a parent usually portray an unhappy family life, thus dissuading youth in the city from adopting conventional roles (Y. Wang, 2023). Media sites should promote stories that bring normalcy to shared parenting responsibilities and varied structures of the family. Such stories can lighten the load of traditional gender expectations and make it easier for young urbanites to see parenthood as a shared and achievable goal.

### **Social Media and Aspirational Narratives**

Social media platforms like Xiaohongshu and Douyin are powerful arenas for shaping aspirations and lifestyle priorities. These platforms often depict individualism and self-fulfilment as desirable traits, overshadowing traditional family aspirations. Content promoting travel, personal freedom, and financial independence are highly prevalent, resonating with young urbanites who seek alternatives to conventional family life (Guo, 2022). Peer-driven content further amplifies these narratives. On platforms like WeChat, users share posts about their child-free lifestyles that showcase the benefits of personal autonomy and

freedom from the responsibilities of parenting. One participant highlighted the influence of such content, stating that social media platforms are full of stories about the struggles of parenthood—financial stress, lack of support, and so on. At the same time, they mention how you see posts celebrating independence and freedom, which makes the idea of having kids less attractive. These aspirational narratives also intersect with broader cultural shifts toward delayed marriage and parenthood.

Influencers often present marriage and childbearing as optional milestones, portraying life without children as equally fulfilling and socially acceptable (Liu et al., 2022). This representation challenges traditional norms and provides young people with alternative pathways to personal happiness and success. However, the aspirational content on social media also creates a double-edged sword. It has this empowering effect on people to pursue personal goals but may also enhance societal pressure and expectations for an ideal lifestyle. Hail independence and success and it rejects those with ambitions that involve the pursuit of traditional family goals but lack the financial or social muscle for them. Social media is also part of peer comparison for peer pressure because users often share well-curated pictures of their lives. This dynamic may, therefore, elevate feelings of inadequacy or even FOMO (fear of missing out) among younger generations, most especially when compared with aspirational lifestyles against traditional achievements such as getting married and conceiving children (Topino et al., 2023). This complicated conflict between aspirational stories and comparative peer experiences underlines that there is so much more to balanced reporting in the media than there is for the validation of different choices for life decisions and offering perspective upon both personal independence and parenthood.

### **Findings from Interviews**

The interviews show a clear relationship between media discourses and personal attitudes toward fertility. Participants consistently mentioned that media content plays a big role in shaping their opinions about children. For instance, one of the participants says that media plays a big role. They point out that you often read about how pricey it is to raise kids or people regret having children on Xiaohongshu social media platforms. A second respondent indicated the role of aspirational stories in Douyin, claiming that the site predominantly features narratives about the troubles associated with being a parent - from lack of sleep to lack of money. In contrast, there are stories of independent travellers, who travel independently and lead fulfilling lives. Such results suggest that media narratives interact with individual choices in complex ways. Economic discourses, representations of gender roles, and aspirational content all interact to shape the attitudes of young people toward fertility, often locking them into decisions to delay or forgo parenthood. The interviewees spoke of the pressure to fit into societal expectations, while at the same time meeting modern aspirations, creating a tension between traditional and contemporary values. Moreover, some respondents expressed relief at finding validation for their choices in media narratives. For example, it is comforting when others opt to not have kids or delay childbearing. That makes me feel less alone in my decision. This is proof that media also plays a significant role in making non-traditional paths seem the norm and minimising the stigma surrounding diverging from societal norms. Based on the analysis of media, qualitative interviews, and the intersection of these with economic, cultural, and aspirational narratives, this study draws attention to the complex role media plays in constructing fertility intentions for urban residents in Beijing and Shanghai. The study highlights how both individual and collective perceptions of parenthood are influenced in contemporary urban China.

