

The Effect of the Chinese One-Child Policy as Imposed Scarcity on Spouse Hunting

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Abstract

China's one-child policy (1979–2015) has created a significant gender imbalance, leaving 34 million more men than women and intensifying competition in the marriage market. This study examines how imposed scarcity affects spouse-seeking behaviours through the lens of attachment theory and reactance theory. While attachment anxiety is expected to heighten desperation for romantic relationships, attachment avoidance may lead to greater reluctance in spouse-seeking. Meanwhile, reactance theory suggests that men—especially onelings (only children)—may experience heightened urgency due to limited partner availability and social pressure to marry.

This study employs a quantitative survey-based approach to analyse attachment styles, desperation, family influence, and spouse-seeking methods among Chinese adults born during the one-child policy era. A structured online questionnaire will be distributed to a representative sample (ages 25–45, various marital statuses) using quota and snowball sampling via Chinese social media platforms and dating forums. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) and multigroup analysis will assess the relationships between attachment styles, desperation, and spouse-seeking behaviours, while also examining gender and age-based differences.

Findings will contribute to theoretical and practical discussions on romantic consumption by:

1. Extending attachment theory to explain how scarcity-driven desperation influences spouse-hunting behaviours.
2. Applying reactance theory to romantic decision-making, providing insights into how individuals react to imposed limitations in the dating market.
3. Examining traditional vs. digital matchmaking trends, offering implications for consumer behaviour, marketing strategies, and matchmaking industries.

By bridging relationship psychology and consumer behaviour, this study provides new perspectives on the impact of demographic policies on romantic consumption. The insights are relevant for academics, policymakers, and the dating industry, particularly as China navigates post-one-child policy demographic shifts.

Introduction

Romantic consumption is a major industry, particularly in East Asia, encompassing products and experiences such as books, movies, dating services, and weddings (Wang et al., 2021). This study applies attachment theory (Arriaga et al., 2014; Mende et al., 2019) to explore spouse-hunting behaviour, introducing a new perspective in the field. China provides an ideal context due to its large marriage market, cultural pressures, and demographic shifts caused by the one-child policy (1979–2015).

The policy reduced birth rates from 2.94 per female in 1978 to 1.67 in 2015 (World Bank, 2020), preventing over 400 million births (Follett, 2020). A strong preference for male heirs (Johnson, 2016) resulted in a gender imbalance, peaking at 120 males per 100 females (BBC News, 2015; Follett, 2020), leaving 34 million more men than women in China today (Denyer and Gowen, 2018). Many men — termed 'bare branches' — face significant challenges in finding a spouse.

Scarcity theory suggests that limited availability increases perceived value and urgency (Hamilton et al., 2019; Fan et al., 2019). This applies to consumer behaviour (Chung et al., 2017; Zhu and Ratner, 2015) and, in this context, to spouse selection, where men face

scarcity while women have greater choice. Reactance theory (Brehm, 1966) further explains resistance to restrictions, suggesting that imposed scarcity could amplify mate-seeking urgency and methods (Barton et al., 2022).

This study examines how attachment anxiety and avoidance influence spouse-seeking behaviours among Chinese adults from the one-child era. While family-arranged marriages remain common in developing countries (Hamon and Ingoldsby, 2003), younger generations increasingly choose partners based on love (Rubio, 2014). The tension between traditional family expectations and modern romantic autonomy creates a unique dynamic that has yet to be explored through the lens of scarcity.

Literature Review

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory explains how individuals form and maintain close relationships based on attachment styles, which develop from past relational experiences (Mende et al., 2019; Mikulincer and Shaver, 2016). Two key dimensions shape these styles: attachment anxiety — the fear of abandonment — and attachment avoidance — a preference for self-reliance over intimacy (Arriaga et al., 2014). Secure individuals are low on both dimensions, while insecure attachment manifests through heightened anxiety or avoidance (Girme et al., 2018). Attachment styles influence romantic consumption (Mende et al., 2019). Anxiously attached individuals seek proximity, reassurance, and security, sometimes turning to symbolic sources (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2009, 2016). In contrast, avoidant individuals prefer independence and resist emotional closeness (Brassard et al., 2007; Girme et al., 2018). Given the gender imbalance in China, attachment theory provides a useful framework for understanding spouse-hunting behaviours.

Reactance Theory

Psychological reactance occurs when individuals perceive threats to their freedom, increasing their desire for restricted options (Brehm, 1966). Scarcity can heighten consumer desperation (Papagiannidis et al., 2023), particularly for experiential products (Barton et al., 2022). While scarcity's effects on purchasing behaviour are well studied (Chung et al., 2017), its impact on romantic consumption remains underexplored.

In China, gender imbalance creates scarcity in the dating market, intensifying men's urgency in spouse hunting, particularly among only children (onelings). Reactance is further powered by family and societal pressures, as arranged or parent-facilitated matchmaking restricts individual autonomy (Andreoli et al., 1974). Males, particularly onelings, may experience greater reactance due to the expectation to marry, leading to increased desperation.

Partner/Spouse Hunting Methods in China

Traditional Chinese marriage culture views marriage as a family responsibility, with parents urging their children to marry at a certain age (Gui, 2017). Common spouse-hunting methods include:

- Family and social recommendations (Tian and Davis, 2019)
- Matchmaking corners in parks where parents promote their children (Gui, 2017; Wang et al., 2020)
- Dating agencies and natural encounters (Tian and Davis, 2019)
- Social clubs and dance events (Date Night China, 2021)
- Online dating platforms (Farrer and Zhongxin, 2003; Chan, 2020)

Online dating is increasingly popular, with 85 million users on Momo (Momo, 2017) and a projected 82 million users by 2024 (Zhang et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated the use of social media platforms like WeChat and Weibo for dating (Luo et al., 2021; Thomala, 2022).

