

5 Fertility desires in the digital era

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As smartphones and social media spread, birth rates declined worldwide. We argue that technological change altered the reproductive cues surrounding young adults, and young women in particular, and outline the mechanisms through which information and communication technology (ICT) use can serve to delay or advance childbearing. As discussed earlier in the preceding chapters, the diffusion of personal digital technologies has transformed the dynamics of partnering (Chapter 3) and the quality and duration of romantic relationships (Chapter 4), especially among childless young adults. These changes in romantic relationships contribute to later and lower fertility, as individuals in their 20s and 30s find it more challenging to establish committed partnerships or spend more time searching for a suitable partner. This chapter builds on that evidence to explore other pathways through which digital technologies shape childbearing. We focus on how digital media use relates to fertility desires or the wishes and plans regarding parenthood.

Media can alter the environmental reproductive cues young adults encounter concerning when to have a child and how many to have. Communication technologies have changed throughout the 20th and 21st centuries in tandem with fertility declines. Television ownership has been studied, in particular, and found to be associated with lower fertility on both population and individual levels. What *drives* the associations between media and childbearing is harder to ascertain, since questions of causality are notoriously hard to tackle: not only is it difficult to disentangle the effect of a particular technology from other cultural, social, economic and political developments, but childbearing is also a much more complex behaviour than, for instance, voting for a political party or buying a specific product.

Existing research suggests that radio, TV, newspapers and other pre-internet mass media played an influential role in promoting smaller families and lower fertility. The key mechanisms identified include exposure to new values (e.g. smaller families perceived as possible and desirable), new consumption patterns and new ways to spend leisure time (e.g. watching TV in bed instead of having sex), and better information about contraceptive use and access to family planning services (e.g. in cultures with patriarchal traditions and long geographical distances to health clinics) (Horn & McAnany, 2001). Some studies relate the spread of new lifestyles

and smaller family ideals to specific popular TV programmes, such as telenovelas in Mexico (Ferrara et al., 2012).

Despite this evidence, the role of technological change is often overlooked in conventional demographic and economic research. As Horni and McAnany (2001) noted in their perceptive overview, television is arguably a stronger predictor of fertility levels in a country than female education or gross national product, but the latter remain far more often mentioned and studied as factors contributing to smaller family size.

How, then, have the internet and the spread of smartphones contributed to fertility? At the global macro level, the coincidence in trends is glaring. The spread of social media in the 2010s was exceptionally rapid for a technological innovation, and paralleled with an equally exceptionally rapid decline in birth rates. The United Nations 2010 forecast (UNDESA, 2010) predicted that a high-income, low-fertility country such as Great Britain would have a total fertility rate of 1.8 in 2020–25, but this materialised as 1.4 in 2024. Also in poorer, middle-income countries such as India or Mexico, fertility has declined in recent years, and faster than predicted based on historical associations between wealth and birth rates. As a species, humanity is predicted to reach below replacement fertility levels (i.e. less than 2.1 children per woman) in this decade, if it has not already happened.

Not only was the accelerated fertility decline unforeseen but it is also not readily explained by traditional political and economic variables such as housing, employment, gender equality, or family policies. Scholars agree it is time to look ‘beyond the economic gaze’ (Comolli et al., 2021) towards a broader picture incorporating also values, perceptions (Guetto et al., 2023), and ‘narratives of the future’ (Vignoli et al., 2020) to grasp the drivers of the fertility decline.

We argue that the rapidly increased use of the internet, smartphones, and social media in the 2010s accelerated fertility decline. Smartphones promote disembodied communication and transmit lifestyles, values, and opportunities that contain predominantly discouraging cues about childbearing. We discuss four key mechanisms working through ICT use that, according to the evidence discussed later, are associated with the timing and probability of childbearing: (1) changing values and access to information, (2) perceived costs of parenting, (3) perceived costs of childbearing on the female body, and (4) connectivity and screen time. These mechanisms work both to push away from or delay childbearing and to pull towards it, depending on the content and type of use, and arguably also on whether the user has children or not. Overall, ICT’s effects on fertility desires and childbearing have been negative so far.

We present research on ICT diffusion and personal use in relation to childbearing desires and outcomes. We focus on studies using large-scale statistical data, which remain relatively few, despite growing in number as well as geographical scope. While having children mostly involves a heterosexual couple, the large majority of all research only studies women—a caveat not unfamiliar to the fertility literature. We also present results from the Finnish Family Barometer survey 2024¹ and excerpts from a thematic interview² (Box 5.1).

