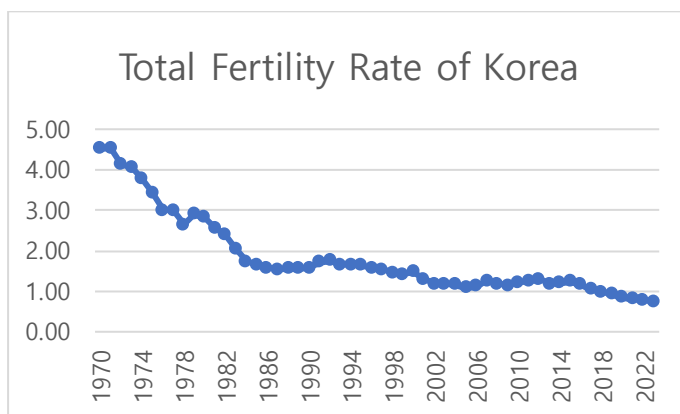


The Effects of Social Media Use on Marriage and Fertility Intentions in Korea

Introduction and Theoretical Focus

Korea currently holds the world's lowest fertility rate, and various factors have contributed to this demographic issue. Economic burdens, rising costs of child-rearing and education, and the increasing trends of late marriage and non-marriage are commonly cited as key contributors to this decline. Structural factors, such as inadequate housing, limited childcare services, and the difficulty of balancing work and family life, have also been heavily discussed in previous research. However, recent studies have introduced a new dimension, suggesting that high competition and population density—especially in metropolitan areas—are affecting fertility intentions (Ko et al., 2020). These studies indicate that the overwhelming competitiveness in densely populated cities pushes childbearing to a lower priority for young adults.



KOSIS(Statistics Korea, Vital Statistics of Korea), Sep. 15th, 2024

In the context of media influence on fertility, the access to media, particularly television, was significantly associated with lower fertility rates in numerous countries, and media can change societal norms regarding family size by promoting modern values such as delayed marriage and smaller families (Hornik & Mcanany, 2001). This highlights the importance of understanding how modern media, such as social media, now affects fertility behavior.

Recent studies have begun examining the role of social media in influencing fertility decisions. A study conducted in sub-Saharan Africa (Wildeman et al., 2022) highlighted that higher social media use was associated with lower fertility rates, suggesting that social media fosters greater social comparisons and feelings of economic inadequacy, which dissuade individuals from pursuing large families. Similarly, research on Chinese women of reproductive age (Ning et al., 2022) found that social media consumption amplifies negative news, leading to decreased social trust and subsequently lower fertility intentions.

A less explored but increasingly relevant factor is the role of social media in shaping marriage and fertility behaviors. Social media, particularly image-driven platforms such as Instagram, has created a virtual space where individuals constantly compare their lives to others. This "social comparison" can intensify feelings of inadequacy, competition, and uncertainty about future life plans. Existing research on social media use primarily focuses on its psychological effects, such as how it contributes to reduced self-esteem and increased anxiety. However, there has been little investigation into how social media affects broader life decisions.

This study explores the theoretical relationship between social media use and declining fertility rates through the lens of psychological competition and social trust. Social trust—the belief that individuals can be relied upon—plays a significant role in personal decisions regarding family and marriage. When social trust is low, people are less likely to commit to long-term decisions, such as having children. Similarly, heightened competition, whether real or perceived, tends to delay such commitments, as individuals prioritize career advancement or financial stability over family formation.

Data and Research Methods

This study employs a survey-based research method to examine the effects of social media on marriage and fertility intentions. The survey collects data on several key variables: types and frequency of social media use, awareness of competition, levels of social trust, and marriage and fertility intentions.

