


Determinants of Institutionalized Political Participation in Elderly Women: Insights From a Chinese Empirical Study

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the factors affecting elderly women's institutional political participation. The inverse relationship between economic status and participation may be attributed to poverty constraining the political engagement capabilities of elderly women, while traditional media, especially television, enhances it by providing easily accessible information resources. In contrast, new media shows minimal influence, hinting at a generational digital divide or preference for traditional information channels. Surprisingly, close social circles, notably neighbors and friends, deter participation, possibly reflecting deep-rooted norms or localized echo chambers. These findings highlight the complex interplay of factors shaping political engagement among elderly women and suggest a need for tailored strategies to promote their active involvement in institutional politics.

KEYWORDS

Elderly Women, Institutionalized Political Participation, Social Circle Influence, Traditional Media Influence

INTRODUCTION

Political participation is a potent instrument for upholding and enhancing government legitimacy while providing a crucial avenue for citizens to articulate their views and safeguard their interests (Liu et al., 2021). The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China underscored the imperative to “expand the organized political engagement of the populace” (Xi, 2017; Liu et al., 2021). *Organized political participation*, often called *institutionalized political participation*, pertains to citizens' involvement in the public political sphere through various methods compliant with legal and policy frameworks. This engagement influences the composition, operation, regulations, and policy processes of the political system (Wang, 2005; Liu et al., 2021). Notable forms of organized political participation encompass grassroots elections, policy-making hearings, online policy consultations, and submission of recommendations.

DOI: 10.4018/IJEGR.345398

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The elderly population holds a considerable share in China, and the political engagement of seniors plays a pivotal role in the government's governance processes. Hence, it is imperative to focus on the political participation of the elderly. As of 2020, mainland China's population aged 60 and above reached 264 million, constituting 18.7% of the overall populace. Over the past two decades since transitioning into an aging society in 2000, the proportion of elderly citizens has ascended by 8.4 percentage points. With the deepening of demographic aging, age has acquired increasing political relevance (Lau & Redlawsk, 2008). Moreover, under predefined parameters related to ethnicity, economic status, and marital status, the elderly exhibit higher political participation rates than other age cohorts (Yang & Ou, 2014). Political participation among the elderly assumes dual roles: a vital avenue for realizing their citizenship rights and a manifestation of active aging. At the micro level, it enables the elderly to advocate for their interests, augment their consciousness of rights, strengthen their political responsibility, and experience personal growth and value during the process. Concurrently, elderly political participation is conducive to sustaining and reinforcing community identity and social cohesion. On a macro scale, it advances the democratization and rationalization of public decision-making processes, thereby playing a pivotal role in the seamless operation of the overall political and societal framework (Ding et al., 2019).

Presently, academic inquiry has embarked on quantitative investigations to discern the pivotal determinants of institutionalized political participation among the elderly, encompassing facets such as political efficacy, political trust, and authoritarian predispositions. Nonetheless, a conspicuous gap exists in the scholarly discourse concerning the nuanced factors influencing institutionalized political participation among elderly women. Women, specifically elderly women, occupying a niche within marginalized demographics, wield substantial influence in the political participation panorama of Chinese citizens. Consequently, they represent a focal demographic in the pursuit of expanding organized political engagement by the populace. In light of historical and individual contextual constraints, the existing sociopolitical structures fall short of catering to the political participation aspirations of rural Chinese women, warranting heightened scholarly and societal attention. For the female demographic, there is a conspicuous dearth of research focusing on the institutionalized political participation of women, and existing studies lack alignment with the real-world context, especially when it comes to investigating the institutionalized political participation behavior of elderly women.

This article explores the key factors that influence the institutionalized political participation behavior of elderly women. The objective is to provide insights and fill this void in the existing body of literature. The research question of this paper is: What factors influence the institutionalized political participation of elderly women in China?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Institutionalized Political Participation Behavior

In the realm of Chinese political science, scholars have undertaken an exhaustive analysis of political participation, drawing from their comprehensive examination of the political engagement of the Chinese populace. Their inquiry has yielded a nuanced classification of political participation among urban residents, a classification that hinges on three distinct factors: rights protection and protest, interest expression, and People's Congress elections. This stratification is founded upon the twin pillars of institutionalization and initiative strength (Hu, 2008; Liu et al., 2021).

To investigate political participation behavior within mainland China more thoroughly, scholars have expanded on this subject by considering a multifaceted framework consisting of six key dimensions. These dimensions encompass the type of influence exerted, the scope of results achieved, the requisite level of initiative, the degree of conflict involved, the extent of cooperation displayed, and the level of risk assumed. Within this expansive framework, researchers have identified five discrete types of political participation, each characterized by its unique attributes

and implications. These categories include voting, running for political office, engaging in contact with political institutions, participating in political communication, and partaking in political protest (Xiao & Yi, 2016; Liu et al., 2021).

It is essential to underscore that this meticulous categorization and exploration of political participation behavior within mainland China not only enhances our understanding of the multifaceted nature of political engagement but also sheds light on the intricate interplay between citizens and their political institutions. Moreover, this scholarly endeavor is paramount in China's evolving political landscape, where the dynamics of civic involvement continue to evolve and adapt to changing sociopolitical circumstances.