Unique features of childbearing

This chapter analyses envisaged social relations: the imagined new realities of what it would be like to have a child or another child. Improved contraception, larger reproductive choice, and individualisation mean that whether and when to have a child is increasingly a personal decision. Media content about families, parenthood, and babies can shape fertility desires. ICT could also affect fertility through numerous indirect routes, such as general negativity and lack of trust, pessimism about the future, or mental health. Here, however, we focus on the reproductive cues that digital media convey to young adults/women of reproductive age.

Our key concepts are *fertility desires* and *reproductive cues*. Fertility desires are usually measured as the reported personal or general ideal number of children, or as the intentions and plans to have a child or children. In low-fertility populations, ideal fertility is typically somewhat higher than intended fertility, which in turn is higher than actual fertility (Friedrich & Bujard, 2025). Fertility desires are known to predict actual childbearing (Schoen et al., 1999). As we will discuss later, fertility desires can also include ‘baby fever’ or a strong longing to have a child, as well as ‘fertility anxiety’ or fears and apprehensions relating to pregnancy and parenthood.

Reproductive cues are a term from evolutionary biology (see Chapter 2) that refers to environmental signals for when it is, or, crucially, when it is not, a good time to have and raise offspring (Rotkirch, 2026). Since human reproduction is physiologically costly and risky, especially for women, avoiding the wrong times to reproduce has been essential during human evolution. Cues that ‘push’ an individual towards delaying childbearing are hence likely to be at least as psychologically pertinent as cues that ‘pull’ towards having a baby now. Reproductive cues can be environmental, physical, cultural, or social. Our focus is on the last two types of cues. Cultural cues relate to the social status of parenthood and especially the values and expectations surrounding successful parenting. Social reproductive cues include how a sense of safety, receiving support in childrearing, or social contagion (especially seeing other people having babies) will strengthen fertility desires, while their absence—insecurity, lack of support, and few babies in sight—can lower desires.

Mass media and the new ICTs provide ample grounds for the transmission of various reproductive cues. Nowadays, ICT occupies substantial shares of people’s time, thus potentially being one of the key environments for reproductive decision-making. In Table 5.1, we list the mechanisms through which ICT may be associated with childbearing, detailing the push and pull effects. Our reasoning follows the logic of Hornik and MacAnany, who in 2001 categorised the fertility effects of the use and spread of mass media into the act of exposure, content-related effects (values and perceived costs of childbearing), and deliberate information campaigns. Using this categorisation as a basis, we define three content categories in relation to digital media: (1) exposure, values, and information; (2) perceived costs of parenting; and (3) perceived bodily costs of motherhood. We also include

Table 5.1 Ways today’s technology may transmit reproductive cues that advance or delay childbearing.

<i>ICT mechanism</i>	<i>Reproductive cues</i>	
	Push or stop: delaying or forgoing childbearing	Pull: good time to have a(nother) child
<i>Exposure, values, and information</i>	Access to information about contraception and sexual rights; non-family-oriented values; childlessness is more approved	Access to information about pregnancies, fertility awareness, and infertility treatments
<i>Perceived costs of parenting</i>	High costs: high demands on parenting; having to give up attractive competing life goals	Low costs: babies and parenthood are seen as attractive; peer support in parenting
<i>Perceived bodily costs of motherhood</i>	Fertility anxiety, fear of pregnancy and identity loss	Empowering views of pregnancy and motherhood
<i>Connectivity and screen time</i>	Passive use; interactions with weak social ties or strangers, or parasocial interactions	Interaction with strong social ties and family members

a fourth category, (4) connectivity and screen time, to better suit the new information technologies with interactive use enabled by apps and social media, building on Adair et al. (2014). Empirical evidence regarding these pathways’ effects is presented later.

Cues that reduce or increase fertility

Values and information

Here we summarise research on values and information transmitted through mass media and ICT in this century, and how it relates to fertility and fertility desires. A consistent body of research shows that both traditional and new media use have been associated with more contraception use (Hadadian et al., 2025). Since the 1970s, media content and large global campaigns have advocated for smaller family sizes, gender equality, later parenthood, and the use of contraception. Mass media use can both improve access to family planning information and serve to weaken the impact of traditional, local norms about contraception (Sedlander & Rimal, 2019). A few country-specific studies have analysed childbearing and smartphone usage specifically. An early longitudinal survey conducted in Balaka, Malawi, between 2009 and 2015, when the country’s total fertility rate was almost four children per woman, found that mobile phone ownership was associated with a smaller ideal family size as well as having fewer children (Billari et al., 2020). In this high-fertility population, the effects were stronger with respect to birth spacing, or having later higher-order children, and not strongly related to age at first birth. The effects were related to using the mobile phone for handling mobile money and for accessing the internet, but not with making phone calls or texting.

