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Investigating the Low Motivation of Young Couples for Childbearing in Shiraz Through Developing a Conceptual Model Using a Quantitative Approach

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A B S T R A C T

Objective: Considering the significance of population and its optimal growth in Iran, the present study examined the low motivation of young couples for childbearing in Shiraz by developing a conceptual model using a quantitative approach.

Methods: This research is applied in terms of its goal. The statistical population of this study includes all young couples without children in Shiraz in 2021 (based on the 2016 census, approximately 14% of couples are childless). According to the population size, the number of questions, Cochran's formula, and the G-power sample adequacy index, the approximate sample size consisted of 300 young childless couples, who were selected using the convenience sampling method. Data were collected using a researcher-made questionnaire, and based on factor analysis, the conceptual model of factors was explained and extracted. To test the model, the structural equation modeling approach was employed. The software used in this research was SPSS and AMOS.

Findings: The results showed significant differences between the component of economic support and the components of personal growth inhibition, body self-concept, semantic attitude, communicative attitude, and social judgment. According to the model's fit indices, it was observed that the X2/df index was equal to 3.70, which is at an acceptable level. Additionally, the values of the RMSEA index were 0.08, CFI was 0.843, FMIN was 3.21, NFI was 0.798, ECVI was 3.70, and IFI was 0.844, all of which were at an appropriate level. Therefore, the model had a good fit.

Conclusion: Based on the research findings, it is recommended that researchers focus on improving attitudes in the areas of body self-concept, social judgment, semantic attitude, and communicative attitudes regarding childbearing.

Keywords: *Childbearing, population control, fertility, supportive policies*

1. Introduction

Since fertility is the most important phenomenon determining population fluctuations (Jiang, 2024; Kim, 2024; Mohammadi, 2024), and childbearing is one of the key demographic factors, it holds significant importance in the context of social and cultural issues. Population changes, especially fertility decline in Iran, have brought about considerable shifts in the population's age structure. As statistics indicate, the total fertility rate has been decreasing over the past five decades. For instance, the total fertility rate in 1956 was 7.2 children per woman, which markedly declined from 6.5 children in 1986 to 2.8 children in 1996 and further to 1.2 children in 2016 (Hassannejad Emamchay & Zabihi, 2024; Mohammadi, 2024).

Iran has experienced an unprecedented population decline in its history. In 1970, the average number of children per Iranian woman was 6.5, which dropped to 1.6 children per woman by 2011, falling below the fertility replacement rate (Abbasishahvazi, 2009; Mehrolhassani et al., 2019). The fertility rate in Iran has shown fluctuating trends over the past few decades. In the early 1970s, there was a moderate decline in fertility from 6.5 in 1970 to about 6 in 1976. After a resurgence between 1976 and 1980 (an increase to 7 in 1980), coinciding with the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the Iran-Iraq war (1980), the decline resumed in the mid-1980s. The family planning initiative was also accelerated in 1979 (from 6.8 in 1984 to 6.3 in 1986 and approximately 5.5 in 1988) (Abbasishahvazi, 2009; Aghajanian & Mehryar, 1999).

Many developing countries are experiencing population decline, a trend that differs from that in developed countries. Population decline in developed countries occurred after economic growth and improved living conditions, while in developing countries, it occurred before living conditions improved and at a faster rate. Iran, as a developing country, is no exception to this rule (Gu et al., 2021). Due to the declining fertility rate in the country, since the beginning of 2010, national policies on family planning have significantly changed, and in 2011, a bill was presented to Parliament, removing all childbearing restrictions from national laws. In 2012, the Population Task Force in the Islamic Consultative Assembly was formed, and the resolution of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, along with national initiatives and basic strategies, outlined measures to prevent further declines in the fertility rate and enhance it (Chamani et al., 2016). Offering incentives for childbearing is one of the fundamental and influential strategies among young couples in the country.