In the realm of influence type, political participation in China exhibits considerable diversity. Voting, a cornerstone of democratic societies worldwide, represents a fundamental form of influence, allowing citizens to support their preferred candidates or policies. Running for office, on the other hand, embodies a proactive form of influence, where individuals step forward as candidates themselves, seeking to shape the political landscape through their candidacy. When considering the scope of results achieved, it becomes evident that different modes of political participation yield varying degrees of impact. Voting, for instance, contributes to the selection of representatives and the adoption of policies, thus wielding a substantial influence on the overall political direction. In contrast, engaging in contact with political institutions might yield more localized outcomes, influencing specific decisions or actions within a narrower sphere.

Initiative requirement serves as a critical dimension in assessing political participation behavior. Some forms of engagement, such as voting, entail relatively low initiative requirements, as citizens are typically presented with established opportunities to cast their ballots during elections. Conversely, running for office necessitates a high degree of individual initiative, as potential candidates must actively seek nomination and garner support. Examining the conflict level inherent in various modes of political participation reveals important insights. Voting, for example, is typically characterized by a low level of conflict, as it is a peaceful and structured process. In contrast, forms of political protest may involve a higher level of conflict, as participants often engage in acts of dissent to express their grievances. Cooperation represents yet another crucial dimension of political participation. Some activities, like voting and contact with political institutions, are inherently cooperative, as they rely on citizen engagement with existing political structures. However, other forms, such as political protest, may be less cooperative, as participants often seek to challenge or disrupt the status quo. Lastly, assessing the risk level associated with political participation is vital. While voting and engaging in contact with political institutions generally carry a low level of personal risk, participation in political protest can entail a higher degree of risk, as it may involve confrontation with authorities or legal consequences.

In conclusion, the comprehensive examination of political participation behavior in mainland China, as categorized and elucidated by scholars, provides a robust framework for understanding the diverse ways citizens engage with their political environment. This framework not only delineates the various dimensions of political participation but also underscores the dynamic interplay between citizens and their political institutions. As China's political landscape continues to evolve, the insights from this research become increasingly relevant, offering valuable guidance for policymakers and scholars alike.

Institutionalized Political Participation Among Elderly and Women

Ding et al. (2019) analyzed institutionalized political participation among elderly and female populations in China using data from the 2014 China Longitudinal Ageing Social Survey (CLASS). The results revealed significant variations in institutionalized political participation among elderly individuals in China based on factors such as gender, age, educational attainment, urban or rural residence, marital status, and health conditions. Whether elderly individuals engage in institutionalized

political participation is the outcome of a complex interplay of demographic, political, and capital-related factors. However, there are certain differences in the influencing factors for institutionalized political participation between urban and rural elderly populations. Xu and Fu (2014) articulated two principal determinants contributing to the limited institutionalized political involvement of women in China. Firstly, rural women frequently encounter infringements upon their interests or unfulfilled legitimate demands, stemming from inherent factors. Secondly, bureaucratic inefficiencies and the inclination of authorities to evade accountability give rise to what is colloquially known as *ineffective appeals* or a dearth of avenues for recourse among rural women. Consequently, these dynamics lead to highly inefficient or ineffectual institutionalized political engagement, prompting the exploration of alternative routes. These challenges are further compounded by an inadequately developed political culture and milieu, manifesting as an incomplete and imbalanced institutional framework for political participation. Furthermore, suboptimal political participation mechanisms and shortcomings in policies and legislation objectively contribute to the meager institutionalized political involvement among rural women. Xu and Fu (2014) categorized these factors into three core issues: the prevalence of pessimistic political psychology, engendering political apathy, a tenuous legal awareness among rural women, and an absence of political systems and procedures, compelling rural women to resort to petitioning activities.

In Song's study (2016), the Chinese government's motivations for implementing electoral quotas for women's participation in village governance are analyzed, specifically focusing on Zhejiang, a highly developed coastal province in China. The research investigates reserved seat elections for women representatives in the village assembly and women members in the villagers' committee. By examining the policies, measures, and practical implementation of such electoral practices, the author contends that the current institutional framework for rural women's political involvement has, on the one hand, effectively increased the number of women engaging in grassroots politics and facilitated their access to positions of power. On the other hand, it also limits the number of women participants and confines them to gender-specific roles. Over the long term, there is potential for a more equitable redistribution of power positions between men and women and a reduction in the perpetuation of gender-specific roles among women members.

Bhalotra et al. (2018) investigated whether incidents of women being competitively elected as state legislators in India encourage subsequent political engagement among women. Through a segmented regression design using Indian constituency data, the study revealed that incumbent women are more likely than incumbent men to seek re-election, while the entry of new female candidates has declined. This decline is most pronounced in states characterized by deeply entrenched gender biases and parties led by male leaders, indicating that barriers for women persist in these domains, exacerbating gender-based obstacles to female political participation.

Resource Mobilization Theory and Political Participation

Resource mobilization theory (RMT) serves as a pivotal framework in the sociological study of social movements. Diverging from traditional views that often paint social movements as spontaneous or emotionally driven, RMT accentuates the role of resources, their mobilization, and the consequential efficacy of movements. Central to this theory is the premise that the emergence, longevity, and outcomes of social movements hinge upon the availability and strategic deployment of specific resources. Within this theoretical scaffold, Edwards and McCarthy (2004) delineated five quintessential resources available to social movement organizations:

1. **Moral resources:** including authenticity, collective commitment, and compassionate endorsement, offering social movements a foundational ethical compass, fortifying the integrity of their pursuits.
2. **Cultural resources:** the aggregated wisdom, shared experiences, and procedural methodologies, functioning as a collective repository of techniques and strategies available to social movements for application.