This suggests that role modelling and access to information were the driving factors behind the changes in fertility preferences and realised fertility. A study from sub-Saharan Africa, with a total fertility rate of around four, examined macro-level indicators of ICT. Phone ownership, Facebook usage, and a smaller gender gap in Facebook usage were all associated with lower subnational birth rates (Wilde-man et al., 2023). Research on internet use and family planning advice in Nigeria reported that online information strengthened women's sexual and reproductive agency, such as being able to refuse unwanted sexual intercourse or asking a male partner to use a condom (Okunlola et al., 2023). Taken together, these findings suggest that the spread of the internet and smartphones affected childbearing in low-income, high-fertility societies in ways similar to the previous influence of radio, newspapers, and television: by supporting women's reproductive rights and spreading ideals of smaller family size (Horn & McAnany, 2001).

Largely similar trends are visible in East Asia, in spite of a regional reproductive landscape very different to that of sub-Saharan Africa. In China, total fertility rates declined from around 1.4 to around only one child per woman during 2010–2025. Analysing longitudinal survey data from 2014 to 2018, Nie et al. (2023) found that internet use reduced childbearing. Fertility was reduced particularly among women in their 20s and 30s, those with a moderate level of education, as well as among married respondents and rural residents. This study hence detected a fertility decline among demographic groups, which arguably would originally have held more traditional family values than their urban, highly educated, or single counterparts. The study also identified changes in the values linked to traditional gender roles and the importance placed on ancestral lines, again suggesting an overall weakening of traditional family norms in the 2010s. Among the identified mechanisms were also decreased marital satisfaction, highlighting how screens may lower the quality of romantic relationships (see Chapter 4), which, in turn, may reduce fertility desires. In addition to realised fertility, internet use was also associated with reduced fertility preferences: compared to non-users, internet users were somewhat more likely to have zero or one child and less likely to have two children or more as their personal fertility ideal (Nie et al., 2023).

Ning et al. (2022) found, using survey data from China in 2017, that not just general internet use, but specifically social media use was associated with lower fertility intentions. Interestingly, unlike evidence from several other countries cited earlier, traditional media use was not associated with fertility desires in this study. The authors interpret this unexpected result in the context of the state-controlled nature of traditional Chinese media. We can speculate that Chinese state-controlled media in the 2010s may not have had the same effect on young adults as national media in less authoritarian societies. Alternatively, as China renounced its one-child policy in 2016, the content of state media may have been less antinatalist than media content in Africa or Latin America in earlier decades.

These African and Chinese studies from the 2010s uniformly point to overall lower childbearing and lower fertility ideals with internet, smartphone and social media use. Unfortunately, we appear to lack comparable large-scale studies from Europe or the Americas, with some exceptions from Finland discussed later.

There is evidence that the use of digital media may reduce childbearing, but can ICT-transmitted information and family values also support childbearing in some cases? Involuntary infertility is a global phenomenon affecting around one in six people of reproductive age around the world (WHO, 2025). In theory, access to better information about fecundity, menstrual cycles, and causes of infertility could promote fertility awareness and reduce involuntary childlessness (e.g. Ford et al., 2020). In reality, however, such tailored factual information about infertility is quite scarce (Hamidzadeh et al., 2024). It also coexists with the ‘overselling’ of childbearing at very high ages, often promoted in mainstream media in the last decades, as young adults perceive rare events of celebrity women having children at high ages as realistic options (Willson et al., 2019).

A few recent studies from China do detect ‘pulling’ reproductive cues fostering family and fertility desires in the social media landscape. Yang et al. (2025) reported that social media use was associated with more positive views of marriage among almost 600 Chinese female, childless undergraduates who volunteered to participate. This association was partly explained by agreement with traditional sex roles and a need to belong. Another Chinese study analysed the new popularity of online baby videos with a snowballing sample, finding that watching baby videos can raise fertility desires among childless youth (Zhou & Zhao, 2024). It is too early to say if such pro-family value changes are enduring, and how they relate to the modest recovery in birth rates in China in 2024.