## **5. SOCIO-CULTURAL AND POLICY CONTEXT**

### **Urban Stressors**

One of the urban stressors, which leads to declining fertility intentions, is that the cost of living in both Beijing and Shanghai is extremely high. The economic hubs are home to millions of residents in the country and impose extreme pressure on households because of their high finances. The cities have some of the highest house prices globally, and huge challenges are imposed upon young couples planning family formation (Jin et al., 2023). Though more affordable, renting is also associated with long-term insecurities, making homeownership an essential but often unattainable milestone before having children. Interview participants often pointed to housing as a critical deterrent to parenthood, noting how owning a house feels like a prerequisite for starting a family, but it is almost impossible with the current market prices. Beyond housing, however, the entire cost of rearing a child in urban China is prohibitively high. Education costs, ranging from preschool to university, are exacerbated by the culture of private tutoring and extracurricular activities essential for maintaining competitiveness (Song & Xue, 2022). Healthcare, maternity services, and childcare are additional expenses that strain family budgets, especially in cities

with limited welfare support. These economic realities discourage young urbanites from embracing parenthood, as highlighted in media narratives and echoed in interviews.

Social expectations add another layer of complexity to urban stressors. Traditional Chinese culture places substantial emphasis on family and reproduction, with older generations often exerting pressure on younger people to marry and have children (Gui, 2022). However, these expectations frequently clash with the personal ambitions of young urbanites, who prioritise career advancement, financial stability, and self-fulfilment. Media content often amplifies this conflict by portraying both the burdens of parenthood and the advantages of a child-free lifestyle, leaving individuals torn between societal obligations and personal aspirations (Fu et al., 2022). Urban work culture further compounds these challenges. The “996” work schedule (9 am to 9 pm, six days a week), prevalent in many industries, leaves little room for personal or family life (Zheng & Qiu, 2023). Women, in particular, face the dual burden of professional demands and traditional expectations to shoulder the majority of caregiving responsibilities (Ang et al., 2022). This imbalance creates a major disincentive for women to consider parenthood, as articulated by interview participants who described the “unrealistic expectations” placed on working mothers.

### **Policy Interventions and Media Campaigns**

Recognising the severity of declining fertility rates, the Chinese government has introduced various policy interventions to encourage higher birth rates. Extended maternity leave, housing subsidies for families, and increased childcare support are some of the initiatives that will help ease the economic and logistical burdens of parenthood (Zhong et al., 2024). However, these initiatives have received a mixed reaction in that their actual implementation often addresses the symptoms of the problems instead of the diseases. For example, although the maternity leave period has been stretched, it most of the time perpetuates discrimination against women by labelling them “less reliable workers” (Kirk & Gupta, 2022). Such labelling discourages employers from employing women of age to bear children, thereby increasing the complexity involved in career and family goal balancing. Apart from these, housing subsidies and childcare support are sometimes insufficient to counterbalance the high cost of urban life, making them less effective as incentives for parenthood (Meng et al., 2022). Another tool is the media campaign, which addresses fertility decline. Media campaigns usually display the traditional values of a family, such as “Two is Enough” and “Three Children, Happy Family” (Wong, 2022). However, these campaigns have been criticised by the public, especially the youth, who feel that these campaigns are not in line with the reality of the times. Social media is often used to criticise such initiatives as users point out the disparity between the rhetoric of the campaign and the lack of actual policy support (Merino et al., 2024). Considering an example from Douyin and WeChat, discussions spread cynicism throughout the urban contexts about the achievability of having more children. A trending post sarcastically said ‘I will raise my three kids along with the support of the state when it subsidises my home and my maid.’ This sets out the disparities between policy desires and public conceptions and helps to understand through media how those resistances by the public affect the government stories. In addition to what the government does, the private sector has worked hard to influence fertility behaviours. Firms within the health and education industries have developed particular adverts focusing on the fun aspect of childbearing in tandem with pitching their products and services (Hong et al., 2023). While these measures are meant to depict a better image of family life, they inadvertently reinforce the notion that the raising of children is an expensive and high-stakes activity.

### **Interplay Between Policy and Media**

The interaction of the policy interventions with media narratives gives birth to a more complex dynamic in the shaping of public attitudes toward fertility. Although the media is put to use to distribute policy messages encouraging family formation, it also carries forward scepticism and other critical voices from the general public, rendering it ineffective (Li et al., 2021). For instance, whereas official campaigns emphasise the advantages of increased family size, media programs, on the other hand, present the difficulties involved in parenting in urban China (Luo et al., 2023). This contradiction leaves young urbanites to deal with mixed messages, as an interviewee aptly summarised the government saying, “More children are good for the country,” while all I see online is how difficult and expensive it is to raise a child here. Moreover, the media are the significant factors which influence social norms and expectations of family life. Often in aspiration narratives, the policy to promote family values clashes with individualism and self-fulfilment. This tension, however, is most evident on social media sites, where user-generated content is either a contradiction or satire of the official government messaging.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