Today, the declining tendency toward childbearing has joined the list of social and demographic issues that must be addressed and resolved. Given the broad demographic changes over the past three decades and the demographic challenges stemming from them, declining fertility levels will have a decisive impact on population growth, composition, and structure, as well as on moderating the pace of population growth. Therefore, attention to this phenomenon and its monitoring and explanation is of significant importance (Jokar, 2014; Kaveh Firouz et al., 2017). Studies have shown that the desire and inclination for childbearing, and consequently fertility, depend on or are related to certain factors. Women's employment, their economic and social independence, economic factors, the lack of government-provided welfare facilities, certain erroneous attitudes, high levels of education, and the various socio-economic, demographic, and cultural characteristics of women concerning these domains, age at marriage, number of children, husband's age, age at first pregnancy, self-support (physical, social, and psychological), modern data and communication technologies, awareness of contraceptive methods, and the use of mobile phones and related technologies, are among these factors (Rastegarkhaled, 2015; Razaghi Nasrabad, 2016; Rezaei & Mohammadi, 2022).

Decision-making regarding childbearing is one of the major life events for couples, which in turn is influenced by many aspects of life, such as health, economic status, family well-being, and culture. Thus, considering the aforementioned issues and the perspective that to understand fertility, one should not merely view it as a fundamental part of demographic behaviors but also as a foundational element in the social structure and human conditions, women feel the need for a deeper understanding of the decision-making process regarding childbearing, particularly the strategy of having only one child (Na'matian & Nougani Dakhteh Bahmani, 2022; Ojaqloo et al., 2014).

Given that Iran is among the countries that have experienced a significant fertility decline globally, and the 50% decline in fertility in Iran is unique among Muslim countries, it appears that this threshold has not been observed anywhere else in the world (Parvinian, 2018; Parvinian et al., 2019). The population growth rate, according to the 2016 census, has decreased to 1.24% (Safari et al., 2017). The total fertility rate in Iran has undergone significant transformations over the past three decades, with a range of

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causes linked to this rapid fertility transition based on demographic transition theories (Abbasishahvazi, 2009), which are of considerable importance. Given the concerns raised by population decline and its consequences for the country's economists and policymakers, examining the factors and causes of this challenge can contribute to appropriate policymaking and planning to prevent further fertility declines and bring fertility back to replacement levels.

At present, the low motivation for childbearing among young couples, like delays in marriage and many other factors, has joined the list of social issues that must be addressed and resolved. Therefore, conducting background studies to understand the childbearing inclinations of young couples and the determining factors plays a crucial role in population policy-making. The present study aimed to investigate the low motivation for childbearing among young couples in Shiraz by developing a conceptual model using a quantitative approach.

2. Methods

This study is applied in terms of its goal, as it aims to provide practical knowledge. In terms of the method of data collection or research design, it is a descriptive-survey study. The statistical population of this study included all young childless couples in Shiraz in 2021 (according to the 2016 census, approximately 14% of couples were childless). The sample size for the quantitative part of the study, based on the population size, number of questions, Cochran's formula, and the G-power sample adequacy index, was approximately 300 young childless couples selected using the convenience sampling method.

Inclusion criteria for the study were young childless couples who had been married for five years and, despite the conditions for pregnancy, did not desire to have children, and were willing to participate in the study. Exclusion criteria included receiving psychiatric or psychological treatment, showing signs of psychosis, substance abuse, and undergoing medical treatment for fertility.

Data were collected using a researcher-made questionnaire, and based on factor analysis, the conceptual model of factors was explained and extracted.

The structural equation modeling approach was employed to test the model. The software used in this study was SPSS and AMOS.

3. Findings and Results

In order to better understand the questions used in this study, descriptive indicators such as mean, standard deviation were presented. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, and variance for the items.