Perceived costs of parenting

The 2010s have been described as a decade of intensive parenting norms (Noma-guchi & Milkie, 2020). The trend appears to be fed by both higher real-world costs and heightened thresholds for what is perceived as good parenting. On the one hand, actual costs of family formation have risen in many societies (van Wijk & Billari, 2024), rendering parenthood unobtainable to ever larger proportions of young adults. On the other hand, the cultural requirements of successful parenting may further heighten the bar, especially among those with little or no direct experience of actual parenting. Perceived costs can appear higher than actual costs, while perceived rewards of parenting can appear lower than actual rewards.

Research on three Chinese social media platforms in 2021–2024 found that negative sentiments were dominating the online discussions regarding childbearing. Of all mentions in 2024, 71% were negative towards the prospect of having a child, and only 2% were positive; the rest were neutral. Furthermore, the share of negative discourse increased significantly within the observation period. Negative sentiment was related to the costs of childrearing and lack of social support for parents of small children (Xiang & Sun, 2025).

Online services, peer support, and influencers can also support parenting and render expectations more realistic, but real evidence is mixed in this regard. Interaction with influencers can include beneficial discussions, support, and information sharing, but also combative interactions and misinformation, as noted in the systematic literature review on pregnant and new parents by Chee et al. (2023). Online

interactions can also enhance parental competition and comparisons (Chae, 2015) or create feelings of stress and inadequacy (e.g. Onishi, 2024).

While cultural and economic requirements for parenthood are on the rise, remaining childless is becoming less stigmatised even in patriarchal societies. Arguably, smartphones have disseminated ideals of a desirable life course, where marriage and parenthood are increasingly framed as life choices with uncertain benefits or even drawbacks. (At the time of writing, a Vogue article asking whether ‘having a boyfriend is embarrassing’ went viral on social media.) In parallel, many societies have witnessed an increase in voluntary childlessness, a trend that can be transmitted by the media. For instance, a qualitative study of Iranian couples identified media and social media as one of the factors contributing to low fertility desires. One respondent said: ‘In media, I see that educated or even prosperous people have one child or they don’t have one at all. I think to myself, why should I have a child?’ (Tori et al., 2023).

The Family Barometer surveys in Finland suggest that stating zero as one’s ideal number of children spread in tandem with the wider use of social media in the 2010s. The overall ideal number of children declined in Finland among cohorts born after 1985, and this change was driven by a substantially increased share having the ideal of no children at all (Golovina et al., 2024). These results are cross-sectional, making it impossible to assess to what extent digitalisation merely reflected existing societal trends. However, another study using Finnish surveys reported that higher social media use was associated with lifestyle preferences that did not include parenthood. Savelieva et al. (2023) examined reasons to postpone or forgo childbearing as reported by Finns aged 20–44 who did not plan to have (more) children soon. Respondents who spent less time on social media also expressed fewer uncertainties regarding parenthood, were less work oriented, and had a more stable life situation. By contrast, respondents who used social media frequently, were childless, and had higher work orientation, more often reported childfree lifestyle preferences and ideals, and this group had more women than men.

Media narratives about parenthood can serve to validate or promote single lifestyles, but they can also serve as positive reproductive cues. Some evidence suggests that pleasant interactions between parents and children, a fair division of duties between the spouses, and work-life balance can serve to lower the perceived costs of becoming a parent. A psychological experiment from the United States on baby fever randomly assigned childless young adults to view images of parents and children against a control group. After seeing soothing parenting content, people expressed a greater desire to have children themselves. A later follow-up study found that this effect persisted for at least three days after the experiment. The mechanism behind the effect was linked to the emotion of empathy: seeing parents with their children provoked empathy, which in turn strengthened childbearing desires (Nelson-Coffey & Cavanaugh, 2022).

Similar results come from China, where online videos of babies grew in popularity in the early 2020s. This ignited a discussion of whether such digital images served as a substitute or an impetus for childbearing in real life. In their mixed-methods study, Zhou and Zhao (2024) found evidence for the latter: avid

baby-video consumers also had stronger baby longing and higher fertility intentions. The study identified three potential psychological mechanisms behind this phenomenon: the emotional value of children, positive role-modelling of parenting, and help with decision-making regarding childbearing. Notably, respondents said that seeing how happy a child could make a parent, successful examples of work-life balance, or well-behaved children were inspirations for aspiring to have a family of their own. As one of them noted, ‘I think their family has a particularly good balance between life and work, because Keke’s mom is a PhD student and Keke’s dad is very supportive of her academic pursuits and also has his own job’. Respondents also contrasted, in their words, ‘beautiful’ videos with the ‘terrible marriage and parenthood’ messages they had encountered on other media platforms. Nevertheless, positive messages about parenthood can also appear unrealistically cute and perfect, further raising the expectations and a fear of failing to be a perfect parent (see Box 5.1).

