

The Effects of Digital Media Use on Young People's Satisfaction with Marriage and Childbearing Support Policies: The Mediating Role of Policy Awareness

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of digital transformation, digital media have become an important channel through which young people access information on marriage and childbearing policies. How digital media use affects their satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies therefore merits attention. Drawing on survey data from 639 young people aged 20-35 in Shaanxi Province, this study examines the effects of digital media use on satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies and the mediating role of policy awareness. The results show that, first, young people in Shaanxi report a moderately high level of overall satisfaction with existing marriage and childbearing support policies, although there remains room for improvement. Satisfaction is relatively high with employment protection policies, whereas satisfaction with housing support and support for families with multiple children remains comparatively low. Second, digital media use is widespread among young people. AI tools show relatively high adoption but low-frequency use, while social media remain the primary channel for obtaining relevant information. Third, regression and mediation analyses show that both AI tool use and social media use significantly enhance young people's awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies, and greater policy awareness is in turn associated with higher policy satisfaction. Further analysis shows that policy awareness mediates the effects of both forms of digital media use on policy satisfaction. The effect of AI tool use is partially mediated by policy awareness, whereas social media use affects policy satisfaction primarily through policy awareness. Compared with social media, AI tool use has stronger total and indirect effects, suggesting an advantage in facilitating policy understanding and the translation of policy information into awareness. These findings provide a theoretical basis and practical reference for improving the communication of marriage and childbearing support policies and enhancing young people's policy awareness and satisfaction in the digital-intelligence era.

Keywords: Marriage and Childbearing Support Policies; Policy Satisfaction; Policy Awareness; AI Tool Use; Social Media Use

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1. Introduction

China continues to face low fertility and rapid population ageing. The government has responded with a broad range of marriage and childbearing support policies. These measures seek to reduce the costs of marriage and childbearing and support fertility intentions. They also aim to promote balanced population development over the long term. Current measures

include marriage leave, parental leave, fertility subsidies, and inclusive childcare services. Other policies address workplace conditions, marriage and childbearing culture, and housing support. Policy support now covers many areas of young people's lives, including marriage, employment, housing, education, and family life. Young people are a major group entering marriage and parenthood. Their knowledge and evaluation of these policies matter for policy implementation. Therefore, exploring the satisfaction level of young people with marriage and childbearing support policies and the influencing mechanisms thereof is of great significance for enhancing the implementation effectiveness of such policies.

Previous studies have shown that public awareness, understanding and acceptance of policy content are crucial foundations for the effective implementation of policies. The level of policy awareness will influence the public's judgment of policy value and implementation effects. Especially in the field of fertility support policies, enhancing the public's awareness and understanding of relevant policies, and boosting their confidence in having children, is an important prerequisite for achieving policy objectives^[2]. At the same time, digitalisation has also changed how young people obtain policy information. Policy information is no longer received only through traditional one-way communication. Social media are now part of everyday information use. Generative AI has also become a new tool for finding and interpreting information. Digital media not only may affect the opportunities for young people to access information about marriage and childbearing policies, but also may further influence their perception and evaluation of these policies. Based on this, this study focuses on whether the use of digital media will affect the satisfaction of young people with marriage and childbearing support policies, and whether this influence is achieved through the cognitive mechanism of policy perception.

To address these questions, this study draws on data from the Shaanxi Survey of Young People's Attitudes toward Dating, Marriage, and Family and focuses on young people aged 20-35 in Shaanxi Province. It examines AI tool use and social media use separately. It then tests whether policy awareness mediates their relationships with policy satisfaction. Finally, based on the empirical results, this study puts forward targeted policy recommendations, providing theoretical basis and references for optimizing the dissemination methods of marriage and childbearing policies in the digital age, as well as enhancing the awareness and satisfaction of young people regarding these policies.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Satisfaction with Marriage and Childbearing Support Policies

Policy satisfaction provides a useful indication of how the public evaluates policy implementation and government policies. Previous research has examined satisfaction in several fields, including agriculture, environmental protection, education, and fertility support. Studies of fertility support policies have mainly considered current levels of satisfaction, their influencing factors, and their links with fertility behaviour. From the perspective of the current situation of policy satisfaction, evidence suggests that evaluations of fertility support policies vary across population groups. Based on a survey of individuals who intended not to marry, remain childless, or have fewer children, Yang et al.^[23] found broad support for measures that reduce children's education costs, provide childcare allowances, and offer paid parental leave. Tian et al.^[17] further reported that the level of support from young people for the three-child policy and their evaluation of the policy's effectiveness in promoting fertility intentions were generally low. This indicates that there is still room for improvement in terms of policy recognition and perceived effectiveness of the current fertility support policies. Marshall et al.^[12] found relatively low satisfaction with existing fertility-related policies among medical researchers and identified demand for stronger support in maternity leave, childcare services, and employment protection. Policy satisfaction not only reflects the public's assessment of the implementation effect of the policies, but also is an important factor influencing the realization of policy goals. Xia and Lin^[20], in their study of extended childbearing leave, found that women of reproductive age generally evaluated the policy positively, regarding it as helpful in reducing childrearing burdens and strengthening fertility intentions. Zhu et al.^[30] similarly argued that families' clear perception of policy provisions is an important basis for policy effectiveness and that policies may influence fertility intentions through changes in public policy evaluations. Improving public awareness of and satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies is therefore an important part of enhancing policy effectiveness.

However, existing research has focused primarily on fertility support policies, with relatively limited attention to broader marriage and childbearing support policies. In the Chinese sociocultural context, marriage remains an important precondition

for childbearing^[10], and young people's marriage and fertility decisions are shaped by a range of factors, including employment, housing, and family support. A narrow focus on fertility support alone therefore cannot fully capture young people's evaluations of the broader policy system. Some recent studies have begun to adopt a more comprehensive marriage-and-childbearing perspective. Li et al.^[9], for example, found that unmarried young people placed greater emphasis on policies supporting career development and housing and on measures designed to reduce child rearing costs. Overall, the existing literature provides a useful basis for understanding how young people evaluate marriage and childbearing policies, but research on their satisfaction with such policies and the mechanisms that shape it remains limited.