3. **Social-organizational resources:** paramount to transmitting a movement's core messages, these resources entail both deliberate and adaptable organizational frameworks. They highlight the pivotal role of societal structures in broadcasting and heightening a movement's tenets.
4. **Material resources:** palpable assets, including monetary reserves, infrastructural facilities, apparatus, and essential provisions, accentuating the vital role of tangible endowments in sustaining a movement's momentum.
5. **Human resources:** reflects the array of individual offerings, encapsulating the workforce, specialized knowledge, and the diverse competencies that participants contribute.

Drawing parallels between RMT and the institutionalized political participation behavior among elderly women necessitates an exploration of the linkage between these resources and the proposed independent variables of the study: economic status, media usage patterns, and social network circles.

- **Economic status and media usage patterns:** material resources, especially financial assets, correlate closely with an individual's economic stature. Those positioned favorably in the economic strata potentially enjoy superior access to diverse media platforms, influencing political participation behavior. Concurrently, the media consumed and the platforms frequented emerge as material resources in their own right, acting as catalysts in shaping political orientations and behaviors (Jiang et al. 2024).
- **Social network circles:** a nexus between social-organizational and cultural resources and social network circles becomes evident upon closer scrutiny. The act of message dissemination inherent in social-organizational resources inherently leverages networks. Similarly, cultural resources, replete with knowledge on event initiation or organizational formation, pivot on social networks. These networks, ranging from intimate community groups to expansive digital forums, play a paramount role in shaping the trajectory of messages and, by extension, political behaviors (Jiang et al. 2024).

In synthesis, the triad of economic status, media usage patterns, and social network circles, when studied as independent variables for institutionalized political participation behavior among elderly women, find robust theoretical anchorage in RMT, especially when contextualized within the classifications advanced by Edwards and McCarthy (2004). RMT places an emphasis on the importance of various resources in the emergence and sustenance of social movements (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004). Applying its principles to institutionalized political participation behavior reveals an intricate interplay of several determinants. Three such determinants, which can be extrapolated from the tenets of RMT, are economic status, media usage patterns, and social network circles. Economic status aligns with RMT's concept of material resources, where individuals with a favorable economic standing have the capacity to contribute to political campaigns, access political education, and engage more robustly in political activities (Ding et al., 2019).

In our contemporary digital landscape, media emerges as a significant information conduit. An individual's media consumption habits, reflective of the platforms they frequent and the information sources they trust, can be mapped onto RMT's notion of material resources. Such patterns influence the political knowledge they accrue, molding their perspectives, convictions, and eventual political behaviors (Jiang et al., 2024). Additionally, the social-organizational resources that RMT underscores find a direct counterpart in the construct of social network circles. People enmeshed in varied social networks encounter a spectrum of political ideas, mobilization efforts, and opportunities for participation. These networks serve as conduits for information, active discourse, and collective mobilization. Furthermore, RMT's cultural resources, embodying shared wisdom and strategies, often resonate within these social networks, facilitating their dissemination. Consequently, the nuanced relationship between economic status, media consumption habits, and social network circles, when interpreted through the RMT framework, provides a comprehensive understanding of the

dynamics of institutionalized political participation behavior. This alignment not only accentuates the contemporary relevance of RMT but also sheds light on the multifarious determinants shaping political engagement today.

RMT is particularly apt for studying the institutionalized political participation behavior among elderly women for several reasons. Firstly, elderly women, especially within varied sociocultural contexts, have historically been marginalized from active political participation (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004). RMT centers on the mobilization of resources for groups traditionally on the peripheries of political activities. By focusing on how elderly women gather and use resources, one can gain a deeper understanding of their political participation. Secondly, due to their life experiences, elderly women possess a distinctive set of resources, be it cultural, material, or social-organizational. For instance, their vast cultural resources in terms of historical memories and traditions can be instrumental in molding political behaviors (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004). Thirdly, considerations regarding economic status are vital. In many societies, elderly women might not have direct access or control over economic resources, often a consequence of historical gender biases in domains like employment, inheritance, or property rights. Assessing how economic status influences their political participation, using RMT's material resources framework, becomes paramount. Fourthly, the media consumption patterns of elderly women likely diverge from other demographic cohorts, given their exposure to different technological eras throughout their lives. By examining these patterns through the lens of RMT's material resources, researchers can ascertain how media shapes their political ideologies and actions (Jiang et al., 2024). Fifthly, the social networks that elderly women cultivate, be it through familial ties, community associations, or peer engagements, significantly impact their political participation.

The emphasis that RMT places on social-organizational resources can offer insights into how such networks mold their engagement in political processes. Lastly, the core tenet of RMT is the idea of empowerment through resource mobilization. As a demographic, elderly women could tap into this principle, leveraging their unique resources to enhance political participation. Therefore, RMT provides a multifaceted lens to explore the political participation of elderly women, considering the unique position they occupy in society and the specific resources they can mobilize. This approach offers a comprehensive understanding of the intersection of societal norms, individual resources, and political behaviors for this demographic.

Drawing upon the principles of RMT, this study identifies three salient determinants-economic status, media usage patterns, and social network circles-to explore institutionalized political participation behavior among elderly women. By contextualizing these three determinants within the RMT framework, a deeper insight into the political engagement of elderly women is anticipated. The chosen variables serve as extrapolations from RMT's foundational tenets, and their examination in relation to the political behavior of elderly women not only emphasizes the modern relevance of RMT but also brings to the fore the intricate factors influencing their political participation.