Table 1

Mean, Standard Deviation, and Variance of Questions

Row	Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance
1	Having a child limits my career advancement	2.60	1.20	1.45
2	Having a child limits my educational advancement	2.59	1.20	1.45
3	Having a child hinders comfort and well-being	2.17	1.17	1.38
4	Having a child prevents new life experiences like traveling to distant places, etc.	2.32	1.22	1.49
5	Having a child takes away my freedom	2.61	1.28	1.66
6	I think a child has no benefit in life	1.47	0.76	0.57
7	Having a child limits my leisure time	2.49	1.28	1.64
8	Having a child limits my social interactions	2.27	1.17	1.38
9	I discard anything that prevents me from reaching my goals (even family)	1.46	0.71	0.49
10	Having a child takes up too much of my time	2.99	1.33	1.78
11	Childbirth disrupts my physical fitness	2.56	1.27	1.62
12	I am afraid of childbirth	2.68	1.34	1.80
13	Childbirth reduces a woman’s sexual attractiveness	2.32	1.12	1.27
14	Pregnancy endangers a woman’s health	2.19	1.14	1.30
15	My age prevents me from thinking about having a child	2.30	1.17	1.37
16	We cannot afford the costs of having a child	3.19	1.48	2.21
17	I cannot afford the costs of childbirth	2.86	1.41	2.00
18	I am afraid I won’t be able to provide food and clothing for my child	2.97	1.51	2.30
19	I am concerned that my child will not be raised properly	3.36	1.38	1.90
20	I am anxious about the future of childbearing	3.11	1.43	2.05
21	The idea that God provides for children is just a slogan	1.95	1.20	1.45

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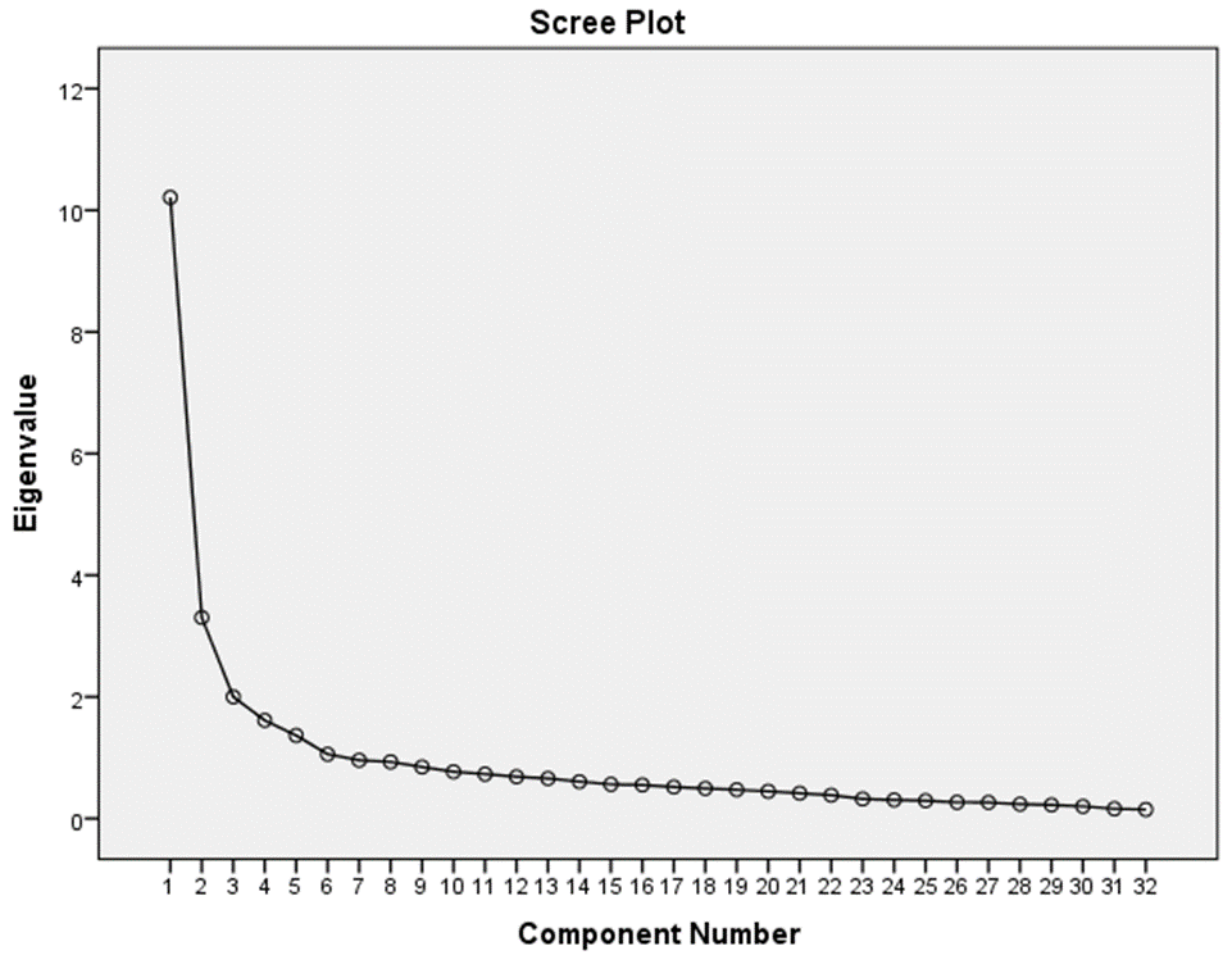
22	My economic situation will worsen with a child	2.88	1.49	2.23
23	Blessings will come to my life with a child	4.14	0.99	0.98
24	I am not psychologically ready to have a child	2.92	1.35	1.83
25	I don't like the idea of becoming a mother/father	1.55	0.87	0.76
26	I am afraid my spouse's attention toward me will decrease after we have a child	1.89	1.01	1.02
27	I do not trust my spouse enough to bring a child into our life	1.89	1.19	1.42
28	People around me are against me having a child	2.29	1.29	1.68
29	I am afraid of not having a son	1.72	1.02	1.06
30	The government does not support childbearing	3.91	1.17	1.38
31	If I ever want to divorce, I worry that I won't get custody of my child	2.51	1.27	1.62
32	I do not trust the government's promises to help couples with children	3.80	1.21	1.46

