

The Influence of Expressing Fertility Risks on Modern Social Media Platforms on Women's Reproductive Anxiety

Yifan Sun^{1,a,*}

¹*School of Social Science, University of California - Irvine, Irvine, US*

a. yifas22@uci.edu

**corresponding author*

Abstract: In the digital age, social media platforms like Weibo, WeChat, and Xiaohongshu have become pivotal spaces for discussing various life aspects, including fertility risks. This study aims to fill a significant research gap by exploring the impact of these discussions on women's reproductive anxiety, particularly among Chinese women aged 20–35. Employing a qualitative research approach, the study conducts in-depth interviews to investigate women's perceptions of fertility anxiety across health, socio-economic, and family domains. The findings reveal that social media discussions can be categorized into three main areas: health-related concerns, socioeconomic factors, and family dynamics. These discussions often employ sensational headlines, alarming statistical data, and anecdotal narratives, intensifying preexisting anxieties. Women employ various coping mechanisms, seeking solace in online communities that offer alternative viewpoints and emotional support. The study also uncovers a shift towards reproductive autonomy influenced by internet usage. Women exposed to diverse perspectives on fertility and reproductive health are prompted to question societal norms, leading to a heightened sense of autonomy. The study holds significance for its comprehensive approach and serves as a foundation for future research, including the exploration of the influence of social media influencers and healthcare professionals on public sentiment and conduct. It not only validates existing theories but also introduces novel perspectives, particularly for Chinese women, thereby paving the way for future investigations.

Keywords: reproductive anxiety, fertility risks, social media

1. Introduction

In the present day, social media has become an integral part of healthcare communication, offering new platforms for discussions on various aspects of life, including reproductive health [1]. The subject of reproductive risk holds significant prominence within these discussions, garnering the interest of women who are actively seeking both informational resources and emotional support during their reproductive journey. Additionally, this topic also captures the attention of schoolgirls who express concerns regarding the reproductive challenges they may encounter in the forthcoming years. With the proliferation of discussions on social media around reproductive risk and the recent implementation of China's 'three-child' birth policy, women have increasingly contemplated their perceived obligations as reproductive individuals.

Within the realm of digital discourse, a notable deficiency exists in the comprehension of the impact that debates about reproductive risk on social media platforms have on women's levels of reproductive anxiety. The existing body of literature has extensively examined the various effects of social media on mental health and well-being. Some scholars have also begun to look specifically at the direct link between social media and mental health through surveys [2]. However, it is important to note that there is a dearth of study in this specific domain due to the relatively recent emergence of discussions surrounding fertility risk, which have gained significant attention only within the past two years. The current body of literature mostly emphasizes quantitative analysis, resulting in a lack of attention toward capturing the intricate experiences and feelings of women who engage in online debates. Furthermore, there is a dearth of research on the cultural factors of Chinese women on popular Chinese social media platforms like Weibo, WeChat, and Xiaohongshu. Previous research has examined the impact of cultural factors on reproductive anxiety within comparative contexts.

The main objective of this study is to comprehensively explore how discussions about fertility risks on social media affect women's fertility anxiety. To this end, this study will use a qualitative research approach, which is effective in understanding the psychological impact of social media on reproductive health, to conduct in-depth interviews with 3-5 Chinese women aged 20–35 who actively use Weibo, WeChat, and Xiaohongshu. By focusing on these women's experiences and perceptions, this study aims to obtain information about women's perceptions of fertility anxiety in the three directions of health, socio-economic, and family, as well as the expression of these anxieties in social media. This study endeavors to bridge the gap in the understanding of the impact of social media discussions on fertility risks and will also provide a basis for exploring further topics of women's sense of self and feminism. Through qualitative interviews, this study hopes to reveal the complexity of this phenomenon and understand the influence of social media on women's thoughts. By delving deeper into these topics, people can also better understand the challenges facing contemporary women while also taking a step towards realizing the vision of gender equality and women's rights [3].

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design

The qualitative research approach was chosen for this investigation to gain an in-depth comprehension of the impact that discussions on social media can have on women's levels of anxiety relating to fertility. For this investigation, qualitative research is preferable to quantitative research because it makes it easier to investigate subjective experiences, feelings, and perceptions, which are typically ignored in quantitative studies. The study makes use of a qualitative methodology, which enables it to capture the complexities and nuances of the experiences of the participants, resulting in a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of the research issue.