Research on the determinants of satisfaction with marriage and childbearing or fertility support policies has largely focused on individual characteristics and policy. At the individual level, gender, marital status, childbearing experience, age, and income have all been associated with differences in policy satisfaction. Wang and Li^[19] found that women reported higher satisfaction with fertility support policies than men, while married respondents with one child expressed the highest satisfaction with pregnancy and childbearing support policies. By contrast, Zhou et al.^[28] reported higher policy satisfaction among men and among older respondents. Zhou and Zhao^[27] further showed that income level and household characteristics were significantly related to policy satisfaction. Apart from individual factors, policy perception is also an important factor influencing policy satisfaction. Existing studies have shown that public awareness and understanding of policies are the fundamental basis for forming policy attitudes. Only when policies are recognized and understood by the public can they further influence their attitudes and behaviors. Xiong et al.^[21] found that farmers with greater policy awareness reported higher satisfaction with relevant policies. Zhou and Zeng^[26] also found a positive association between policy awareness and policy satisfaction. Similar findings have been reported in fertility research. Zhou^[29] found that women of reproductive age who were more familiar with relevant policies and evaluated their effects more positively also reported stronger fertility intentions. Dong et al.^[2] emphasized that public awareness and understanding of fertility support policies are important for achieving expected policy outcomes. These studies suggest that policy cognition may serve as an important mechanism linking the acquisition of policy information and policy satisfaction.

Existing research offers a basis for studying satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies, but two issues remain underexplored. First, existing research mainly focuses on fertility support policies, while there is relatively little research on the satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies. Second, the existing studies mainly explain from individual characteristics and policy factors, and pay less attention to how technological factors such as digital media influence the process of policy information acquisition and cognition to shape policy attitudes. Based on this, this study incorporates digital media usage into the framework of satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies, and further examines how digital media usage affects policy satisfaction and the mediating role of policy awareness.

2.2 Technological Factors and Policy Attitudes

With the development of digital government construction and artificial intelligence technology, digital and intelligent technologies such as the Internet, social media, and artificial intelligence have gradually become important channels for the public to obtain policy information, understand policy contents, and form policy attitudes. Compared with the one-way information transmission mode of traditional media, digital and intelligent technologies have driven the policy dissemination to gradually develop in the direction of intelligence, interaction, and personalization. The public has changed from passive recipients of policy information to active seekers and interactive participants. Existing studies have shown that digital media not only affects the opportunities for the public to access policy information, but also further influences the public's policy attitudes by changing the ways of information acquisition, the process of information processing, and the degree of policy understanding.

Early studies focused on the roles of different media types in policy dissemination and the differences in their communication effects. Qing and Kong^[14] discovered that different types of media (traditional media, new media) have varying degrees of influence on each dimension of policy identification (cognition, emotion, evaluation, etc.). The public's perception of the role of media will also further affect their policy expectations and policy evaluations. This indicates that media is not only a channel for policy information dissemination, but also its communication characteristics will affect the public's understanding

and evaluation of policies. At the same time, communication studies have pointed out that due to differences in information richness, interactivity, and feedback mechanisms among different media, their information transmission methods and users' information reception experiences are also different^[1]. These media characteristics may further influence individuals' information understanding and cognitive processing processes, providing a theoretical basis for analyzing how digital media shape policy attitudes.

With the development of internet and mobile communication technologies, research has further focused on the impact of internet usage and social media on the effectiveness of policy dissemination. Existing studies have found that the internet or social media can broaden the channels through which the public access policy information, increase the degree of exposure to policy information, and promote the formation of policy attitudes. Wang et al.^[18] found that residents' use of new media significantly positively influences public awareness and support for environmental protection policies. Yin and Tao^[24] showed that social media interaction represented by WeChat groups can significantly enhance the consistency of policy cognition between village officials and residents as well as the organizational dissemination efficiency.

With the rapid development of generative artificial intelligence, research has begun to focus on the application of AI in public governance and policy dissemination. Compared with traditional digital media, generative AI has features such as real-time interaction, information integration, and personalized feedback, which may change the way the public obtain and understand policy information. Existing studies on AI have mainly examined public responses to its use in government and policy making. Haesevoets et al.^[4] found that public support for AI involvement varied with the policy domain, the degree of AI involvement, and perceptions of AI competence and approachability. Margalit and Raviv^[11] showed that attitudes towards government use of AI were influenced more by information about AI than by prior experience with the technology. Positive information increased support, whereas negative information reduced acceptance. AI-powered search tools are also becoming a source of public knowledge, and both the information they provide and the way they organise it may affect users' understanding of social issues^[8]. Current research, however, has concentrated mainly on AI applications and public attitudes towards AI-enabled governance. Much less empirical attention has been paid to how individuals actively use generative AI to obtain policy information and how such use subsequently shapes policy attitudes.

In conclusion, the current research still has some shortcomings: First, the existing studies mainly focus on the influence of the Internet and social media on policy attitudes, as well as the public's acceptance of AI governance, while there is still a lack of research on how AI tools as a medium for policy information acquisition affect the public's policy attitudes; Second, although the studies recognize the different characteristics of different media in communication, there is insufficient comparative research on the differences in communication effects between generative AI and social media; Third, there has been little empirical testing of the proposed pathway linking digital media use, awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies, and satisfaction with such policies. Therefore, this study incorporates the use of AI tools and social platform usage simultaneously into the research framework of satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies, constructs an analytical model of "digital media use-awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies- satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies", examines the mechanism by which digital media affects the satisfaction of young people with marriage and childbearing support policies, and compares the differences in the roles of AI tools and social media in the formation of policy attitudes. This is to expand the research perspective on the impact of digital and intelligent technologies on policy attitudes.

3. Hypothesis Development and Theoretical Framework

This study integrates the Cognitive Mediation Model (CMM)^[3] and the Search-as-Learning (SAL) framework^[15] to develop a theoretical framework linking digital media use to satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies. The CMM posits that the influence of media usage on attitudes and behaviors does not occur directly; instead, it is achieved indirectly by activating individual cognitive processing. The SAL framework treats information seeking as a learning activity in which users update their knowledge while interacting with information. Based on this, AI tools and social media, as two heterogeneous digital media, both enhance users' in-depth processing and knowledge acquisition of marriage and childbearing policy

information, thereby improving policy satisfaction.