Figure 1 presents the eigenvalues for the questions related to the low childbearing motivation scale. After ensuring the adequacy of content sampling and the usability of the correlation matrix, the factor structure of this scale was examined using the principal components method. A six-factor solution was found to be the most appropriate. The factors were labeled as follows: economic support, personal growth inhibition, body self-concept, semantic attitude, communication, and social judgment.

Figure 1

Eigenvalues for All Items



Based on the values in Table 2, it can be observed that the lowest mean belongs to the semantic attitude factor, while the highest mean is associated with the economic support factor.

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Table 2

Mean, Standard Deviation, Minimum, and Maximum Values of Low Childbearing Motivation Components

Component	Mean	Weighted Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Economic Support	26.13	3.26	8.71	8	40
Personal Growth Inhibition	20.07	2.51	7.76	8	40
Body Self-Concept	9.76	2.44	3.90	4	20
Semantic Attitude	4.49	1.49	1.78	3	13
Communication	6.30	2.10	2.67	3	15
Social Judgment	6.32	2.10	2.40	3	15

As shown in Table 3, the correlation coefficients and significance levels obtained from the component correlation matrix indicate that all components have significant relationships with each other.

Table 3

Pearson Correlation Coefficients of Low Childbearing Motivation Components

Component	Economic Support	Personal Growth Inhibition	Body Self-Concept	Semantic Attitude	Communication	Social Judgment
Economic Support	1					
Personal Growth Inhibition	.474*	1				
Body Self-Concept	.335*	.506*	1			
Semantic Attitude	.329*	.494*	.427*	1		
Communication	.388*	.401*	.404*	.399*	1	
Social Judgment	.224*	.280*	.337*	.249*	.352*	1

*p < .01

The results in Table 4 show Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the components of the low childbearing motivation scale, indicating that the components have suitable reliability.

Table 4

Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient of Low Childbearing Motivation Scale

Component	Alpha
Economic Support	.908
Personal Growth Inhibition	.911
Body Self-Concept	.809
Semantic Attitude	.634
Communication	.648
Social Judgment	.431

Table 5 shows the results of the Friedman test, which indicates that the significance level is less than .05. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a significant difference in the value and impact of the extracted components.