Bodily costs and fertility anxiety

A unique cost of parenthood is the bodily costs of pregnancy and birth that only mothers encounter. While undeniable, particularly negative and anxious views of the bodily costs of motherhood proliferated in some corners of the social media landscape in the 2010s and 2020s. We lack ways to fully assess their extent, contents, and how much they reflected or amplified offline trends. Currently, most large-scale studies on the topic are from China.

A study of three Chinese media platforms by Xiang and Sun (2025) detected strong negative sentiments about childrearing, which included deep concerns related to pregnancy, giving birth, and the mother’s mental health. Yang et al. (2024) conducted a thematic analysis of a long discussion thread about ‘What does childbirth mean to a woman’, which received 2,634 entries on the social media platform Douban. This study found that negative sentiments were related to health risks and positive to happiness and fulfilment. Negative comments were twice as prevalent as positive ones, and the negative posts received more replies and likes. The authors find evidence for exaggerated perception of health risks among women and a lack of knowledge about childbirth.

Analysing around 4,000 posts on Weibo, another popular Chinese social media platform, Li and Zhou (2025) further deepened our understanding of what they call ‘fertility anxiety’ or ‘a state of internal conflict between normative expectations and perceived personal costs’. An example is the post titled ‘90s DINK couples being pressured by parents to have children’ that received over 25,000 comments and 300 million views. The researchers also identify a competing online counter-narrative, less aptly named ‘anti-fertility anxiety’. The counter-narrative distances itself from policy narratives that state childbearing as a duty or obligatory part of feminine identity, but advocates for support and reproductive autonomy. This trend is exemplified by the post ‘Freedom to procreate’ that attracted over 53,000 comments and 220 million views.

Fertility anxiety largely consists of fear of pregnancy, birth itself, and possible injuries from stretch marks to weakened pelvic muscles or post-partum depression. Li and Zhou (2025) also noted concerns about body image and sexual attractiveness: ‘The mom of twins with a hanging belly develops quilt-like creases after giving birth’, is offered as an example of a post that made users more anxious about birth. A second major theme is fear of losing one’s identity when becoming a mother. Other themes included family and gender equality, and workplace discrimination of mothers. By contrast, the counter-discourse focuses on control over reproduction, emotional connection between mother and child, and societal and workplace support. For our purposes, of particular interest is how the counter-narrative criticises social media fixation on unhealthy body standards, evidenced in very thin pregnant women (‘7-month-pregnant woman weighs only 104 pounds’).

These Chinese studies cannot be automatically generalised to other countries. Furthermore, they may reflect women’s fears or pessimism about real-world conditions, but also the effects of the medium itself. Digital platforms are known to amplify strong and often negative emotions to maximise user engagement. Artificial intelligence creates algorithms that tailor content to foster user engagement, and often enhance outrage and pessimism (cf. Nie et al., 2023).

Examples of fertility anxiety outside China are available but little studied. The social media app TikTok is among the most used among young adults and is known as a forum for views idealising the choice of not to have children and singlehood (Navlakha, 2021). One viral trend on TikTok was *The Girl with the List*, which had received over 84 million likes by late 2025. The list is a gruesome compilation of everything that could possibly go wrong in pregnancy, birth and motherhood, sometimes tongue-in-cheek, often preoccupied with topics highly similar to the Chinese fertility anxiety: altered body image, health issues, vulnerability, and female loss of identity through motherhood.

An exploratory survey of similar discourses on TikTok analysed how negative fertility intentions were presented on the platform, examining data from posts with over 51 million views and nearly 790,000 comments. Woodthorp and Gray (2025) analysed a collection of TikTok videos associated with three hashtags: #childfree, #childfreebychoice, and #childfreetiktok. Key themes were that parenthood is no longer seen as attractive, concern over the physical consequences of pregnancy and labour, concern about free time, and a lack of urge to have children.

However, TikTok is also extremely popular for posting family-friendly content, and babies are allegedly among the most posted picture genres (The Economist, 2025). In the 2020s, the engagement-maximising algorithmic nature of all social media, but especially TikTok, has led to individually tailored content being fed to users based on their previous preferences. In this media landscape, anti- and pronatalist messages can exist in parallel. No research has, to our knowledge, explored the entire childbearing discourse on a specific social media platform. In a pioneering contribution, Adair et al. (2014) analysed Twitter accounts expressing a strong desire to have a baby. They found women were overwhelmingly more likely than men to use the #babyfever hashtag, and they typically expressed strong and

positive emotional reactions, although a minority also expressed negative emotions. Interestingly, experiences of ‘baby fever’ were particularly likely to include mentions of direct exposure to babies in real life—one of the strongest reproductive cues signalling a good time to reproduce.