3.1 Effects of Digital Media Use on Awareness of Marriage and Childbearing Support Policies

In the digital age, information search has become an integral part of daily life, work and study. Besides social media like Xiaohongshu, generative AI tools such as DeepSeek, due to their personalized interaction, structured output and immediate feedback, are emerging as new channels for young people to obtain information on marriage and childbearing policies. According to the SAL framework, the information search process of users is not a passive reception but an active learning activity where they actively change their own knowledge state through interaction with the information content. The information search process is also a learning process, which promotes the cognitive development of users.

Previous studies also show a relationship between online information seeking and individual cognition. Han et al.^[5] found that online information seeking significantly improved cognitive ability among older adults in rural areas. Han et al.^[6] reported that more frequent searches for health information helped users accumulate health knowledge and develop more objective perceptions of health risks. Accordingly, whether using AI tools or social media to search for information related to dating, marriage, and family affairs, these are all forms of digital information search and learning behaviors, which can promote users' cognitive development regarding marriage and childbearing policies. The following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a: AI tool use positively predicts young people's awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies.

H1b: Social media use positively predicts young people's awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies.

3.2 Effect of Policy Awareness on Satisfaction with Marriage and Childbearing Support Policies

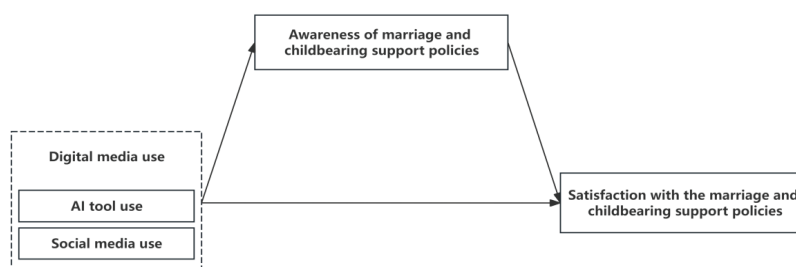
From the perspective of cognitive psychology, individuals' understanding of a policy object provides an important basis for forming evaluative attitudes and judgments of satisfaction. Within policy research, policy awareness has been widely regarded as an important antecedent of policy satisfaction. It reflects not only whether individuals know and understand policy content, but also how they assess policy objectives, intended beneficiaries, and modes of implementation. Pang et al.^[13] found that subjective perceptions of wetland ecological compensation policies significantly influenced policy satisfaction, with an effect greater than that of household income. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Jung et al.^[7] reported a significant positive association between students' depth of understanding of pandemic-control policies and their satisfaction with those policies among students attending in-person classes. Zhang et al.^[25] similarly found that ecological forest rangers who possessed more policy information reported higher levels of policy satisfaction. Based on these findings, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies positively predicts satisfaction with these policies.

3.3 The Mediating Role of Awareness of Marriage and Childbearing Support Policies

Based on the above analysis, the use of AI tools and the use of social media enhance users' awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies through the search-and-learn mechanism; and the deepening of policy awareness further improves the satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies through the cognitive-attitude pathway. This logic is consistent with the central proposition of the Cognitive Mediation Model: media use first affects cognitive processing, which subsequently shapes attitudinal responses. Previous studies provide related empirical evidence. Policy awareness has been found to mediate the relationship between information capability and policy satisfaction^[16]. It has also mediated the relationship between media use and support for environmental policies^[18]. Based on these findings, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Figure 1: Analysis Framework



H3a: Awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies mediates the relationship between AI tool use and satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies.

H3b: Awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies mediates the relationship between social media use and satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies.

In summary, based on the above theoretical arguments, the analytical framework is constructed as follows:

4. Research Design and Method

4.1 Data

The data used in this study were drawn from the Shaanxi Survey on Young People's Attitudes toward Dating, Marriage, and Family, conducted in May 2025 among young people aged 20-35 in Shaanxi Province. The study used online convenience sampling, with electronic questionnaires distributed through Credamo, a professional online research platform. The platform has a nationwide participant pool and allows sample quotas to be set according to characteristics such as age and gender. Data were collected in two stages. A small pilot survey was conducted first, and the questionnaire was revised after problems such as incomplete answers and logical inconsistencies were identified. The formal survey was then carried out. Additional questionnaires were collected when needed, while the gender quota was controlled during data collection. In total, 699 questionnaires were returned. Sixty were removed because of excessively short completion times, logical inconsistencies, patterned responses, or similar problems. This left 639 valid questionnaires, giving a valid response rate of 91.4%. Satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies was measured on a five-point scale from 1="very dissatisfied" to 5="very satisfied", with an additional "not available" option. Responses of "not available" were treated as missing values and excluded. The final analytical sample therefore included 477 respondents ($N = 477$).

4.2 Variable Measurement and Weighted Index Construction

4.2.1 Variable Measurement

Dependent variable. The dependent variable in this study is the satisfaction with the marriage and childbearing support policies, which is measured by asking the respondents about their satisfaction with the contents of various types of marriage and childbearing support policies listed. Each question uses a 5-point scale, with "very dissatisfied=1", "dissatisfied=2", "moderately satisfied=3", "satisfied=4", and "very satisfied=5". The higher the score, the higher the satisfaction with the marriage and childbearing support policies. The Cronbach's α coefficient is 0.827, indicating that the scale has passed the reliability test and has good internal consistency and stability.

Independent variable. Digital media usage, including the use of AI tools and social media, is the independent variable in this study. It is measured by asking the respondents about the frequency of querying information related to marriage and family affairs in the past year. Each question uses a 5-point scale, with options and assignment as "never=1", "occasionally=2", "sometimes=3", "often=4", and "very often=5". The higher the score, the higher the frequency of using AI or social media to search for marriage and family affairs information.