Table 5

Friedman Test Results

Number	Chi-Square	Degrees of Freedom	Significance Level
418	817.07	5	.001

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Table 6 shows the Wilcoxon test results, which indicate significant differences between the economic support component and the components of personal growth inhibition, body self-concept, semantic attitude, communication, and social judgment. Based on the means in Table 9, which show that the mean of the economic support component is higher than that of other components, it can be said that this significance favors economic support. There is no significant difference between personal growth inhibition and body self-concept, but there are significant differences between personal growth inhibition and the components of semantic attitude, communication, and social judgment. Given that the mean of personal growth inhibition is higher than that of other components, this significance favors personal growth inhibition. There are significant differences between body self-concept and the components of semantic attitude, communication, and social judgment, and the higher mean of body self-concept indicates that this significance favors body self-concept. There are also significant differences between semantic attitude and the components of communication and social judgment. Given that the mean values of communication and social judgment are higher than that of semantic attitude, it can be concluded that this significance favors communication and social judgment. There is no significant difference between communication and social judgment.

Table 6

Wilcoxon Test Results

Component Comparison	z	Significance Level
Economic Support - Personal Growth Inhibition	-12.33	.001
Economic Support - Body Self-Concept	-12.21	.001
Economic Support - Semantic Attitude	-17.22	.001
Economic Support - Communication	-15.51	.001
Economic Support - Social Judgment	-14.71	.001
Personal Growth Inhibition - Body Self-Concept	-1.21	.226
Personal Growth Inhibition - Semantic Attitude	-16.04	.001
Personal Growth Inhibition - Communication	-7.62	.001
Personal Growth Inhibition - Social Judgment	-6.87	.001
Body Self-Concept - Semantic Attitude	-15.18	.001
Body Self-Concept - Communication	-6.51	.001
Body Self-Concept - Social Judgment	-6.02	.001
Semantic Attitude - Communication	-12.13	.001
Semantic Attitude - Social Judgment	-12.25	.001
Communication - Social Judgment	-0.416	.678

Finally, he X2/df index is 3.70, which is at an acceptable level. Additionally, the values of RMSEA (.08), CFI (.843), FMIN (3.21), NFI (.798), ECVI (3.70), and IFI (.844) are all appropriate, indicating that the model had a good fit.

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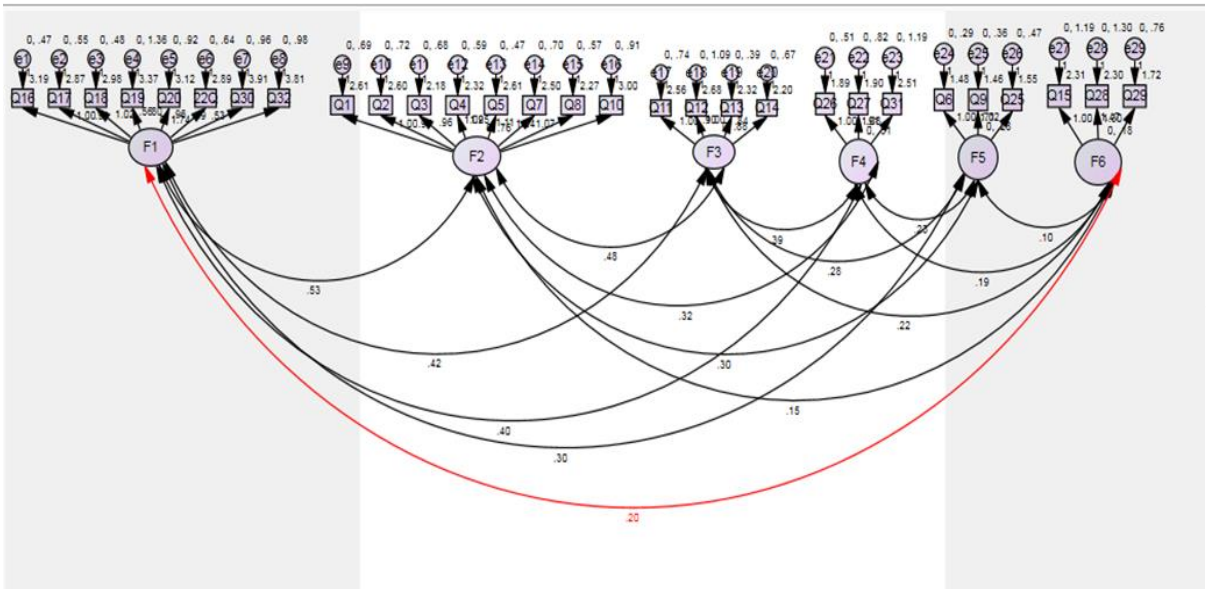
Figure 2

The Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis



4. Discussion and Conclusion

In the second half of the 20th century, the world witnessed significant demographic changes. Global fertility rates dropped from five children per woman to 2.7 children. Part of these global demographic shifts is influenced by the globalization of fertility attitudes and behaviors. Similarly, Iran has experienced a significant decline in total fertility rates in recent decades. For instance, in 1966, the total fertility rate in Iran was around 7.7 children per woman, which decreased to 6.3 by 1976. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the low motivation of young couples for childbearing in Shiraz through developing a conceptual model using a quantitative approach.

There was a significant difference between the economic support component and the components of personal growth inhibition, body self-concept, semantic attitude, communication, and social judgment, with the mean value of economic support being higher than that of the other components. This significance favored economic support. It can be explained that, although children give meaning to parents' lives, considering the financial conditions of families, parents view having children as requiring financial resources to meet their needs and expenses. According to the women interviewed, when parents are in poor financial conditions, having an additional child imposes significant costs. Given that modern life demands substantial financial resources, and since children today live in a world of hyper-consumption, the preference leans towards having fewer children to better meet their financial needs. Moreover, due to financial constraints, where the father's income alone cannot cover living expenses, the mother also enters the workforce, contributing to the family's income and child-related costs. However, this leads to a gap between the ideal and actual number of children. The primary concern of most people is economic challenges and financial problems. According to previous research, the main barriers to childbearing are concerns about securing a child's future, increasing economic difficulties, and insufficient income. In this study, most participants cited financial concerns, economic instability, inflation, unpredictable economic parameters, and job insecurity as factors influencing their decision to have children or have more children. Economic fears, job insecurity, and fragile economic parameters are key factors in creating doubt about childbearing, as corroborated by other findings (Mousavi & Ghafeleh Bashi, 2013).

On the other hand, people face numerous concerns, including economic, educational, social, and cultural concerns. Families, due to reduced institutional and social support, feel alone with these concerns, increasing their fear and hesitation about childbearing. Social responsibility was another factor that preoccupied respondents. Participants viewed the decision to have children as a responsible and conscious decision that comes with obligations and commitments. According to the theory of planned behavior, performing a behavior or achieving a goal is considered a rational act. Achieving intentions may be influenced by real limitations (such as low income) and interacts with

perceived behavioral control (how income is perceived in relation to achieving the goal). Therefore, the current economic insecurities and social insecurities that participants mentioned affect their decisions regarding childbearing, leading to decisions to have fewer or no children. Supporting this finding, Lutz et al. (2006) argue that social security declines, risks, and economic uncertainties are factors influencing fertility intentions. Since young people are more exposed to these insecurities, their fertility ideals and intentions decline. Contrary to the study by Parvinian et al. (2018) which attributed low fertility to the diminished value of motherhood, this study found that participants saw low fertility as a result of perceived responsibility for raising and supporting a child (Parvinian, 2018).