As Chinese evidence suggests, viral trends can relatively quickly change from being against childbearing to promoting it. Analysing the spread of baby videos on Chinese social media, Zhou and Zhao (2024) found that such content consumption could both reinforce existing wishes for a child and raise the willingness to consider childbearing. ‘After watching online baby videos, I became less fearful of childbearing and even started to look forward to it’, says one of their respondents. The value of seeing realistic parenting is highlighted in a similar way by a young Finnish woman in our thematic interview (Box 5.1).

Connectivity and screen time

Having analysed studies related to values, costs of parenthood, and the bodily costs of motherhood transmitted through the media, we return to the question of the medium itself. Next, we explore whether screen time and what particular type of screen use are associated with fertility desires.

Using the Finnish Family Barometer survey data from 2024¹, we investigated how overall screen time and specific types of screen use were associated with fertility desires. Here, we are not interested in the content but the type of communication. We asked 2,385 respondents aged 18–49, of whom 55% were childless, to report their daily screen time outside work or studies, measured in hours per day. We then asked them to detail their social media use types, classified by passive or active use and by interaction with sites or persons with whom they have or do not have an offline association.³ The 13 options ranged from ‘I follow accounts of people I do not personally know’ to ‘I send private messages to close friends or relatives’. We were interested in indications of wanting a first child or a subsequent child and made separate analyses for childless respondents and parents.

Figure 5.1 shows the predicted probability of wishing for a(nother) child by parenthood status and screen time (measured in hours, categorised as quartiles). The mean screen times in the quartiles from lowest to highest are 1.9, 3.0, 4.4, and 8.5 hours. Of parents, 32% are in the lowest screen time category and 16% in the highest. For childless respondents, the respective percentages are 18% and 37%. Controlling for age, sex, education, and partnership status, more screen time is associated with lower desires to have a child among childless respondents. However, we see no statistically significant negative effects for parents, but rather signs of a positive trend. Importantly, we see differences in the ways parents and childless respondents use social media. In parents, higher screen time is associated with following the accounts of the near and dear and acquaintances with whom they do not otherwise interact much, as well as sending private messages to such people. In childless people, these same ways of using social media are associated with lower screen time—as they spend more time interacting with people they do not know, or following and commenting on the accounts of organisations, news services, or similar.

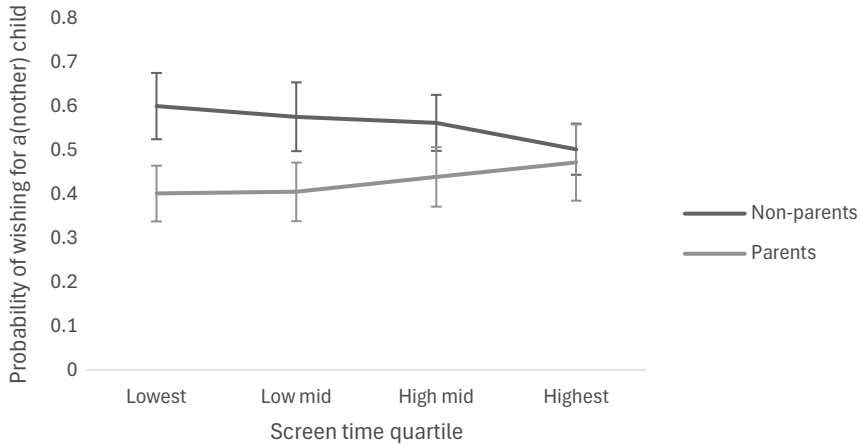


Figure 5.1 Fertility desires by screen time and parenthood.

Our results are in line with some previous studies. Gleeson et al. (2019) found that mothers could build social capital online through sharing information and providing emotional support to each other. Zhou and Zhao (2024) found that individual fertility intentions were positively associated with *offline* social capital, particularly among women aged 30 and above, many of whom were mothers. By contrast, more *online* social capital lowered fertility intentions of women aged 18–29.

This suggests that parental priorities and time constraints alter screen use: parents typically use screen time to strengthen their strong ties. By contrast, higher screen time is associated with lower childbearing ideals in non-parents, and their screen time seems to consist more of time spent on weak ties than on strong ties.