Mediating variable. Awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies is the mediating variable. Respondents reported how familiar they were with different types of marriage and childbearing support policies. Each question uses a 5-point scale, with "not at all aware=1", "slightly aware=2", "moderately aware=3", "fairly aware=4", and "very aware=5". The higher the score, the higher the level of awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies. The Cronbach's α coefficient is 0.944, indicating that the scale has a high reliability level and has strong internal consistency and stability.

Control variables. The control variables in this study include gender, marital status, childbearing experience, economic income, and age. Gender, male is assigned a value of 1, and female is assigned a value of 2. Marital status, "unmarried" is assigned a value of 1, and "first marriage", "remarriage", "divorce", and "widowed" are combined as "married" and assigned a value of 2. Childbearing experience, "no child" is assigned a value of 1, and "one child", "two children" and above are combined as "already having children" and assigned a value of 2. Economic income, based on the per capita disposable annual income of Shaanxi residents, is divided into two groups: those with an annual income of 30,000 yuan or less are assigned a value of 1, and those with an annual income above 30,000 yuan are assigned a value of 2. Age, 20-24 years old is assigned a value of 1, 25-29 years old is assigned a value of 2, and 30-35 years old is assigned a value of 3.

4.2.2 Construction of Weighted Indices for Policy Awareness and Policy Satisfaction

To provide an overall measure of respondents' awareness of and satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies, this study employed the entropy weighting method to construct separate weighted composite indices. The entropy weighting method is an objective weighting approach that determines the weight of each indicator according to the degree of variation in its observed values, thereby avoiding the subjective assumption of equal weighting. Taking policy awareness as an example, mean scores were first calculated for each respondent across the six policy dimensions on a scale from 1 to 5 ensuring that the dimensional structure was consistent with that used to measure policy satisfaction. The weighted composite index was then constructed as follows:

Step 1: Calculate the proportion. For respondent i on dimension j , the proportion p_{ij} is calculated as follows:

$$p_{ij} = \frac{y_{ij}}{\sum_{i=1}^N y_{ij}} \quad (1)$$

Step 2: Calculate the information entropy. The information entropy e_j for dimension j is calculated as follows:

$$e_j = -\frac{1}{\ln N} \sum_{i=1}^N p_{ij} \ln(p_{ij}) \quad (2)$$

Step 3: Calculate the coefficient of variation and the weight. The coefficient of variation is calculated as $d_j = 1 - e_j$, and the weight w_j assigned to dimension j is then obtained as follows:

$$w_j = \frac{d_j}{\sum_{j=1}^K d_j} \quad (3)$$

Step 4: Calculate the weighted composite index. For each respondent, the weighted composite index S_i is calculated as the weighted sum of the mean scores for each dimension and their corresponding weights:

$$S_i = \sum_{j=1}^K w_j \times y_{ij} \quad (4)$$

Following these procedures, a weighted composite index of policy awareness was obtained. The index ranges from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating greater awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies. The weighted composite index of policy satisfaction was constructed using the same procedure. The resulting weights are reported in Table 1.

Table 1: Entropy-Based Weights for Policy Awareness and Policy Satisfaction

Primary Indicator	Secondary Indicator	Information Entropy (e)	Divergence Coefficient (d)	Weight (W)
Awareness of Marriage and Childbearing Support Policies	Three-child Policy	0.994261635	0.005738365	0.131006869
	Housing Support for Marriage and Childbearing	0.986533965	0.013466035	0.307429591
	Childbearing Support	0.992614715	0.007385285	0.168606071
	Marriage Support	0.995866196	0.004133804	0.094374749
	Elimination of Employment Discrimination	0.993341032	0.006658968	0.152024252
	Support for Flexible Employment	0.993580444	0.006419556	0.146558467
Satisfaction with Marriage and Childbearing Support Policies	Three-child Policy	0.992244486	0.007755514	0.219264106
	Housing Support for Marriage and Childbearing	0.993531625	0.006468375	0.182874082
	Childbearing Support	0.994860204	0.005139796	0.145312457
	Marriage Support	0.99486935	0.00513065	0.145053871
	Elimination of Employment Discrimination	0.993159343	0.006840657	0.193399235
	Support for Flexible Employment	0.995964341	0.004035659	0.114096249

4.3 Common Method Bias Test

Because the data were collected through self-reports, common method bias may be present. To minimize its potential effects, the survey adopted procedural measures including anonymity and reverse-coded items. Two post hoc statistical tests were also conducted after data collection. First, Harman's single-factor test was performed. The results identified five factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, and the first factor accounted for 37.60% of the total variance, below the 40% threshold. Second, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with an unmeasured latent method factor was conducted. A baseline model (M1) was compared with a model that included a common method factor (M2). The changes in model fit were $\Delta CFI=0.045$, $\Delta TLI=0.042$, and $\Delta RMSEA=-0.011$. Although the fit indices improved after the common method factor was introduced, the magnitude of improvement remained below the 0.05 criterion. These results suggest that common method bias was not severe and that the data were sufficiently reliable for subsequent analysis.

4.4 Analytical Methods

First, means, frequency distributions, independent-samples t-tests, and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used to describe policy satisfaction and digital media use among young people and to examine differences across demographic groups. Second, after examining correlations among the core variables, hierarchical multiple linear regression and bootstrap mediation analysis were then used to examine whether awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies mediates the relationship between digital media use and satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies. Finally, robustness checks were conducted using several approaches, including cross-method validation, alternative measures of the dependent and mediating variables, alternative treatments of the independent variables, and subsample analyses excluding specific groups. Regarding variable construction, mean scores were used for the descriptive and group-difference analyses of the mediating and dependent variables to provide an intuitive representation of their overall levels, whereas weighted indices were used in the correlation, regression, and mediation analyses.