This study examines institutionalized political participation behavior among elderly women by considering three variables: *economic status*, *media usage patterns*, and *social network circles*. Recent studies have increasingly highlighted the intricate ways socioeconomic status influences political engagement, suggesting that individuals with higher economic resources are more likely to participate in institutionalized political activities (Verba et al., 1995). This relationship is particularly pronounced among specific demographics, where the interplay between economic resources and political participation becomes more complex. For instance, Burns et al. (2001) found that gender plays a significant role in political participation, with women historically exhibiting lower rates of political engagement compared to men. However, the dynamics of political participation among women are not static and evolve with age and socioeconomic advancements (Jennings & Andersen, 2003). As elderly women represent a demographic that has traditionally been marginalized in political discourse, understanding the factors that facilitate their political engagement is crucial. Research by Campbell and Wolbrecht (2006) suggested that economic independence and access to resources

can empower elderly women to engage more actively in political processes, overcoming barriers to participation. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed in this study.

H1: Economic status has a positive impact on institutionalized political participation of elderly women.

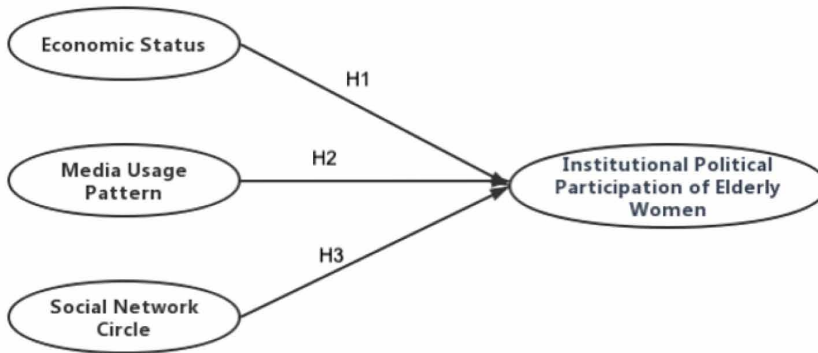
In the rapidly evolving landscape of media and communication, understanding how different demographics engage with media and the subsequent impact on political participation has become a crucial area of study. Research has increasingly shown that media usage patterns can significantly influence individuals' political behaviors and attitudes, particularly among specific demographic groups. According to Uldam and Vestergaard (2015), the media serves as a critical conduit for political information, shaping perceptions and encouraging engagement in the political process. This assertion is supported by Moy et al. (1999), who found that exposure to political content in the media can enhance political efficacy and stimulate participatory behaviors. Further, studies focusing on elderly populations, such as by Xie and Jaeger (2008), have highlighted the role of media in compensating for the physical and social limitations that might otherwise diminish these individual participatory capacities. Given the growing body of evidence pointing to the media's role in fostering political participation among the elderly, it is essential to consider the nuances of this relationship, especially among elderly women. This group faces unique challenges and barriers to political participation, including societal and cultural expectations, lower levels of previous political engagement, and, in some cases, limited access to or familiarity with digital forms of media. However, when elderly women do engage with media, particularly media that is accessible, relevant, and engaging, it can empower them to become more politically active and informed. The synthesis of these findings suggests a complex interplay between media consumption patterns and political participation among elderly women, warranting further investigation. Therefore, based on the literature reviewed, this paper proposes the following hypothesis.

H2: Media usage pattern has a positive impact on institutionalized political participation of elderly women.

In modern society, social network circles, such as family, friends, and neighbors, are considered important sources of social capital that influence individual political participation. Especially for elderly women, these social circles not only provide a platform for information exchange but also serve as a crucial source of motivation for acquiring political knowledge and engaging in political activities. In recent years, studies on the impact of social network circles on political participation have been increasing. For instance, Jiang et al. (2024) conducted an empirical analysis based on CGSS2021 data, finding a positive correlation between participation in social circles and institutionalized political participation among Chinese women. The study also found that residential areas and the consumption of traditional media are positively correlated with political participation, while younger women tend to be less politically engaged. This indicates the significant influence of social network circles. Evidence supporting this view is also found in other related literature. Social network circles, by providing information and increasing opportunities for political discussions, can enhance the individual sense of political efficacy and motivation to participate. Furthermore, the interactive nature of social networks also helps to improve the level of political knowledge, thereby promoting institutionalized political participation behavior.

The positive impact of social networks on institutionalized political participation behavior among elderly women is underpinned by a rich body of research. Particularly, studies have found that Internet use among the elderly positively influences their social networks, thereby enhancing social participation. For instance, a study by Zhang and Li (2022) revealed that Internet use among the elderly in China significantly enlarges their social network size, increases social network

Figure 1. Research Model



heterogeneity, and raises social network upper reachability. The mediation analysis further indicated that social participation plays a positive mediating role in the influence of Internet use on the social networks of the elderly. This suggests that Internet use facilitates greater social network engagement by improving levels of social participation among the elderly. Research also highlights the significant mediating role of social participation between Internet use and health outcomes among older adults. It suggests that engaging in social activities via the Internet can lead to better health status, indicating a broad range of benefits from digital engagement. These findings underscore the importance of integrating elderly individuals into the digital world to enhance their social participation and, by extension, their political participation. Given the rapidly aging population and the digital era, it is critical to bridge the digital divide and ensure that elderly populations, especially women, have the resources and skills needed to participate actively in social networks. This can have far-reaching implications for their engagement in institutionalized political behaviors, contributing to a more inclusive and participatory political process. Therefore, based on the literature reviewed, this paper proposes the following hypothesis.

H3: Social network circle has a positive impact on institutionalized political participation of elderly women.

The research model of this paper is shown as Figure 1.