This study investigates how attachment and reactance theories explain spouse-hunting behaviour in a scarcity-driven Chinese marriage market, advancing understanding of romantic consumption and market segmentation.

Research questions

This study explores how attachment styles, reactance, family influence, and scarcity shape romantic desperation and spouse-seeking behaviours among Chinese onelings. Drawing on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer and Shaver, 2016) and reactance theory (Brehm, 1966), we examine how desperation for a romantic relationship affects decision-making and partner-seeking methods.

Attachment, Desperation, and Romantic Relationships

Individuals with high attachment anxiety seek love and security, making them more desperate for relationships (Mende et al., 2019), whereas attachment-avoidant individuals prioritise independence and are less motivated to pursue romantic connections (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2016). In Chinese culture, men experience financial and social pressures to establish themselves before marriage, while women face expectations to marry earlier, aligning with traditional gender norms (Peng, 2004; Piotrowski et al., 2016). Additionally, family influence plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' relationship expectations, reinforcing desperation, particularly for attachment-anxious individuals (Campbell et al., 2005). The gender imbalance caused by China's one-child policy has intensified marriage pressure, particularly for male onelings (Guilmoto, 2012; Hu et al., 2015).

- RQ1: How do attachment styles (anxiety and avoidance) and family influence shape desperation for romantic relationships and marriage, and to what extent do gender and age moderate this relationship?

Spouse-Hunting Methods and Digital Influence

Spouse-seeking methods in China range from traditional approaches, such as family matchmaking, matchmaking corners, and social events, to modern digital platforms like dating apps and online agencies (Tian and Davis, 2019; Chan, 2020). More desperate individuals may be proactive in seeking partners, engaging with structured methods such as dating agencies or online searches, whereas less desperate individuals may rely on natural encounters (Pettier, 2022; March et al., 2017). Consumer decision-making models, such as AISAS (Attention-Interest-Search-Action-Share), highlight how desperation may influence how individuals navigate and prioritise partner-seeking strategies (Sugiyama and Andree, 2011).

- RQ2: How does desperation influence spouse-seeking behaviours, including the choice of traditional vs. modern partner-seeking methods and consumer decision-making in romantic consumption?

Attachment, Desperation, and Romantic Decision-Making

As a response to romantic scarcity, desperation may mediate the relationship between attachment styles and partner-seeking behaviours (Hamilton et al., 2019). While attachment-anxious individuals are likely to heighten their romantic focus, attachment-avoidant individuals may exhibit lower engagement in active spouse-seeking (Mikulincer and Shaver,

2016). Furthermore, onelings—having received greater parental attention and resources—may be more influenced by family expectations and therefore more inclined to follow family-arranged spouse-seeking methods rather than independent choice (Polit and Falbo, 1987; Roberts and Blanton, 2001).

- RQ3: Does desperation mediate the relationship between attachment styles and romantic decision-making, and how do onelings differ from individuals with siblings in their approach to partner selection?

Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative approach to examine how attachment styles, reactance, family influence, and scarcity shape desperation for romantic relationships and partner-seeking behaviours in China. A survey-based method is employed to collect primary data from Chinese adult children.

A structured online questionnaire will be administered to a representative sample of Chinese adults born during the one-child policy era (1979–2015). The sample will include heterosexual males and females, aged 25–45, with varying marital statuses (single, dating, or married). A non-probability sampling technique (quota and snowball sampling) will be used to ensure diversity in age, gender, and regional background. The survey will be distributed via Chinese social media platforms (WeChat, Weibo), dating forums, and university alumni networks.

Key constructs will be measured using validated scales and Quantitative data will be analysed using SPSS and AMOS.

Intended Contributions

This study advances theoretical and practical understanding of romantic scarcity by:

1. Extending attachment theory to explain desperation-driven spouse-hunting behaviours.
2. Applying reactance theory to romantic consumption, offering insights into how scarcity influences mate-seeking urgency.
3. Providing the first study to analyse dating and marriage markets through both attachment and reactance theory perspectives.

A plan to develop the paper prior to discussion/presentation at the conference

To prepare for the conference, we will begin by formulating hypotheses and developing a conceptual framework, drawing on a thorough literature review to identify research gaps and align the study's objectives with attachment theory, reactance theory, and romantic consumption. This process will guide the development of hypotheses and ensure theoretical robustness.

Next, we will design and finalise the survey questionnaire, ensuring that all items are clear, unbiased, and aligned with the research objectives. The questionnaire will incorporate validated scales for key constructs, such as attachment styles, desperation for romantic relationships, family influence, and spouse-hunting methods.

Once finalised, we will submit the ethics approval form to the lead applicant university, ensuring compliance with ethical guidelines. Following ethical clearance, a pre-test will be conducted with a small sample to assess question clarity, sequencing, and scale measurement

reliability. Based on pre-test feedback, any necessary refinements will be made to enhance the questionnaire's validity.

Data collection will then proceed through a panel company, focusing on Chinese adults who were born during the one-child policy era. The sample will include individuals of varying marital statuses to ensure a diverse representation of spouse-seeking behaviours.

Data analysis will be conducted using SPSS for descriptive statistics and preliminary analyses, followed by AMOS for structural equation modeling (SEM) to test direct, mediated, and moderated relationships within the conceptual framework.

If accepted for the conference, we will be able to present a preliminary, if not full, analysis of our findings, offering insights into attachment-driven desperation, scarcity effects on spouse-seeking, and evolving trends in romantic consumption. This will contribute to advancing discussions in consumer psychology, marketing, and social behaviour in the context of demographic change.

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