5. Results

5.1 Satisfaction with Marriage and Childbearing Support Policies among Young People in Shaanxi

5.1.1 Current Level of Satisfaction with Marriage and Childbearing Support Policies

Figure 2. Mean Satisfaction Scores for Different Types of Marriage and Childbearing Support Policies among Young People in Shaanxi

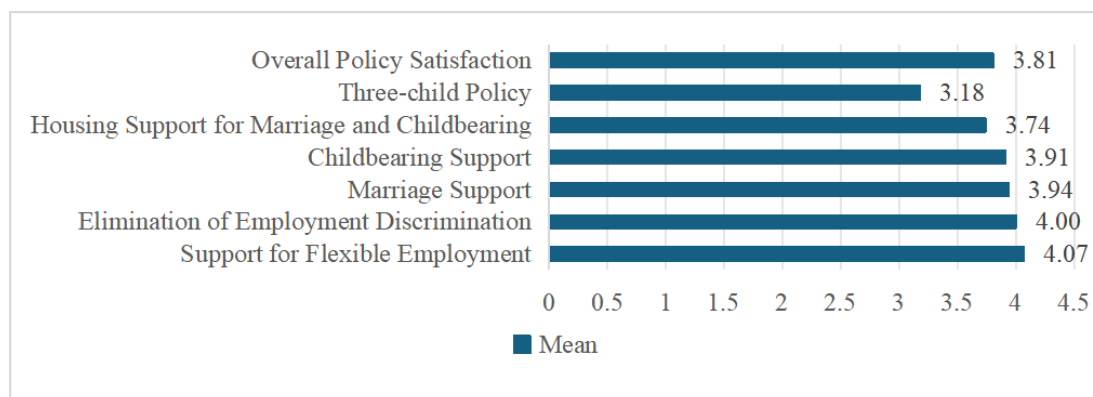


Figure 2 presents the mean satisfaction scores of young people in Shaanxi for different types of marriage and childbearing support policies. Overall, satisfaction varied across policy domains: employment protection measures received relatively favorable evaluations, whereas satisfaction with housing support for marriage and childbearing and support for families with multiple children was comparatively lower. There therefore remains room for improvement in overall policy satisfaction. More specifically, the mean score for overall satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies was 3.81, falling between “moderately satisfied” and “satisfied”. This suggests that although young people generally viewed the policies positively, strong policy acceptance has not yet been fully established. The satisfaction levels for the flexible employment policy (4.07) and the policy eliminating employment discrimination (4.00) are relatively high, both reaching the “satisfied” level. The satisfaction levels for the fertility support policy (3.91) and the marriage support policy (3.94) are at the medium level. However, the satisfaction levels for the marriage and child-rearing housing support policy ($M=3.74$) and the three-child

policy ($M=3.18$) are relatively low, indicating that young people in Shaanxi have a strong sense of gain regarding employment security-related marriage and child-rearing support policies, but their perception of the policy effects in terms of alleviating the pressure of marriage and child-rearing costs, especially the burden of housing and support for multiple-child births, is still relatively insufficient.

5.1.2 Differences in Satisfaction with Marriage and Childbearing Support Policies

Table 2 presents the differences in satisfaction with the marriage and childbearing support policies among young people with different demographic characteristics. The results show that there are significant differences in satisfaction with the marriage and childbearing support policies in terms of gender, marital status, reproductive experience, and economic income. Young men, married individuals, those who have had children, and those with high income have higher satisfaction with the marriage and childbearing support policies. However, the differences among age groups did not reach a significant level. Specifically, the average satisfaction score for men was 3.95, significantly higher than that of women (3.67); the satisfaction score for married young people was 3.93, higher than that of unmarried young people (3.73); the satisfaction score for young people who have had children was 3.93, higher than that of those who have not had children (3.73); and the satisfaction score for young people with an income over 30,000 yuan was 3.87, also significantly higher than that of young people with a low income (3.64).

T *ences in Satisfaction with Marriage and Childbearing Support Policies among Young People*

Variable	Gender		Marital Status		Childbearing Experience		Annual Income		Age		
	Male	Female	Unmarried	Married	No Children	With Children	≤ RMB 30,000	> RMB 30,000	20-24	25-29	30-35
Policy Satisfaction	3.95 ±0.65	3.67 ±0.74	3.73 ±0.73	3.93 ±0.65	3.73 ±0.74	3.93 ±0.64	3.64 ±0.77	3.87 ±0.68	3.72 ±0.70	3.84 ±0.71	3.87 ±0.72

Note. t-tests and ANOVA showed significant group differences for all demographic variables except age.

5.2 Digital Media Use among Young People in Shaanxi

5.2.1 Current Patterns of Digital Media Use

Table 3 shows that using digital media to search for information on dating, marriage, and family affairs was already common among the respondents, although AI tool use and social media use followed different patterns. Social media remain the main information acquisition channels, with higher usage frequency and depth than AI tools. The use of AI tools in this domain was still developing and was characterized by high adoption but low-frequency use. In addition, the frequency of young people obtaining information related to family affairs through digital media is generally higher than that of information related to marriage. Specifically, the popularity rates of using AI tools and social media to search for information related to dating, marriage, and family affairs by young people are both at a relatively high level. Among them, the usage rate of AI tools exceeds 70% (the proportion of never using is 24.7%-26.2%), while the usage rate of social platforms is higher, exceeding 87% (the proportion of never using is 8.6%-12.6%). Digital media has become an important channel for young people to obtain information related to marriage and family affairs.

Further comparison reveals that AI tool use was characterized by high adoption but limited intensive use. Approximately 45.7%-53.9% of respondents were light users, defined as those selecting “occasionally” or “sometimes”, whereas only 21.4%-28.1% were frequent users, defined as those selecting “often” or “very often”. In contrast, the usage frequency of social media is higher, with a light usage proportion of approximately 51.4%-59.7%, and a high usage proportion of 31.7%-36.0%, showing stronger usage stickiness and deeper participation tendencies. From the perspective of information topics, the high usage rates of AI tools and social media for searching for information related to family affairs are 28.1% and 36.0% respectively, both higher than the search proportion for marriage information of 21.4% and 31.7%. This indicates that family-related topics have higher attention in young people’s digital information acquisition.