METHOD

Data Source

The study harnesses the CGSS2021 database, a product of collaboration between Renmin University's Department of Sociology and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology's School of Social Science. Initiated in 2003, the CGSS represents a pioneering effort in continuous academic surveys at a national and comprehensive scale in China. This rigorous platform captures multi-layered data (spanning societal, community, family, and individual dimensions) and serves as an indispensable resource for both domestic analysis and international comparative studies. This study utilizes data from CGSS2021 to enhance its scientific validity.

Respondent Information

Following data refinement, the dataset comprises information from 538 respondents. Table 1 shows the detailed breakdown of the respondents.

Table 1. Respondent Information

		Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Province	Inner Mongolia	7	1.30	1.30
	Beijing	79	14.68	15.99
	Ningxia	6	1.12	17.10
	Anhui	37	6.88	23.98
	Shandong	58	10.78	34.76
	Shanxi (山)	10	1.86	36.62
	Guangxi	18	3.35	39.96
	Jiangsu	37	6.88	46.84
	Jiangxi	8	1.49	48.33
	Hebei	14	2.60	50.93
	Henan	34	6.32	57.25
	Zhejiang	38	7.06	64.31
	Hubei	38	7.06	71.38
	Hunan	14	2.60	73.98
	Gansu	7	1.30	75.28
	Fujian	23	4.28	79.55
	Liaoning	40	7.43	86.99
	Chongqing	52	9.67	96.65
Shanxi (陕西)	18	3.35	100.00	
Age	60 to 70 years old	328	60.97	60.97
	71 to 80 years old	159	29.55	90.52
	81 to 90 years old	47	8.74	99.26
	Above 91 years old	4	0.74	100.00
Ethnic	Non-Han	32	5.95	5.95
	Han	506	94.05	100.00
Political affiliation	Non-party members	478	88.85	88.85
	Party members	60	11.15	100.00
Religious belief	Non-religious belief	478	88.85	88.85
	Religious belief	60	11.15	100.00

continued on following page

Table 1. Continued

		Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Highest level of education attained by elderly women	No formal education	137	25.46	25.46
	Private school or literacy classes	11	2.04	27.51
	Elementary school	136	25.28	52.79
	Junior high school	134	24.91	77.70
	Vocational high school	5	0.93	78.62
	General high school	75	13.94	92.57
	Secondary vocational school	18	3.35	95.91
	College (adult higher education)	9	1.67	97.58
	College (regular higher education)	7	1.30	98.88
	Undergraduate (adult higher education)	2	0.37	99.26
	Undergraduate (formal higher education)	4	0.74	100.00
	Highest level of education attained by respondents' fathers	No formal education	313	58.18
Private school or literacy classes		56	10.41	68.59
Elementary school		117	21.75	90.33
Junior high school		32	5.95	96.28
Vocational high school		1	0.19	96.47
General high school		10	1.86	98.33
Secondary vocational school		2	0.37	98.70
Vocational school		1	0.19	98.88
College (regular higher education)		1	0.19	99.07
Undergraduate (adult higher education)		1	0.19	99.26
Undergraduate (formal higher education)		4	0.74	100.00

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Table 1. Continued

		Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Highest level of education attained by respondents' mother	No formal education	443	82.34	82.34
	Private school or literacy classes	27	5.02	87.36
	Elementary school	47	8.74	96.10
	Junior high school	14	2.60	98.70
	General high school	2	0.37	99.07
	Secondary vocational school	2	0.37	99.44
	College (adult higher education)	1	0.19	99.63
	College (regular higher education)	1	0.19	99.81
	Undergraduate (formal higher education)	1	0.19	100.00
Total		538	100.00	100.00

The respondent information offers a comprehensive view of the diverse backgrounds of participants: Geographically, Beijing dominates the representation at 14.68%, closely followed by provinces like Shandong and Chongqing. On the other end of the spectrum, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, and Shanxi have the sparsest participation. In the ethnic context, a significant majority, 94.05%, are of Han ethnicity, leaving a mere 5.95% as non-Han. This disparity highlights the overwhelming representation of the Han group in the sample. With respect to political affiliation, the majority of respondents, 88.85%, are not party members, while the remaining 11.15% are affiliated with the party. This suggests that party members constitute only a minor portion of the surveyed individuals.

When analyzing religious beliefs, a vast 88.85% of participants do not adhere to any specific religious belief, indicating a predominantly secular respondent group. The remaining 11.15% identify as having religious affiliations. Lastly, in terms of education levels, disparities are evident. While elderly females' educational backgrounds exhibit a varied distribution across categories, a significant concentration exists within the primary educational level for both the fathers (58.18%) and mothers (82.34%) of respondents.

Descriptive Statistic

The descriptive statistics results are as follows (Table 2). Firstly, regarding socioeconomic status, with a mean of 2.316 (standard deviation of 0.926), it indicates a medium tendency in the participants' self-assessment of their socioeconomic status. The skewness (0.068) is close to 0, indicating a relatively symmetric distribution, while the kurtosis (-0.606) being less than 0 suggests a flatter distribution compared to a normal distribution. This means that the distribution of socioeconomic status among elderly women is relatively balanced, with no extreme highs or lows.