Thematic interview: ‘Life is not black and white’

Box 5.1 Social media and expectations of parenthood: a young woman’s perspective.

I’m glad my early childhood and youth was not coloured by social media. Touchscreen phones came when I was around 13. I remember then when Instagram came, and Youtube, not at all in the same magnitude as now, but we used them.

I really like being with children. I always knew I wanted to be a mother. And on Instagram, if you look at one video about pregnancy the algorithm offers you more. So I was into that. The posts on motherhood I was fed were mostly from English-speaking countries. And especially posts from the US often feel so individualistic. They feel . . . commercial is the word that comes to my mind, and as if they feed the egos of the influencers. I find it hard to

understand why somebody would want to share so much of something which is basically such a natural thing. And also share so much about the children who can't have a say.

I haven't seen too much of the negative sides of motherhood. To me it's more the perfectionism /that is a problem/. You see only the good sides, the highlights people choose to post. That can create a black and white impression, that you have to strive for a certain kind of life. There's the illusion you can control everything, your body, and your mood . . . and then there's a big disappointment if life is not like that, am I the only one, have I failed?

That is why fear of pregnancy has spread so much. There is so much information and women hear the horror stories, about difficult deliveries and so on. Then you also get these extremely high expectations, what you can do to control the situation. What the birth will be like, what the child will be like When actually you can't know what will happen, there are lots of uncertainties you just have to be able to cope with.

Like I saw this woman who was pregnant and she painted her flat. Then she became worried that the chemicals were harmful You see the person there on the screen, you identify with her, you think could that happen to me? It touches you more than some health expert talking on the news.

Or at our classes in school they say fertility starts declining after age 25, but on Instagram you can see a post like, 'don't listen to those who pressure you to have kids young, I had my first when I was 39 years old'.

So I had so much of, this is dangerous, or you have to do this, or don't do that, or you have to behave like this to the child. Then when you talk to real people who actually have kids this all feels so superficial and simplistic. So I wondered is there any point in me watching this /online/ and feeding my more anxious or overanalysing side?

So around three years ago, when Instagram became more rapid with more videos, I deleted the app from my phone. Now I access it only through a browser, it's more clumsy to do so I use it less.

When I started following some British influencers they were 5–10 years older than me, which means that now they are having kids, and I still enjoy following them They say not to stress, you can raise kids in many different ways. That's helpful. They share their difficulties. Kids can be irritating and frustrating, they get tantrums, you don't only have positive emotions, you can be anxious, you can be scared of birth—there's nothing wrong with that!

The black and white thinking goes for dating too I think. There's so much talk about what personality your partner needs to have and what they need to do to you. The red flags, you know! The message is he always has to listen and be really emotionally present . . . and if you have disagreements you may not be right for each other, conflicts are dangerous. It feels like people are looking for something which doesn't involve difficult emotions

Also in traditional media they put so much responsibility on you individually, they followed social media with more of these click bait headlines. ‘If you do any of these five things you will become depressed, or your kid is doomed’. I just read this article about the best things for 2026: How to optimise life, how to optimise eating, how to optimise exercise, how to optimise parenthood too probably. How to make everything as functional as possible and avoid having negative emotions. I want more resilience and room for action.

25-year-old woman, capital area, Finland²

Conclusion

The new ICTs have profoundly changed our landscape of family formation and childbearing. In the 20th century, the spread of mass media already contributed considerably to lower fertility ideals, individualism, and the decline of traditional family values. In this chapter, we have outlined four major mechanisms through which the new ICTs may have further affected fertility in the 21st century. Regarding the evidence base for the fertility effects of ICT, the main finding is that much more research needs to be done.

Based on research literature and present data from the Finnish Family Barometer survey, we have argued that, from the 2010s onwards, digital media, particularly smartphones and social media, have accelerated the fertility decline, especially the rise in childlessness. Today’s digital media transmit lifestyles, values, and opportunities that may contain reproductive cues about whether to have children, their timing, and the costs of parenting. On the one hand, we detect four mechanisms that push and delay childbearing through ICT: access to smaller family-size ideals and means to achieve them, perceived costs of parenthood, perceived bodily costs of motherhood, and displacement of in-person social interactions through passive ICT use and parasocial interactions. On the other hand, three mechanisms can support fertility desires: exposure to online content about babies, positive depictions of family life and emotional connections with one’s own children, and communication with family members and friends.