Table3: Frequency Distribution of Digital Media Use (%)

Frequency of Use	never	occasionally	sometimes	often	very often
AI Search for Dating and Marriage Information	24.7	33.1	20.8	19.3	2.1
AI Search for Family-related Information	26.2	25.2	20.5	22.0	6.1
Social Media Search for Dating and Marriage Information	8.6	31.0	28.7	30.0	1.7
Social Media Search for Family-related Information	12.6	27.3	24.1	29.1	6.9

5.2.2 Group Differences in Digital Media Use

Table 4 shows the differences in the use of digital media among young people with different demographic characteristics. The results indicate that there are significant differences in the frequency of using AI tools and social media to search for information related to dating, marriage, and family affairs among different groups. Young people of male gender, high income, married status, having children, and those in the older age group (30-35) generally exhibit higher levels of digital media usage. In terms of gender, the mean values for male usage of AI tools ($M=1.73$) and social media ($M=2.03$) are higher than those of females ($M=1.25$, $M=1.73$), suggesting that male young people have a relatively higher participation in digital media for obtaining information related to marriage and family affairs. Clear differences also emerged by marital and childbearing status. The frequency of digital media usage among married and childbearing young people is significantly higher than that of unmarried and childless young people. Among married young people, the mean values for AI tools and social media usage are 2.03 and 2.34 respectively, while for childbearing young people, they are 2.06 and 2.34 respectively. This indicates that marital and childbearing experiences may accompany higher information acquisition needs. In terms of economic income, the mean values for AI tools and social media usage of high-income young people (annual income > 30,000 yuan) (1.70, 2.07) are higher than those of low-income young people (0.89, 1.35). Additionally, as age increases, the frequency of digital media usage by young people shows an increasing trend. Among those aged 30-35, the usage level is the highest, with mean values of 1.96 and 2.30 for AI tools and social media respectively. The digital media usage of young people shows certain population group differences, and marital and childbearing experiences, economic conditions, and age stages may be closely related to the digital needs of young people for obtaining information about marriage and family.

T
ences in Digital Media Use among Young People

Variable	Gender		Marital Status		Childbearing Experience		Annual Income		Age(1<2<3)		
	Male	Female	Unmarried	Married	No Children	With Children	≤ RMB 30,000	> RMB 30,000	20-24	25-29	30-35
AI Tool Use	1.73 ±1.00	1.25 ±1.05	1.16 ±1.00	2.03 ±0.92	1.15 ±1.00	2.06 ±0.90	0.89 ±0.85	1.70 ±1.04	1.07 ±1.00	1.52 ±1.00	1.96 ±0.98
Social Media Use	2.03 ±0.85	1.73 ±0.96	1.60 ±0.88	2.34± 0.78	1.61 ±0.90	2.34 ±0.75	1.35 ±0.93	2.07 ±0.84	1.57 ±0.91	1.84 ±0.90	2.30 ±0.77

Note. All t- and F-tests were statistically significant. Age group: 1=20-24; 2=25-29; 3= 30-35.

5.3 Mechanisms Through Which Digital Media Use Affects Satisfaction with Marriage and Childbearing Support Policies

5.3.1 Correlation Analysis

SPSS was used to examine the correlations among the core variables, including AI tool use, social media use, awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies, and satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies. As shown in Table 5, all four variables were significantly correlated with one another, and all correlation coefficients were positive. These results indicate significant positive pairwise associations among the variables and provide a basis for the subsequent analyses.

Table5: Correlation Analysis

	satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies	awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies	AI Tool Use	Social Me- dia Use
satisfaction with marriage and child- bearing support policies	1			
awareness of marriage and childbear- ing support policies	.484**	1		
AI Tool Use	.331**	.509**	1	
Social Media Use	.245**	.412**	.580**	1

Note. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

5.3.2 Multiple Regression Analysis

Building on the correlation analysis, hierarchical multiple linear regression was conducted to examine the mediating role of awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies in the relationship between digital media use and satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies. The regression results are presented in Table 6.

In Model 1, satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies was specified as the dependent variable, with the control variables entered as predictors. The results show a negative association between gender and policy satisfaction, indicating that male respondents reported higher satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies than female respondents. Model 2 added AI tool use to Model 1. AI tool use had a significant positive effect on satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies. In other words, the more frequently young people used AI tools to search for information related to dating, marriage, and family affairs, the higher their satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies. In Model 3, awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies was added to Model 2 as the mediating variable. The results indicate that awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies had a significant positive effect on satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies, supporting H2. The direct effect of AI tool use on policy satisfaction remained significant after the mediator was introduced, indicating that awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies partially mediated the relationship between AI tool use and satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies. H3a was therefore supported.

Model 4 added social media use to Model 1. The results show that social media use had a significant positive effect on satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies; that is, young people who more frequently used social media to search for information related to dating, marriage, and family affairs reported higher levels of policy satisfaction. In Model 5, awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies was added to Model 4 as the mediating variable. Policy awareness remained significantly and positively associated with satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies, whereas the direct effect of social media use on policy satisfaction became not significant. This finding indicates that awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies fully mediated the relationship between social media use and satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies, supporting H3b.

In Model 6, awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies was specified as the dependent variable, with the control variables entered as predictors. Gender was negatively associated with policy awareness, indicating that male respondents had greater awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies than female respondents. Income and childbearing experience were positively associated with policy awareness, suggesting that young people with higher incomes and those who had children showed greater awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies. Model 7 added AI tool use to Model 6. AI tool use had a significant positive effect on awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies; specifically, the more frequently young people used AI tools to search for information related to dating, marriage, and family affairs, the greater their policy awareness. H1a was thus supported. Model 8 added social media use to Model 7. Social media use was also significantly and positively associated with awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies. Young people who

more frequently used social media to search for information related to dating, marriage, and family affairs exhibited higher levels of policy awareness. This result supports H1b.