Secondly, the use of traditional media shows different characteristics. For broadcast, the mean is 1.890 (standard deviation of 1.157), with a skewness of 1.135, indicating a left-skewed distribution, meaning that most elderly women use the radio less frequently. Its kurtosis of 0.258, slightly higher than a normal distribution, suggests a relative concentration but not significant. In contrast, television usage is higher (mean of 3.816, standard deviation of 1.170), with a skewness of -0.906, indicating that most elderly women use television more frequently, with a right-skewed distribution. The kurtosis

is close to 0 (-0.028), suggesting a distribution shape similar to a normal distribution. In terms of the level of Internet and new media usage, the mean is 2.535 (standard deviation of 1.634), with a kurtosis of -1.534, indicating a flatter distribution than a normal distribution with a slight left skew (skewness of 0.392). This shows some variation among elderly women in their use of the Internet and new media, with most using it at a moderate frequency but a significant number using it less. Regarding social circles, the family social circle has the highest mean (4.013, standard deviation of 0.756), but with a kurtosis of 1.862 and a skewness of -0.956, indicating a more peaked distribution than a normal distribution and a right skew, meaning that most elderly women have an active family social life. The use of neighborhood social circles (mean of 3.920, standard deviation of 2.424) and friends social circles (mean of 3.394, standard deviation of 2.123) suggests a variety of participation levels among elderly women in these areas, with both kurtosis values being less than 0 (-1.658 and -1.289, respectively), indicating flatter distributions, reflecting the wide variation in participation levels among different elderly women in these social circles.

Lastly, the mean of institutionalized political participation of elderly women is 0.595 (standard deviation of 0.491), with a kurtosis of -1.857 and a skewness of -0.387, indicating a flatter distribution with a slight right skew. This means that while most elderly women are conservative in their institutionalized political participation, there is also a certain proportion of active participants.

RESULTS

The study initiated a chi-square analysis to investigate the relationship between family income and Institutionalized political participation of elderly women (see Table 3). The results highlight that family income has a significant impact on whether an individual participates in voting or abstains. Specifically, 63.64% of those with a family income level of 1.0 (*no income*) chose not to participate in voting (0.0), which is considerably higher than the average non-participation rate of 40.52%. On the other hand, 50.00% of those with a family income level of 7.0 (250,001 RMB/year and above)

Table 2. Descriptive Statistic

Item	Mean ± standard deviation	Variance	SE	Mean 95% CI(LL)	Mean 95% CI(UL)	IQR	Kurtosis	Skewness
Socioeconomic status	2.316 ± 0.926	0.857	0.040	2.238	2.394	1.000	-0.606	0.068
Traditional media: broadcast	1.890 ± 1.157	1.338	0.050	1.793	1.988	2.000	0.258	1.135
Traditional media: television	3.816 ± 1.170	1.368	0.050	3.717	3.915	2.000	-0.028	-0.906
Level of Internet and new media usage	2.535 ± 1.634	2.670	0.070	2.397	2.673	3.000	-1.534	0.392
Family social circles	4.013 ± 0.756	0.572	0.033	3.949	4.077	0.000	1.862	-0.956
Neighborhood social circles	3.920 ± 2.424	5.876	0.105	3.715	4.125	5.250	-1.658	0.098
Friends' social circles	3.394 ± 2.123	4.507	0.092	3.215	3.573	4.000	-1.289	0.370
Institutionalized political participation of elderly women	0.595 ± 0.491	0.241	0.021	0.553	0.636	1.000	-1.857	-0.387

Table 3. Cross Analysis of Family Income and Institutionalized Political Participation of Elderly Women

		Total Household Income (%)							Total	χ^2	p
		1.0	2.0	3.0	4.0	5.0	6.0	7.0			
Institutionalized political participation of elderly women	0.0	21 (63.64)	106 (36.18)	64 (46.04)	12 (37.50)	5 (31.25)	2 (22.22)	8 (50.00)	218 (40.52)	13.907	0.031*
	1.0	12 (36.36)	187 (63.82)	75 (53.96)	20 (62.50)	11 (68.75)	7 (77.78)	8 (50.00)	320 (59.48)		
Total		33	293	139	32	16	9	16	538		

Note. * = $p < 0.05$; ** = $p < 0.01$

and 77.78% with a family income of 6.0 (200,001 to 250,000 RMB/year) participated in voting (1.0), both surpassing the average participation rate of 59.48%. Similarly, 68.75% of the respondents with a family income level of 5.0 (150,001 to 200,000 RMB/year) chose to vote, which is notably above the average voting percentage of 59.48%. In essence, distinct differences in election participation are evident across various family income levels.

Table 4 showcases the binary logit regression analysis with economic status (ECO), traditional media radio broadcasts (TRAB), traditional media television (TRAT), degree of Internet usage (NEWIN), familial social circle (FACIR), neighborhood circle (NEICIR), and friends social circle (FRICIR) as independent variables, while institutional political participation serves as the dependent variable. The regression formula is shown in equation 1.

$$\ln(p / 1 - p) = 0.471 - 0.260 * ECO + 0.173 * TRAB + 0.225 * TRAT + 0.088 * NEWIN - 0.000 * FACIR - 0.126 * NEICIR - 0.110 * FRICIR \quad (1)$$

where p represents the probability of political participation being 1 and $1 - p$ denotes the probability of a zero outcome.