The socio-cultural and policy context around fertility intentions in Beijing and Shanghai calls for more holistic and targeted interventions. Policies should move beyond just incentives on the surface level and work with the structural issues that dissuade youths from having families. For example, more investment in low-cost housing, childcare infrastructure, and workplace gender equality would make the environment more amenable to parenthood. Media strategies need to be rewritten to better depict realities for urban youth. Rather than talking about an idealised family, the campaigns could communicate real-life solutions and success stories that make sense to them. Policymaking, media practitioners, and the private sector could collaborate in disseminating the same message to bring policy intentions closer to public perception. This, therefore, means that solutions to declining fertility rates in urban China would rest in a multidimensional approach, integrating interplay factors involving sociocultural factors, policy interventions, and media narratives. It is only then that policymakers and practitioners could better understand what they are facing, thus enabling them to better develop strategies for supporting the family formation and demographic challenges in cities such as Beijing Shanghai and the rest of the urban centers.

## **6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

### **Key Themes from Media Content Analysis and Participant Interviews**

Content shared through media and interviews with youth in Beijing and Shanghai showed that some issues keep on recurring, which influence fertility intentions. Economic challenges, including high living costs and housing pressures, were a key concern and amplified by media narratives. Issues of gender roles and parenthood also came to the forefront, as the media accounts of professional career women, non-traditional families, and tensions between professional ambitions and societal expectations. Aspirational content on platforms like Xiaohongshu and Douyin celebrated independence and personal freedom, often undermining traditional family aspirations. Interviewees noted the influence of these narratives, questioning the value of parenthood in light of its sacrifices.

### **Interaction Between Media Narratives and Individual Decision-Making**

Media reflects as well as alters social values to make decisions for parenthood. For the young people staying in cities, media legitimises issues and brings on the option of "DINK" lifestyles and, therefore, a means of enabling them to alter their paths toward a different lifestyle. Still, it catalyses social conflict and brings forth generation differences and the fear of being a parent. Aspiration can encourage freedom but raises anxiety in others due to the limited scope they have about receiving financial and cultural opportunities.

### **Broader Implications for Urban Culture, Individualism, and Fertility**

Findings suggest urban China is more individualistic, seeking personal fulfilment in independent, competitive lifestyles and media storytelling that promotes personal success in their careers over marrying and having children. Cultural and generational splits challenge fertility to decline while, at the same time, promoting generational polarisation as young adults in urbanised areas refuse traditional values and ways of life touted by their seniors. The power of the mass media, hence, becomes important in bridging or widening these gaps in depicting parenthood.

### **Summary of the Role of Media in Influencing Declining Fertility Intentions**

Media greatly influences fertility intentions because of the amplification of economic challenges, encouragement toward alternative lifestyles, and dismantling of traditional gender roles. While strong media promotes various realities, it may also omit those who want traditional family goals. Thus, this calls for balanced media narratives in addressing systemic barriers and enabling informed decision-making about parenthood.

### **Recommendations for Media Strategies to Promote Balanced Narratives**

Media strategies must promote balanced reportage of problems and benefits of parenting. Coverage of successful family experiences in addressing issues in urban environments would give a more vibrant outlook to the coverage and can diffuse one-sided bad publicity. Campaigns should also bring about gender equality by reporting shared responsibility on the part of parents to childcare, breaking all stereotypes of making women do all the chores themselves. With such practical content for affordable housing among families, with ready resources for kids, and money planning and handling, the mystery surrounding parenting would be eliminated thereby making the aim more friendly for anyone. Another aspect is the intergenerational dialogue created via media content as it may cover the culture gap that has



the potential to create mutual understanding between elders and the youths regarding family values and aspirations.