2.2. Data Collection Method: Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews that were only partially prepared were the primary method of data collection utilized for this study. This methodology provides a flexible interview format in which the interviewer is provided with a predetermined set of questions but can also ask additional questions based on the responses provided by the participants. It is anticipated that each interview session will last somewhere between sixty and ninety minutes and will be conducted either face-to-face or through secure video conferencing platforms. This will depend on the preferences and logistical constraints of the participants. Face-to-face interviews are expected to take approximately sixty minutes. The participants will be asked to give their permission to record any interviews, and afterward, the interviews will be transcribed word for word so that the results can be analyzed.

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2.3. Research Object: Participant Selection Criteria

The purpose of this research is to conduct interviews with a sample group consisting of three to five Chinese women, ranging in age from twenty to thirty-five, who are regular users of the social media platforms Weibo, WeChat, and Xiaohongshu. The age range that has been selected has been done with the intention of including women who are more likely to be considering or experiencing fertility issues. The participants will be recruited using a technique called “purposive sampling,” which will focus on individuals who have actively participated in online discussions relating to fertility risks on various online platforms. This method helps to ensure that the study accurately captures the experiences of those people who are most significantly impacted by the phenomenon that is being investigated.

2.4. Research Process: Interview Protocol

The interviews will be carried out using a set of guidelines known as an interview protocol, which will outline the primary questions and topics that will be discussed. The protocol is going to be put through a pilot test with a smaller subset of participants to determine whether or not it is effective and whether or not it is easy to understand. During the interviews, an in-depth discussion will take place regarding the participants’ experiences and points of view about three primary domains, namely health-related concerns, socio-economic factors, and family-related pressures. The questions that are going to be asked are going to be of an open-ended nature, which will allow the participants to freely express their ideas and opinions.

2.5. Data Analysis Method: Thematic Analysis

After the transcription process has been finished, the collected interviews will be subjected to analysis using a method known as thematic analysis. The data are organized methodically into distinct themes and sub-themes as part of this methodology. These themes and sub-themes emerge during the process of data analysis. After the data has been coded, it will be analyzed to look for patterns and connections between the various themes that have been determined. The thematic analysis makes it easier to have a comprehensive understanding of the data, which in turn helps uncover the fundamental frameworks that affect the experiences and perspectives of the participants.

2.6. Validity and Reliability

To enhance the study’s validity and reliability, the research will utilize triangulation as a methodological approach [4]. This will involve comparing the study’s findings with existing literature and soliciting comments from experts in the relevant field. By employing triangulation, the study aims to corroborate its findings and augment the overall credibility of the research.

3. Results

3.1. Participants' Feeling about Fertility Anxieties Through Social Media

Interviewee 1: 21 years old, unmarried, no children

Interviewee 2: 30 years old, unmarried, no children

Interviewee 3: 28 years old, married, 1 children

Interviewee 4: 27 years old, married, no children

Interviewee 5: 25 years old, married, no children

3.1.1. Health-Related Anxiety

The most frequent anxiety among the participants of the interviews was about the direction of health. They believed that having a child would cause a lot of irreversible damage to the body and that they would have to endure a lot of pain and experience physical risks. Interviewee 1, a 21-year-old unmarried and childless woman, expressed her shock and fear vividly: "After seeing those pictures online of bellies being cut open, I was deeply shocked. It looked really painful. I couldn't sleep for nights thinking about the physical pain of childbirth." This sentiment was echoed by Interviewee 2, a 30-year-old single woman without children, who added another layer to the health-related anxiety: "I read an article about the risks of late pregnancy, and it scared me. I felt like I was running out of time. The post even included statistics on the decline of fertility rates after 30, which made it even more alarming."

3.1.2. Accessing Educational Content and Diverse Perspectives

Respondents were also very anxious about the stress of having a child in terms of expenses. They believe that society nowadays demands a lot from children's education and a good education requires a lot of money. This puts a lot of financial pressure on families and makes them more cautious before choosing to have children. Interviewee 3, a 28-year-old married woman with one child, shared her concerns: "The cost of raising a child these days is astronomical. Just looking at the posts about education and healthcare expenses makes me anxious. I remember seeing a breakdown of costs from birth to college, and it was eye-opening. I started questioning if we could afford a second child." Interviewee 4, a 27-year-old woman in a relationship but without children, had similar anxieties, but from the perspective of someone who hasn't yet started a family: "I saw a post about the 'cost of a child calculator,' and the numbers were staggering. It made me question if I could ever afford to have a child [5]. The post even included future inflation rates, which made it all seem impossible."