There was no significant difference between personal growth inhibition and body self-concept, but there were significant differences between personal growth inhibition and the components of semantic attitude, communication, and social judgment, with the mean value of personal growth inhibition being higher than that of other components. The most significant meaning that women associate with low fertility is self-support. This indicates that women consider supporting their physical, psychological, and social conditions as a reason for their preference for having fewer children. The aspiration for career advancement, better social opportunities, and psychological well-being are dimensions of this self-support. Avoiding lagging behind their husbands in social and economic progress can result from a lack of confidence in the continuity of the marriage and insufficient trust in their spouse. Some women believed that if they focused solely on homemaking and childbearing without progressing socially and economically alongside their husbands, they might face physical and emotional exhaustion. Upon achieving social and economic success, their husbands might no longer find them desirable. Therefore, they do not want to sacrifice their current opportunities for future progress.

In contemporary society, with the increased importance of self and personal responsibility, the power of choice has also grown (Abbasishahvazi, 2001, 2009; Abdollahi & Ghazi Tabatabai, 2017). As a result, individuals start to make choices regarding childbearing. They view having children as a personal choice and prioritize it after achieving their financial and social goals. They believe that pregnancy and childbearing can hinder personal growth. Due to their desire for self-advancement and self-realization, they prefer to focus on self-development before considering having children. It appears that some propositions of the second demographic transition theory apply here, as the theory attributes the shift to below-replacement fertility to changing values, personal development ideologies, and the importance of individual and social freedom. In this regard, the findings of this study regarding the centrality of self in childbearing align with the prior results (Parvinian, 2018; Parvinian et al., 2019). The outcome is a value shift regarding fertility, where low fertility is supported by a set of new values, some of which result from the expansion of social connections at regional and transregional levels and are influenced by societal institutional resources (Abdollahi & Ghazi Tabatabai, 2017).

There were significant differences between body self-concept and the components of semantic attitude, communication, and social judgment, with the mean of body self-concept being higher. Body image refers to an individual's perception of their physical attributes, such as weight, shape, height, and skin color. It is a multidimensional perception involving cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and perceptual aspects. Physical appearance is a crucial part of body image, as it is the primary source of information in social interactions. Changes in body image, whether visible or invisible, can have a profound effect on an individual's personality. Body dissatisfaction is a person's negative subjective evaluation of their physical appearance. In the modern era, where a beautiful and flawless body is considered a source of status, body management is important to the women interviewed. As society places increasing focus on the human body, and beauty standards are continuously shaped by media and social atmospheres, some women associate pregnancy with fears of disrupting their physical appearance. For these women, preserving their body's beauty and fitness is a significant factor, making them cautious when deciding about childbearing. Most women believed that pregnancy and childbirth would take them away from maintaining their ideal body image. These results are consistent with prior studies (Kaveh Firouz et al., 2017).

There were significant differences between the semantic attitude component and the communication and social judgment components, with the mean values of communication and social judgment being higher than that of semantic attitude. There was no significant difference between communication and social judgment. The fear of being judged by others, the stigma of being ridiculed, and societal pressures are other important factors that push parents toward limiting fertility. To conform and avoid

social blame, parents limit their childbearing. These findings are consistent with prior studies (Razaghi Nasrabad, 2016; Rezaei & Mohammadi, 2022). Finally, based on the model fit indices, it was observed that all indices were at acceptable levels, indicating that the model had a good fit.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

From this study, it can be concluded that using a qualitative approach and developing a conceptual model helped to investigate the low motivation of young couples for childbearing in Shiraz. There were significant differences between the economic support component and the components of personal growth inhibition, body self-concept, semantic attitude, communication, and social judgment. The mean value of the economic support component was higher than the others, favoring economic support. Based on this research, it is recommended that future studies focus on improving attitudes toward body self-concept, social judgment, semantic attitudes, and communication regarding childbearing. Experimental and quasi-experimental studies should be used to further explore this topic. The limitations of this research are related to its field study design and the distribution and return of questionnaires. Additionally, the study was conducted within a limited time frame, so the results may change over time.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. This article is derived from the first author's Ph.D. dissertation at Marvdasht Branch, Islamic Azad University, Marvdasht, Iran. The dissertation topic was approved by the Department of Educational and Graduate Studies of the Faculty of Humanities, Marvdasht Branch, on November 29, 2021, with the registration code 162535589. We extend our gratitude to all participants in this study

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