

How can social diffusion theory be used to investigate the external and internal influences on South Korean youths' decision-making towards childbirth and partnering?

Despite trillions of Korean won being expended by the Korean government to introduce pronatalist policy initiatives since 2005, South Korea's total fertility rate (TFR) remains the lowest in the world. Fertility scholars have long attributed factors such as precarious economic conditions, the surge of women's education and participation in the labour market, and longstanding traditional values to the country's deteriorating fertility rate. However, there is a dearth of literature concerning the extent to which gendered issues influence Koreans' decisions regarding childbirth, specifically within younger generations. Furthermore, research regarding the social diffusion of attitudes regarding marriage, childbirth and their translation to individual attitudes, alongside the key catalysts for these attitudinal changes, must be investigated further. In essence, Korean society must become a more favourable environment in which young people feel encouraged to exercise their personal autonomy and feel supported should they want to have children. To achieve this, a drastic restructuring of fertility policies and their foci must be undertaken to contribute to the shaping of such an environment. This presentation aims to identify how we can approach answering these identified gaps in the literature. The proposed approach to investigating the attitudes held by young generations of Koreans towards marriage and childbirth, and the factors that contribute to their decision-making will be described. A mixed-method approach is proposed by using qualitative semi-structured interviews to explore the possible gendered, social and political factors that influence decision-making, combined with quantitative approaches analysing fertility change and attitudes from existing survey datasets.

Keywords: low fertility, social diffusion, South Korea, TFR

Paper Summary

Fertility in South Korea (hereafter Korea) is the lowest in the world. Since the release of global fertility reports for 2023, news articles and social media posts were once again inundated with dramatic headlines warning of the "extinction" of Koreans as the country once again exceeded its previous global record for the lowest total fertility rate (TFR) with a rate of 0.72 (KOSIS 2024a; Seo 2019, p. 32). Additionally, despite its previous status as one of the most fertile countries in the world, it has maintained a TFR lower than the replacement level since 1983 (Bak 2019, p. 1; KOSIS 2024b; Lee SS 2009, p. 57; Yoo & Sobotka 2018, p. 550). Despite trillions of South Korean won being expended by the Korean government to introduce pronatalist policy initiatives since 2005, Korea's total fertility rate (TFR) has steadily decreased over the years. While there are a multitude of factors which point to the inefficacy of past and current policies, scholars and journalists alike have criticised Korea's fertility policies for focusing primarily on financial incentives rather than addressing culturally ingrained issues which have deterred recent generations of Koreans from childbirth (Seo 2019, p. 33).

While the notion of extinction may seem extreme, given the projected population for Korea to decrease from 51.8 million in 2024 to 47.1 million in 2050 and 37.2 million by 2070, the country may be facing a host of indelible consequences if the issue of low fertility persists (KOSIS 2024a). The most concerning of these consequences is the transition into a "super-aged society" (Bak 2019, p. 6). A country is considered an "ageing society" when its ageing rate exceeds 7%, an "aged society" when it surpasses 14% and a "super-aged society" when it reaches an ageing rate of 21% or higher (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development & World Health Organisation 2022). Korea has been categorised as an "ageing society" between 2000 and 2017 and is currently classified as an "aged society", with projections of becoming a "super-aged society" by 2026 (OECD & WHO 2022; KOSIS

2024b). Furthermore, Korea is ageing “more rapidly than other OECD country” (OECD 2018), and compared to its OECD counterparts, the country has consistently attained a fertility rate of under 1.3 since 2001 and has maintained this trend for the most extended period (Hwang 2023, p. 563-564; Stephen 2012, p. 3). Thus, there is an imperative need for research which focuses on the specific needs of future generations to inform fertility policymaking and create childbirth-friendly conditions.

Of course, the case of Korea's ultra-low TFR is not an isolated issue. In the 1990s, countries such as Italy, Spain, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Greece, Portugal, Japan, Hong Kong and Macau also suffered from TFRs below 1.3, alarming policymakers across the globe (McDonald 2000, p. 3). Since then, various policies spanning different areas of social policy such as "women, children, family, health, welfare or labour" have been implemented by the affected countries to reverse the issue (Jeong et al. 2022, p. 1). However, while parts of Europe and East Asia faced similar issues of prolonged lowest low fertility in the 1990s, many parts of Europe saw improvements in the 2000s (Hwang 2023, p. 564). Regionally speaking, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore have also been experiencing drawn-out periods of ultra-low fertility within the Asian region, undeterred by extensive changes to pronatalist policies, and countries such as China and Thailand have also suffered lower fertility rates closer to ultra-low levels (Hwang 2023, p. 564; Jones 2019, p. 132). Trends across the East and South-East Asian regions demonstrate that singlehood and delayed marriage among a variety of other factors such as economic conditions, fertility policies, increased number of educated women and the consequent increase of women's participation in the labour force have contributed to the region's low fertility.