The regression coefficient for economic status indicates a value of -0.260, reaching significance at the 0.05 level ($z = -2.505, p = 0.012 < 0.05$). This denotes a noteworthy negative association between economic status and institutional political participation behaviors among elderly females. Additionally, the odds ratio (OR) stands at 0.771, suggesting that for each unit increment in economic status, there is a decrement in the likelihood of political participation in this demographic by a

Table 4. Binary Logit Analysis Results

Item	Regression coefficient	SE	Z-value	Wald χ^2	p-value	OR	OR 95% CI
ECO	-0.260	0.104	-2.505	6.275	0.012	0.771	0.630 ~ 0.945
TRAB	0.173	0.082	2.113	4.467	0.035	1.188	1.013 ~ 1.395
TRAT	0.225	0.079	2.845	8.093	0.004	1.252	1.072 ~ 1.461
N EWIN	0.088	0.057	1.536	2.358	0.125	1.092	0.976 ~ 1.221
FACIR	-0.000	0.127	-0.003	0.000	0.997	1.000	0.779 ~ 1.283
NEICIR	-0.126	0.045	-2.784	7.751	0.005	0.882	0.807 ~ 0.963
FRICIR	-0.110	0.053	-2.100	4.410	0.036	0.895	0.808 ~ 0.993
Intercept	0.471	0.765	0.616	0.379	0.538	1.602	0.358 ~ 7.178

Note. Dependent variable: Institutionalized political participation of elderly women; McFadden R^2 : 0.039; Cox and Snell R^2 : 0.051; Nagelkerke R^2 : 0.068

factor of 0.771. Exploring potential explanatory mechanisms, it might be hypothesized that elevated economic status diminishes political engagement due to perceived stability, with fewer incentives rooted in personal stakes or needs. Concurrently, affluent elderly females might be preoccupied with alternative commitments, reducing available time for political endeavors. Cultural norms or perceived roles within society might also deter this cohort from more pronounced public or political engagements. Moreover, while superior information accessibility is conceivable for this demographic, varying degrees of source trustworthiness or overarching political landscape perceptions could act as deterrents.

The regression coefficient for traditional media broadcasting is valued at 0.173, achieving significance at the 0.05 threshold ($z = 2.113, p = 0.035 < 0.05$). This evidences a salient positive relationship between traditional media broadcasting and institutional political participation behaviors among elderly females. Furthermore, the OR is recorded at 1.188, indicating that with each unit increase in exposure to traditional media broadcasting, the propensity for political participation in this group rises by a factor of 1.188. Analytically, this can suggest that traditional media broadcasting plays a pivotal role in galvanizing political engagement in the elderly female cohort. One plausible rationale is that such broadcasting channels are more accessible or trusted by older generations, rendering them effective conduits for disseminating political information and influencing viewpoints. These channels could reinforce pre-existing beliefs or awaken latent political interests. It underscores the continued relevance of traditional media in an age of digital proliferation, especially for specific demographic segments. Further in-depth studies are essential to elucidate the nuances of this correlation.

The regression coefficient for traditional media television exposure stands at 0.225, demonstrating significance at the 0.01 level ($z = 2.845, p = 0.004 < 0.01$). This underscores the prominent positive influence of traditional media television on the institutional political participation of the elderly female demographic. With an OR of 1.252, the data indicates that for every unit increase in traditional media television exposure, there is a 1.252-fold increase in the probability of institutional political participation among elderly women. Analytically, this evidences the central role of traditional television in shaping political behaviors within this demographic. Given the history and widespread accessibility of television, its persuasive power remains particularly robust among older female audiences, possibly due to their prolonged exposure and trust in this medium. Besides, the usage intensity of new Internet media has a regression coefficient of 0.088. However, its lack of statistical significance ($z = 1.536, p = 0.125 > 0.05$) suggests that the engagement level with new Internet media does not significantly influence the institutional political participation of elderly women cohorts.

The family circle has a regression coefficient close to zero, with no statistical significance ($z = -0.003, p = 0.997 > 0.05$) on institutional political participation of elderly women, indicating that family dynamics do not contribute to shifts in the political participation behaviors of elderly women. Conversely, the neighborhood circle presents a regression coefficient of -0.126 and demonstrates significance at the 0.01 level ($z = -2.784, p = 0.005 < 0.01$). With an OR of 0.882, this suggests that for each unit increase in the involvement within the neighborhood circle, there's a decrease in institutional political participation by 0.882 times among elderly females. Similarly, the friend circle's regression coefficient -0.110 is significant at the 0.05 level ($z = -2.100, p = 0.036 < 0.05$). The OR value of 0.895 indicates that as involvement in the friend circle grows by a unit, institutional political participation decreases by approximately 0.895 times among elderly women.

DISCUSSION

The negative impact within neighborhood circles may be rooted in traditional beliefs and societal expectations. In certain communities, cultures emphasizing traditional values may relegate the social role of elderly women to a relatively secondary position, resulting in insufficient support and encouragement for their political involvement within neighborhood circles. Social pressure may also play a role, as elderly women might hesitate to contravene unspoken agreements within the

neighborhood to maintain social harmony. Conversely, the negative influence within friend circles may stem from social influence and information filtering. If there exists a negative perception or indifferent attitude toward political engagement in the friend circle, elderly women may be influenced to reduce their political participation. Such social environments may foster an information-filtering pattern, limiting the exposure of elderly women to political information and diminishing their motivation for political involvement.

The institutional political participation of elderly women can be influenced by an interplay of cultural and social dynamics prevalent in their neighborhoods and social circles. In many societies, especially ones with traditional orientations, the roles of elderly women may be subdued, with their exposure to political narratives being limited, especially if their immediate circles sustain these views. Moreover, these circles can act as echo chambers, perpetuating a uniform set of apathetic or negative views toward politics. Anecdotal experiences shared within these networks, especially those pointing to the inefficacy of political actions or systemic hurdles, can further erode the motivation to participate. Additionally, the generational communication barriers, where elderly women's political information might largely derive from younger members but is not supported in their direct discussions, can cause a disconnect. Lastly, the evolution of political engagement in the digital age, juxtaposed with the traditional discourse predominant in these circles, can deter their proactive political involvement. Such intricate dynamics, blending sociological, psychological, and political perspectives, underscore the challenges and nuances of bolstering political participation among elderly women. Future endeavors in this realm should encompass targeted strategies, cognizant of these unique experiences and challenges.