So far, the push-effects seem to dominate the internet content. Since younger adults tend to be unpartnered, childless, and use social media the most, the largest ICT effects on fertility are likely to be found among this group. With the current research knowledge, however, it is impossible to say whether childfree discourses on social media truly amplify or merely reflect a desire among young adults to prioritise other life goals than parenting. However, the rise of social media coincides systematically with the rise in both singlehood and childlessness in many countries. Digital media form a central part of today’s young adults’ lives and must be taken into account when examining their reproductive behaviour.

We have focused on direct effects, while numerous indirect effects are identified in other chapters. They can be at least as significant as direct effects on fertility desires. They include ICT effects on undermining the formation of committed romantic partnerships (see Chapters 3 and 4) or on the quality of parenting in the digital age (see Chapters 6 and 7). Other indirect effects include general societal sentiment and political polarisation. In addition, a global trend of increasing mental health problems of young adults is notably associated with both the spread of social media and lower fertility (Golovina et al., 2025).

Somewhat unexpectedly, most of the robust research pertains to sub-Saharan Africa and China, while Western countries suffer from a lack of large-scale and longitudinal studies on ICT use and childbearing. However, enough has been done to safely say that smartphones and social media are very likely to play a part in the recent global fertility decline. This implies a need for a paradigm shift in fertility research: in a substantially different world, the demographer's usual suspects—education, socioeconomic status, income, and union formation—are unlikely to tell the full story of childbearing decisions.

Instead, it seems we have to embark on a whole new territory filled with identities, values, personal narratives, offline and online social support, misinformation, disinformation, and stories gone viral. The AI-driven algorithms of social media platforms further complicate the picture: their logic works to exacerbate weak signals that provoke negative emotions and, therefore, they can amplify perceptions of risk. We suggest that this happened in the late 2010s and early 2020s regarding the risks of pregnancy and the bodily and mental costs of motherhood. In a world where childbearing is safer than ever before, increasingly many childless women are worrying—even panicking—about pregnancy and childbirth. The echo-chambers of social media algorithms are likely at least partly to blame for this phenomenon.

On the potentially fertility-boosting end of the continuum, the key mechanism appears to be—perhaps unsurprisingly—babies themselves. Natal attraction is a well-known feature across female primates (Silk et al., 2003). The difficulty is that engagement-maximising algorithms likely keep those exposed to the lists of ways parenting can ruin your life and those exposed to adorable baby pictures firmly apart, driving the experiences of these groups further away from each other. Our fresh Finnish results also suggest that childless people and parents may inherently use social media in different ways, due to time constraints as well as different life priorities.

There is no single identified mechanism for the acceleration of the fertility decline during the last 15 years. Rapid technological diffusion took place in the 2010s, primarily among adults of childbearing age, while fertility also declined at a faster pace than had been predicted based on previous trends. Changes in everyday digital media consumption are one of the few candidates that would match the global scope of the decline. This is not to say that education, economic security, having a partner, and adequate housing do not play a role—they certainly do. Technological change has come to determine how these, among other environmental factors related to reproduction, are perceived.

Notes

- 1 The Finnish Family Barometer is a recurring, population-based survey examining families in Finland. The 2024 data collection focused on partnerships and sexuality and included 5,293 18–79-year-old respondents of whom 3,809 had a partner. The data were collected via stratified quota sampling from an online respondent panel. Quotas accounted for representativeness by age, sex, education, region of residence, and having children in the household.
- 2 One thematic interview was conducted around the themes of childbearing and social media use specifically for this chapter. The interviewee was recruited through social networks and the interview was recorded in Finnish in January, 2026 by one of the authors. Parts of the interview were translated into English and were redacted for clarity.
- 3 Items measuring social media use in the Family Barometer survey 2024, answered on a scale from never to many times a day:
 - 1: I follow accounts of close friends or relatives
 - 2: I follow accounts of acquaintances with whom I have little other interaction
 - 3: I follow accounts of people I do not personally know
 - 4: I follow accounts of organisations, news services, or similar accounts
 - 5: I comment on posts by close friends or relatives
 - 6: I comment on posts by acquaintances with whom I have little other interaction
 - 7: I comment on posts by people I do not personally know
 - 8: I comment on posts by organisations, news services, or similar entities
 - 9: I send private messages to close friends or relatives
 - 10: I send private messages to acquaintances with whom I have little other interaction
 - 11: I send private messages to people I do not personally know
 - 12: I post or share existing content to a closed group of followers
 - 13: I post or share existing content publicly for everyone.

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