3.1.3. The Pressure for a Perfect Family

The birth of a child also represents in some concepts the consummation of the family. And many women, after seeing the lives of other women on the Internet who have children, wish they could be in that ideal family. But there are many women who realize after having a child that maybe that family isn't so ideal, and because of the need to raise a child, all decisions need to be made with more thought. It also makes them worry that they will not have the freedom to choose the life they want after having children. Interviewee 5, a 25-year-old woman in a relationship but without children, expressed her concerns: "I constantly see posts about the 'perfect family,' and it makes me wonder if I'm ready for that kind of commitment. The posts often show happy families on vacations or celebrating milestones, and they set a high standard. I start to think about my own family dynamics and whether we could ever achieve that 'picture-perfect' life."

3.2. Why Participants Feel These Anxieties and How Social Media Triggers Them

3.2.1. Sensationalism and Fear-mongering

One recurring theme that emerged was the sensationalism and fear-mongering present in social media posts. Interviewee 1, who was already anxious about the physical aspects of childbirth, highlighted how sensational headlines like ‘The Horrors of Childbirth’ exacerbated her fears. She remarked, “When I read headlines like that, it just adds fuel to the fire. It’s like these posts are designed to scare you.” This observation sheds light on the sensational nature of certain content that amplifies existing anxieties, emphasizing the role of fear-inducing language and imagery on social media.

3.2.2. Statistical Anxiety

Interviewee 2 provided valuable insights into how statistical information shared on social media could induce stress. She noted that posts often included percentages and graphs that made her feel like she was “against the odds.” For instance, posts about declining fertility rates after a certain age left her feeling like she was “racing against a biological clock.” This aspect of statistical anxiety highlights how numerical data, when presented without context or explanation, can contribute to heightened reproductive anxiety.

3.2.3. Consumption Anxiety

Another challenge women encountered on social media was the presentation of an unattainable lifestyle, particularly related to the financial aspects of parenthood. Interviewee 3, already concerned about finances, explained that numerous posts showcased ‘must-have’ baby products and the ‘best’ schools, which added to her stress. She expressed, “It makes you feel like you’re not doing enough if you can’t afford them.” This phenomenon underscores the role of materialism and the pressure to conform to certain consumption norms in exacerbating reproductive anxieties.

3.2.4. Peer Comparison and Idealized Family Life

Additionally, interviewees revealed how comparing themselves to their peers on social media often triggered socioeconomic and readiness anxieties. Interviewee 4, for example, mentioned that seeing friends post about their expanding families made her question her own financial readiness for parenthood. Interviewee 5 shared how the idealized family life often portrayed on social media, along with the comments praising these ‘perfect’ moments, heightened her sense of having high standards to meet. These insights underscore the social comparison aspect of reproductive anxiety, revealing how online representations of others’ lives can shape individual perceptions and anxieties about their own readiness for parenthood.

3.3. The Content of Coping with Women’s Reproductive Anxiety on Social Media

Another prevalent strategy was the deliberate consumption of educational content. Interviewee 2, for instance, actively sought out medical professionals and scientific articles to counterbalance anxiety-inducing posts. She stated, “I follow medical professionals and read scientific articles that provide a more balanced view of fertility and pregnancy. It helps me feel more informed and less anxious.” This approach reflects the pivotal role that knowledge and information play in mitigating anxiety related to reproductive health. It also underscores the importance of diverse perspectives on the internet, providing individuals with a well-rounded understanding of the topic.

3.3.1. Seeking Reassurance and Validation

One prominent coping strategy that emerged involved the active pursuit of reassurance and validation within online communities. Interviewee 1, profoundly affected by graphic images of childbirth, found solace in platforms where women shared positive birth experiences. She explained, “I started following accounts that focused on natural births and positive affirmations. It helped balance the fear-inducing posts I usually see.” This approach underscores the significance of peer support and shared experiences in alleviating reproductive anxiety, showcasing the potential of social media as a source of comfort and understanding for individuals facing similar concerns.