### **Implications for Policymakers, Urban Planners, and Media Practitioners**

The implications of the findings are enormous for policymakers, city planners, and media practitioners. Policymakers should consider the fact that economic realities are paired with cultural change in determining fertility intentions. They should invest more in affordable housing, accessible childcare, and supportive workplace policies which help to make a family-conducive environment. Urban space planners should take into account the needs of young families when designing urban areas. Child-friendly infrastructure and community centres would reduce some of the stressors making them seem much less stressful due to the lifestyle of urbanising. Work and school locations should be integrated as well to ensure that commuter time is reduced so that parents do not have to spend numerous hours away at work and be with their children more. Influences in a collective psyche concerning what is considered acceptable by media experts are central. By showing systemic barriers through such narratives yet celebrating diversity in family experience, media can facilitate an inclusive and supportive cultural landscape. Such efforts might be amplified by cooperation between media, policymakers, and private sector stakeholders in ways that public discourse becomes aligned with the needs and aspirations of young urban residents.

### **Conclusion**

In Beijing and Shanghai, the interplay of media narratives with fertility intentions reveals a complexity of economic, cultural, and societal factors. The challenges of urban life are reflected in the shaping of individual aspirations and societal norms on media platforms influencing parenthood decisions. Declining fertility rates in urban China need to be approached in a multi-faceted approach with policy interventions, cultural shifts, and media strategies. In short, balanced stories and overcoming systemic barriers form a conducive environment through which the youths have a greater likelihood of achieving their futures, whether involving parenthood or otherwise. In that sense, collective action is a critically important step toward demographically managing challenges in urban China that would lead the way to a sustainable and inclusive community.

**All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.**

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## 42. Appendix

### 43. Interview Transcript

#### 44. Participant 1

45. **Interviewer:** What do you have to say regarding raising a family in Beijing?

46. **Participant:** Honestly, I think it is a huge difficulty. The cost of living here is so high—housing, education, even daily expenses. It feels overwhelming when I think about having children. It's not just about money; there's also the pressure to provide the best opportunities for your kids, which feels unattainable sometimes.

47. **Interviewer:** How do you think media influences your views on this topic?

48. **Participant:** Media plays a big role. On social media platforms like Xiaohongshu, you often see posts about how expensive it is to raise kids or how people regret having children. At the same time, influencers are promoting the "DINK" lifestyle, which looks appealing—travel, personal freedom, and focusing on your career. It's hard not to compare yourself and question if having kids is worth the sacrifice.

49. **Interviewer:** Are there any traditional or societal expectations that affect your decision?

50. **Participant:** Definitely. My parents would like me to have children, but they also understand the financial struggles. Society still expects women to balance both a career and family, which feels unfair. The media sometimes reinforces these stereotypes, making it harder for young people like me to decide.

#### 51. Participant 2

52. **Interviewer:** What are your thoughts on fertility and starting a family in Shanghai?

53. **Participant:** It's a complicated issue. I'm not against having children, but it feels like a distant goal. The economic burden is a major deterrent, and honestly, I enjoy my independence right now. I think a lot of young people here feel the same way.

54. **Interviewer:** How do you perceive the role of media in shaping attitudes towards having children?

55. **Participant:** Media has a huge influence. Douyin, for example, tends to focus on the difficulties of parenting, such as sleepless nights or financial stress. On the other hand, there is aspirational content about single, successful people travelling and enjoying life. These narratives shape how we think about priorities and the feasibility of having a family.

56. **Interviewer:** How are the societal norms and cultural context affecting this process?

57. **Participant:** I personally think that the traditional views on marriage and family are changing, but the pressure from the older generation is not eradicated. Young people, especially the youth in big cities like Shanghai, begin to question these values. There are times when the media questions these norms but others when the media perpetuates them in subtle form.

#### 58. Participant 3

59. **Interviewer:** Do you have some views on starting a family as a young person living in Beijing or Shanghai?

**Participant:** I think it's a daunting task. The costs are the first thing that comes to mind. Raising a child in Beijing or Shanghai is incredibly expensive. Then there's the question of whether you'll have the time and energy to manage both a career and a family.

**Interviewer:** How much do you think media contributes to these issues?

**Participant:** It definitely makes me think of it differently. There are stories all over social media about the struggle of having kids—stress on finances, lack of support, and all that. On the other hand, you have independence and freedom being celebrated. All this does not make it seem so appealing.

**Interviewer:** How do you deal with the societal pressures about this?

**Participant:** It's hard. There is much societal pressure to settle down and have children, especially from older relatives. But the media's stories of personal freedom and the difficulties of parenting balance that out. It feels like a constant push and pull between tradition and modernity.