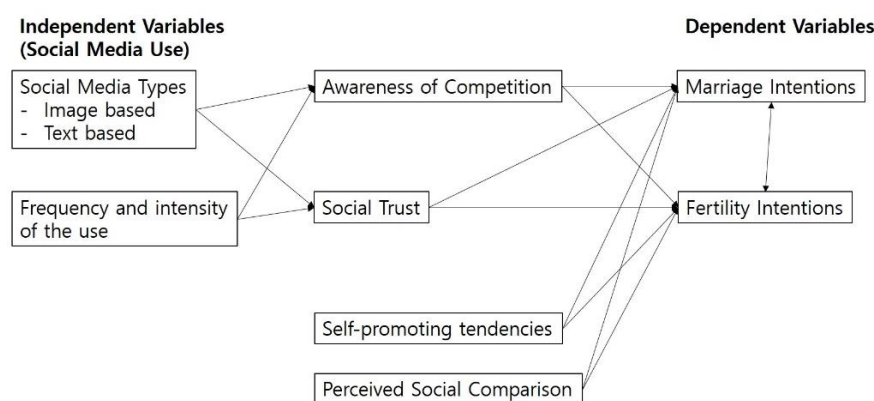


Figure. Hypothesis model

1. Independent Variables:

- **Social Media Use:** The survey categorizes social media use into different types, including text-based platforms (e.g., X) and image-based platforms (e.g., Instagram). The frequency and intensity of use are also measured.

2. Mediating Variables:

- Awareness of Competition: This variable captures the level of psychological competition that respondents feel in real and virtual environments. - Social Trust: This variable measures the respondent's level of trust in other individuals (e.g., friends, family, online communities).

- Perceived Social Comparison: This variable assesses the extent to which respondents feel that social media encourages them to compare their lives to others.

- Self-promoting tendencies: The survey includes questions that assess respondents' tendencies to promote themselves or their achievements.

3. Dependent Variables:

- Marriage and Fertility Intentions: Respondents are asked about their plans regarding marriage and childbearing, including how certain or uncertain they feel about these plans.

Survey questions examples
How many hours per day, on average, have you used social media or online community services over the past week?
The following items are designed to understand how you perceive competition. Please indicate how much you agree with each statement on a 7-point scale.
In general, to what extent do you think people can be trusted? A score of 1 means 'cannot be trusted at all,' and a score of 7 means 'can be trusted completely.'

The survey will be distributed to a sample of young adults in Korea, who represent the primary age group for marriage and childbearing. By focusing on this demographic, the study seeks to capture the most relevant attitudes and behaviors regarding social media use and fertility intentions.

Once the data are collected, the relationships between the variables will be analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and Path Analysis. SEM is chosen for its ability to examine complex relationships between observed and latent variables, allowing for a detailed understanding of how social media use influences marriage and fertility intentions. Path analysis, meanwhile, helps to map out the pathways through which feelings of competition and social trust mediate these effects.

Expected Findings

This research hypothesizes that higher levels of social media use, especially on image-based platforms, will be associated with lower marriage and fertility intentions.

1. Increased Psychological Competition: Individuals who use image-based platforms are expected to report higher levels of psychological competition and social comparison. This competition is likely to negatively impact their life satisfaction and lead to feelings of inadequacy, thus making

them more hesitant to commit to long-term decisions such as marriage and childbirth.

2. Role of Platform Type: The study anticipates that image-centered platforms like Instagram will have a stronger negative effect on marriage and fertility intentions compared to text-based platforms. The visual nature of these platforms encourages more direct social comparisons, as users are exposed to curated and idealized images of others' lives. This is expected to intensify feelings of inadequacy, leading to greater hesitancy about family-related decisions.

3. Implications for Media and Policymakers: The findings of this study are expected to provide insights for media companies and policymakers. If social media use is shown to contribute to declining fertility rates, media platforms may need to consider how they design and promote content, particularly regarding how it influences young adults' life choices. Policymakers could also use these insights to design public campaigns that address the psychological impacts of social media and promote a healthier balance between virtual and real-life experiences.

Conclusion

This study aims to deepen the understanding of how social media influences major life decisions, specifically focusing on marriage and fertility intentions in Korea. By examining the psychological and social dynamics that social media use amplifies, such as competition and social trust, this research contributes to the broader discussion on the factors driving the fertility decline in Korea. The expected findings will not only clarify the relationship between social media use and fertility intentions but also offer practical recommendations for media and policymakers working to address this pressing demographic issue.

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