Table 6: Hierarchical Multiple Linear Regression Results

Variable	satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies					awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Independent Variable								
AI Tool Use		0.302***	0.137**				0.375***	0.319***
Social Media Use				0.202***	0.078			0.117*
Mediating Variable								
awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies			0.439***		0.468***			
Control Variable								
Gender	-0.19***	-0.15**	-0.10*	-0.17***	-0.11*	-0.16***	-0.11**	-0.11**
Age	-0.04	-0.06	-0.05	-0.05	-0.05	0.006	-0.01	-0.01
Annual Income	0.05	0.004	-0.05	0.01	-0.05	0.18***	0.12*	0.10*
Childbearing Experience	0.05	-0.03	-0.12	0.01	-0.11	0.30***	0.20*	0.20*
Marital Status	0.08	0.07	0.08	0.05	0.08	-0.01	-0.03	-0.04
Constant	4.01	3.83	2.78	3.85	2.71	2.86	2.61	2.54
R ²	0.06	0.13	0.26	0.09	0.25	0.21	0.32	0.33
ΔR ²	0.06	0.07	0.13	0.03	0.16	0.21	0.11	0.009
F	6.14***	11.84***	23.77***	8.10***	22.80***	25.61***	37.26***	33.13***
ΔF	6.14***	37.98***	82.94***	16.89***	100.70***	25.61***	75.29***	6.01*

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. All VIF values were well below 10, indicating no serious multicollinearity.

5.3.3 Mediation Analysis

The mediation results were further examined with the PROCESS macro for SPSS using 5,000 bootstrap resamples. As shown in Table 7, the indirect effect along the path “AI tool use→awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies→satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies” accounted for 54.59% of the total effect. Its 95% confidence interval was [0.0762, 0.1496], which did not contain zero. The direct effect of “AI tool use→satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies” accounted for 45.41% of the total effect, and its confidence interval [0.0281, 0.1578] also excluded zero. Since both the indirect and direct effects were significant, awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies partially mediated the relationship between AI tool use and satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies. H3a was therefore supported. For social media use, the indirect effect along the path “social media use→awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies→satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies” accounted for 61.42% of the total effect, and the confidence interval [0.0611, 0.1376] did not include zero. By contrast, the direct effect of “social media use→satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies” accounted for 38.58% of the total effect, but the confidence interval [-0.0102, 0.1318] contained zero. Thus, the indirect effect was significant while the direct effect was not. Awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies fully mediated the relationship between social media use and satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies, supporting H3b.

Furthermore, by comparing the differences in the functions of AI tools and social media, it was found that both influence

the satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies through the awareness of such policies. However, the paths of their influence are different. Overall, the impact effect of using AI tools is greater than that of using social media. More specifically, the total effect of AI tool use on satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies was 0.2046, of which the indirect effect was 0.1117, accounting for 54.59% of the total effect. The corresponding total effect of social media use was 0.1576, with an indirect effect of 0.0968, accounting for 61.42% of the total effect. AI tool use therefore had both the larger total effect and the larger indirect effect through awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies. It suggests that AI tools played a more pronounced role in enhancing young people's policy awareness and, in turn, their satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies.

Table 7: Bootstrap Mediation Analysis

Path (Effect Type)	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Effect Proportion
AI→awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies→satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies(Indirect Effect)	0.1117	0.0185	[0.0762,0.1496]	54.59%
AI→satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies(Direct Effect)	0.0929	0.0330	[0.0281,0.1578]	45.41%
AI Path(Total Effect)	0.2046	0.0332	[0.1394,0.2698]	
Social Media→awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies→satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies(Indirect Effect)	0.0968	0.0195	[0.0611,0.1376]	61.42%
Social Media→satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies(Direct Effect)	0.0608	0.0361	[-0.0102,0.1318]	38.58%
Social Media Path(Total Effect)	0.1576	0.0383	[0.0822,0.2329]	

5.3.4 Robustness Checks

To assess the reliability of the findings, four types of robustness checks were conducted. Across these tests, the directions of the effects for the core variables remained largely unchanged, indicating that the main conclusions are robust. (1) Cross-method validation. Building on the hierarchical regression and bootstrap mediation analyses, a structural equation model was further estimated to examine the hypothesized paths. The results showed that digital media use affected satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies through awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies, providing further support for the proposed mechanism. (2) Alternative Index Construction for the Dependent and Mediating Variables. The mediation analysis was re-estimated using simple mean scores in place of the original weighted indices. The directions of the effects for the core variables were consistent with those in the baseline model. (3) Alternative operationalisation of the independent variables. AI tool use was recoded as a binary indicator of whether AI tools had been used, while social media use was recoded into high- and low-use groups. Re-estimation of the models showed that the direction of the effects of digital media use and the mediating role of awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies remained unchanged. (4) Sample sensitivity analysis. Given that gender, childbearing experience, and marital status may influence young people's attitudes toward marriage and childbearing support policies, the analyses were repeated after separately excluding female respondents, respondents with children, and married respondents. The directions of the effects for the core variables showed no substantial changes.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusions and Discussion

6.1.1 Overall Evaluation of and Group Differences in Satisfaction with Marriage and Childbearing Support Policies

The findings show that young people in Shaanxi rated existing marriage and childbearing support policies between “moderately satisfied” and “satisfied” overall. The overall evaluation indicates that the existing policy system has received relatively positive responses from young people, although satisfaction can still be improved. Employment protection measures received

the most favourable evaluations, while policies related to housing pressures and support for families with multiple children were rated less favourably.

Satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies also differed by gender, marital status, childbearing experience, and income. Men, married respondents, respondents with children, and higher-income groups reported higher satisfaction than women, unmarried respondents, those without children, and lower-income groups. Existing studies have also pointed out that the effectiveness of marriage and childbearing policies shows significant differences among groups. Groups in the marriage and childbearing stage or with stronger resource foundations are more likely to perceive policy support, while female, unmarried, and childless young people, as well as those from low-income backgrounds, due to higher opportunity costs and economic pressures and lack of demand-driven factors, have relatively insufficient perception of policy support. This study further validates this view, indicating that improving the satisfaction of marriage and childbearing support policies not only requires improving policy content, but also needs to pay attention to the differentiated needs of different young groups.

6.1.2 Patterns of Digital Media Use and Their Effects on Policy Communication

The results show that digital media are already widely used by young people to obtain information on dating, marriage, and family affairs. Social media were used more frequently and remained the main information channel in the sample. AI tool use is still developing and displays a pattern of high adoption but low-frequency use. Family-related information was also searched for more frequently than information about dating and marriage.