3.3.2. Accessing Educational Content and Diverse Perspectives

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3.3.3. Diversified Coping Mechanisms

Beyond reassurance and education, our study revealed a range of diversified coping mechanisms. Interviewee 3, concerned about the financial aspects of parenthood, found comfort in posts offering budgeting tips and financial planning advice for parents. Interviewee 4 appreciated real-life stories shared on social media, highlighting the challenges but also offering solutions and positive outcomes. Interviewee 5, who grappled with idealized family life anxiety, sought solace in mindfulness and self-care accounts, emphasizing the importance of self-compassion and taking things one step at a time. These varied strategies collectively emphasize the transformative potential of the internet, redirecting the focus from concerns about fertility to the pursuit of reproductive autonomy, and offering a rich tapestry of coping mechanisms for women in the digital age.

4. Discussion

4.1. Social Media Influences Women’s Fertility Intentions

The study’s findings demonstrate that social media functions not only as an information platform but also as a catalyst that shapes women’s intentions regarding fertility. This aligns with the research, which revealed that the nature and presentation of information can significantly impact women’s decisions related to their health. However, our study goes beyond this by examining the emotional and psychological consequences of such information. For instance, attention-grabbing headlines regarding the concept of the ‘biological clock’ can create a heightened sense of urgency, thereby influencing women to accelerate their fertility plans [6]. This is supported by the arguments put forth, which contend that sensationalism in health-related social media posts can result in impulsive decisions [7], often made without sufficient comprehension or preparation.

4.2. Public Space for Reflection on Women’s Fertility Issues

Our research is in line with the findings of social media as a public domain, where women engage in discussions about fertility matters. However, this public domain has both positive and negative implications. On one hand, it provides a platform for women to share experiences and receive support.

On the other hand, it exacerbates existing anxieties by creating an ‘echo chamber, where similar concerns and fears are repeatedly expressed and intensified [8]. This amplification can be particularly harmful within the context of societal norms and expectations, as it reinforces the stigma associated with infertility or delayed fertility, thereby adding a layer of anxiety for women [9].

4.3. The Social Media Inspires Self-Awareness of Women’s Reproductive Autonomy

The research also identified a notable shift in thinking towards reproductive autonomy that has been influenced by internet usage [10]. While exploring the empowering aspects of online communities, our study examines the nuanced ways in which these platforms facilitate self-awareness and autonomy. Specifically, our findings reveal that women in our study reported that exposure to diverse perspectives on fertility and reproductive health prompted them to question societal norms and expectations, leading to a heightened sense of autonomy [11]. This contribution to the existing body of literature is significant, as it suggests that the internet can serve as a transformative medium, redirecting the focus from concerns about fertility to the pursuit of reproductive autonomy.

5. Conclusion

The study reveals the multifaceted relationship between social media and women’s reproductive health, corroborating previous research that highlights the impact of social media on healthcare outcomes. While social media catalyzes amplifying existing fears—ranging from health-related concerns to socio-economic pressures—it also acts as a counterbalance by providing spaces for alternative narratives and emotional support. This duality is especially pronounced among Chinese women, who are influenced not just by global trends but also by specific cultural norms and societal expectations. The study’s findings suggest that social media is not merely a mirror reflecting existing anxieties but a complex landscape where anxieties are both formed and alleviated.

The significance of this research lies in its pioneering focus on Chinese women, a demographic that has been largely underrepresented in existing literature. By employing qualitative research methods, the study captures the emotional and psychological complexities that are often glossed over in quantitative analyses. Importantly, the research contributes to feminist discourse by reframing the conversation around women’s reproductive anxieties. It shifts the focus from a problem-centered narrative to one of empowerment and autonomy, thereby aligning with feminist ideals of bodily autonomy and informed choice.

Considering the study’s limitations, future research could benefit from a more diverse sample and explore the role of healthcare professionals and influencers on social media. Longitudinal studies could provide insights into the evolving nature of reproductive anxieties over time. Moreover, the influence of authoritative figures, such as healthcare professionals and social media influencers, warrants investigation. Their role in shaping or mitigating reproductive anxieties could be a focal point for subsequent studies. Additionally, cross-cultural studies could offer comparative insights into how different cultural settings influence women’s experiences and coping mechanisms.

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