Despite the extensive efforts of the Korean government to recover the fertility rate, Korean fertility policies have remained largely unsuccessful in encouraging childbirth across the country (Bak 2019, p. 8-9). While there are a multitude of factors which point to the

inefficacy of past and current policies, scholars and journalists alike have criticised these policies for focusing primarily on financial incentives rather than addressing culturally ingrained issues which have deterred recent generations of Koreans from childbirth (Seo 2019, p. 33). For one, Korea's gruelling work culture and gendered stigmatisation within the workplace poses barriers regarding the proportion of time that can be distributed between parents for childcare; this is a factor which many women have come to resent and deters them from bearing children on an individual level (Ahn 2022, p. 5; Tan & Yu 2024, p. 13). Additionally, the lack of alternate measures for childbirth and a disconnect from social issues such as hyper competitiveness in education and employment, rising housing costs, the increased financial and opportunity costs regarding children and inadequate childcare support from the government also contribute to younger generations' attitudes towards childrearing (Ahn 2022, p. 5). Furthermore, Korean youth have been forfeiting "courtship, marriage and childbearing" in recent times, giving rise to the term "Sampo generation", denoting that modern youths are giving up three important aspects of their lives (Ahn 2022, p. 5; Kim et al. 2019).

Inevitably, future generations will have to shoulder the responsibility of providing financial support not only for their potential children, but also for their parents and grandparents as life expectancy also increases and the persistence of long held Confucian values of filial piety remain (Bak 2019, p. 7). Factors such as "high unemployment rates, job insecurity", increased housing prices and an ever more competitive job market also contribute to the growing burdens placed on Korea's youth, and inevitably impact their decision-making regarding childbirth and marriage (Hwang 2023, p. 566). These growing burdens placed on Korea's youth inevitably impact their decision-making regarding childbirth and the notions associated with the "marriage package" (Hwang 2023, p. 566; Raymo et al. 2015, p. 482).

Thus, in order to create an environment conducive to childbirth, the factors which motivate these decisions must inform and influence future fertility policies.

Given the pertinence of Korea's rapidly deteriorating fertility rate, the following research question is posed to better comprehend the social mechanisms which may maintain young Korean's attitudes towards childbirth and marriage:

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Through this research question, I aim to explore the extent to which the attitudes and decision-making of Korean youths towards childbirth and partnering are influenced by social interactions and both local and globalised media. By taking a diffusionist perspective on low fertility, I propose that Korea's dwindling fertility rates are significantly impacted by the "diffusion of new attitudes and ideas" regarding the "value" of raising children and partnered life (Vitali & Billari 2015, p. 2). Given the rise of single-person households and unmarried individuals within Korean society and particularly within Seoul, I hypothesise that social diffusion has played a significant role in normalising childlessness and remaining single.

As an example, a Korean feminist movement called "4B" (or "Four Nos") which involves the boycotting of heterosexual dating, marriage, sex and childbirth emerged in 2019, and according to the extant literature, has spread both within Korea and in neighbouring regions such as China and Japan (Cheng 2023, p. 3; Lee & Jeong 2021, p. 633). While the current literature on 4B estimates the forum's membership to be around 4,000 women, the movement has gained global notoriety on social media platforms such as Tiktok and Instagram. The 4B movement exemplifies the power of social interactions and exposure to media to fuel or strengthen the diffusion of anti-natalist attitudes and the acquisition of behaviours among youth.

With regards to the significance for this research question, there exists a notable gap in the literature which specifically discusses the diffusion of social attitudes towards childbirth and marriage in Korea; most papers centred around the diffusion of contraceptive knowledge and practices. Furthermore, despite the extensive efforts of the Korean government to recover the fertility rate, Korean fertility policies have remained largely unsuccessful in encouraging childbirth across the country (Bak 2019, p. 8-9). Thus, a deeper understanding of the factors which contribute to low fertility must be conducted, alongside identification of the social mechanisms which may maintain and feed negative attitudes towards childbirth, child rearing and marriage.

To address these topics, this research paper will take the form of a literature review, utilising the theoretical framework of 'glocalisation' in conjunction with a diffusionist lens to investigate the flow of global attitudes towards childbirth and marriage are manifested and interpreted locally in Korea (Kim 2023, p. 2; Robert 1994). This paper will also analyse how Korean attitudes towards childbirth and marriage have also been localised in other societies around the world.

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