The relationship with satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies does not appear to depend on use frequency alone. Although AI tools were used less frequently than social media, it showed a stronger effect on satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies. This pattern suggests that differences between the two media may also involve how information is processed rather than simply how often users are exposed to it. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) offers a way to interpret this result. The model distinguishes between a central route based on careful processing and a peripheral route that relies more on external cues. Using an AI tool usually begins with a question: users need to identify what they want to know, formulate the query, and judge whether the response addresses their needs. This form of interaction may encourage closer processing of policy information. Social media provide a different information setting. Users often encounter policy information while browsing rather than through a specific search, and their responses may be influenced by popularity, comments, social interaction, or other users' evaluations. Information overload and fragmented attention may also make sustained processing more difficult.

The data also show differences in digital media use across demographic groups. Men, higher-income respondents, married respondents, those with children, and older young adults reported more frequent use. It points to a degree of social differentiation in the adoption of digital technologies. Effective use of digital media also depends on individuals' digital competencies and algorithmic literacy. Xu^[22] found that digital literacy significantly increased attention to and understanding of policies and regulations. Future digital communication of marriage and childbearing policies should therefore not only make use of the informational advantages of emerging technologies such as AI but also take differences in digital literacy into account and strengthen the capacity of different groups to access and use policy information.

6.1.3 Cognitive Mechanisms Linking Digital Media Use to Policy Satisfaction and Differences Between Media Types

The regression models show two related results. First, both AI tool use and social media use were positively associated with awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies. Second, greater awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies was associated with higher satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies. Before awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies was entered into the models, both forms of digital media use were also positively related to satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies.

The mediation analysis indicates that awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies mediated the relationships of both AI tool use and social media use with policy satisfaction. This finding supports the proposed cognitive pathway and accords with the core argument of the Cognitive Mediation Model, in which media use is related to attitudes through cognitive processing. The two forms of digital media, however, showed different mediation patterns. There is still a direct effect between

the use of AI tools and policy satisfaction, manifested as a partial mediating role. The influence of social media use mainly occurs through policy cognition, presenting a complete mediating role. This indicates that in addition to promoting policy cognition, AI tools may also directly affect young people's policy evaluation by improving information comprehension efficiency and enhancing individual policy experience; while social media mainly plays the role of information dissemination and policy cognition formation, and its impact on policy satisfaction mainly depends on young people's understanding and absorption of relevant policy information.

The strength of these effects also differed between the two forms of digital media. Although both AI tools and social platforms exert their effects through policy awareness, the intensity of their effects varies significantly. The use of AI tools not only has a higher overall impact effect, but also has a stronger indirect influence generated through policy awareness, indicating that AI tools have a more obvious advantage in promoting policy understanding and cognitive transformation. From the perspective of media richness theory, different digital media have differences in information processing capabilities and interaction methods. AI tools can integrate information based on user needs, provide precise responses and personalized explanations, helping young people acquire and understand policy information more efficiently, thereby promoting the transformation of policy awareness to policy evaluation. In contrast, although social platforms have the characteristics of wide information dissemination range and strong interactivity, their information presentation has a strong openness and decentralized feature. Policy-related information is prone to be affected by fragmented dissemination, information redundancy and non-professional expression, which may reduce the efficiency of effective information transmission.

6.2 Policy Recommendations

6.2.1 Strengthen the Policy Communication Function of Digital Media and Improve Awareness of Marriage and Childbearing Support Policies

The empirical results show that both AI tool use and social media use are positively associated with awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies, while awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies plays a mediating role in their relationships with satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies. Policy communication through digital media should therefore focus not only on making information available but also on helping young people understand its content. Policy communication on marriage and childbearing should therefore move beyond the simple provision of information toward promoting public understanding, making fuller use of the digital platforms commonly used by young people for policy interpretation and interactive communication. More specifically, social media can use short videos, cases, and other easy-to-follow formats to expand the reach of policy information. Policy content should also be organised clearly so that users can identify key provisions and understand how they apply. This can reduce the difficulty of processing policy information and improve the communication of existing support measures.

6.2.2 Harness the Potential of AI to Strengthen Digital Policy Service

Although AI tool use is currently less frequent than social media use, its relationship with satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies is stronger. AI tools also show a larger indirect effect through awareness of marriage and childbearing support policies. These results point to their potential as an additional channel for policy services. Government agencies can explore the use of AI for functions such as intelligent question answering, policy matching, and personalised consultation. Such services could help young people locate policy information that is more closely related to their own circumstances. At the same time, the accuracy and clarity of the information provided should remain central to the design of these services. Differences in digital skills and technology use also need to be considered. Support for digital literacy can help young people access and assess policy information more effectively and reduce differences in their ability to use emerging digital services.

6.2.3 Focus on Young People's Practical Needs and Improve the Targeting and Perceived Effectiveness of Marriage and Childbearing Support Policies

The results show that satisfaction with marriage and childbearing support policies can still be improved. Housing support and support for families with multiple children received relatively lower evaluations. Women, unmarried and childless young people, and lower-income groups also reported lower levels of satisfaction. Policy provision should therefore take greater

account of these differences. On the basis of existing employment protection measures, more attention can be given to housing support, childcare services, and measures that reduce the costs of childbearing and childrearing. These are also areas in which respondents reported comparatively lower satisfaction. Young people at different stages of marriage and childbearing may face different policy needs, and their economic resources also differ. Policy provision should reflect these differences more closely so that existing support can better match the circumstances of different groups.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the analysis uses cross-sectional data, which do not allow causal relationships among the variables to be established. Reverse causality and omitted-variable bias also cannot be excluded. Second, the study used online convenience sampling and included only young people in Shaanxi Province. The extent to which the findings apply to young people in other regions therefore remains uncertain. Future research could use longitudinal data to examine how these relationships change over time. Instrumental-variable approaches may also be considered when suitable instruments are available. Studies based on samples from other regions could further test the generalisability of the findings.

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Conflict of Interests

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