CONCLUSION

Conclusively, the data demonstrates that elderly women's institutional political participation is significantly influenced by socioeconomic factors and their immediate social circles. An inverse relationship with economic status suggests potential socioeconomic impediments. Notably, negative correlations with close social ties, such as neighbors and friends, hint at the role of entrenched traditional norms or echo chambers that might limit political engagement. In stark contrast, traditional media, especially television, remains a dominant positive influence. However, the negligible impact of new media usage possibly indicates a generational digital divide or a proclivity towards traditional information channels. These insights emphasize the need for targeted interventions that address both economic challenges and the subtleties of social influences in enhancing political participation among this demographic.

Theoretical Implications

The findings regarding the influence of socioeconomic factors and social circles on elderly women's institutional political participation have several theoretical implications that contribute to the broader understanding of political engagement and sociopolitical dynamics. First, the regression analysis reveals that the economic status variable's negative coefficient exerts a significant inverse influence on the institutionalized political participation of elderly women. This denotes that as economic status increases, there is a discernible decrease in the likelihood of these elderly women engaging in institutionalized political activities. This finding challenges the conventional position that socioeconomic well-being directly influences higher levels of political engagement, suggesting a more complex interplay at work, particularly in institutionalized political participation. Theoretically, this inverse association may signify a phenomenon where economic affluence leads to a perceived decrease in dependency on political outcomes, fostering a sense of complacency or contentment that diminishes the urgency or perceived necessity for political engagement.

This perspective aligns with theories suggesting that socioeconomic security may insulate individuals from the perceived immediate impacts of political decisions, thereby reducing their motivational drive to participate in institutional political activities. Conversely, this pattern might

also imply that elderly women with higher economic status employ alternative avenues for political influence that fall outside the scope of traditional indicators of institutional political participation. The recognition of this complex relationship between economic status and political participation among elderly women adds a critical dimension to the discourse on socioeconomic determinants of political behavior. It underscores the necessity for a broader conceptualization of political participation that encompasses a variety of engagement forms, particularly those prevalent among demographics with unique socioeconomic profiles. Moreover, it calls for reevaluating the assumptions underlying the socioeconomic models of political engagement, advocating for a more differentiated understanding of how economic resources and social positions influence the choice and nature of political involvement. This refined theoretical perspective is essential for developing a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of the dynamics that drive political participation across different segments of the population.

Second, the media usage pattern, encompassing both traditional media and Internet usage, plays a distinct role in shaping the institutionalized political participation of elderly women. The regression analysis highlights a significant positive influence of traditional media, encompassing radio and television, on the institutionalized political participation of elderly women. This result underscores the potent capacity of traditional media channels to not only inform and shape public opinion and mobilize this demographic toward engaging in formal political processes. The positive coefficients signal that traditional media, through its agenda-setting role, plays a crucial part in guiding the political interests and participation levels of elderly women, a group that may have less interaction with digital platforms. This finding enriches the media effects theory by demonstrating traditional media's continued relevance and effectiveness in engaging specific segments of the population in institutionalized political activities, thus challenging the narrative of its obsolescence in the face of rising digital media influence. Conversely, the analysis reveals an insignificant influence of Internet usage on institutionalized political participation among elderly women, suggesting that the Internet's role in this context is minimal. This outcome introduces a critical dimension to the discourse on digital engagement and the digital divide, indicating that the mere availability of Internet technology does not directly lead to enhanced political participation within this demographic. It suggests that for Internet engagement to be meaningful in promoting political participation, other factors such as digital literacy, the relevance and accessibility of online political content, and supportive online social networks are crucial. This finding calls for a nuanced understanding of digital engagement, emphasizing that overcoming the digital divide requires addressing not just issues of access but also enhancing the quality and context of Internet use to empower elderly women to participate in institutionalized political processes. These findings provide a nuanced view of how traditional media and Internet usage influence institutionalized political participation among elderly women. They underscore the importance of recognizing the distinct media engagement patterns and preferences of different demographic groups when devising strategies to enhance political participation. Moreover, these insights advocate for a multifaceted approach to addressing the digital divide, highlighting the necessity of fostering not only access but also meaningful engagement with digital platforms to support the political involvement of elderly women in institutionalized settings.

Third, the intricate dynamics between social circles and institutionalized political participation among elderly women, as revealed through the analysis, underscore a complex landscape where social structures exert mixed effects on political engagement. This differentiation in influence—in which familial social circles show no significant impact, contrasted with the negative associations observed within neighborhoods and social circles—provides profound insights into how social networks can simultaneously facilitate and impede political behavior, particularly in the context of institutionalized participation among elderly women. The absence of a significant effect from familial social circles on the institutionalized political participation of elderly women might suggest that within this demographic, family dynamics do not play a pivotal role in shaping political engagement.

This could indicate the personal autonomy elderly women maintain in their political decisions, where familial opinions and discussions do not directly translate into political action. Alternatively, it may reflect the nature of these relationships, which could be primarily supportive and non-political, pointing to the need for further investigation into how and under what conditions family influences might intersect with political behaviors. The negative associations with neighborhoods and social circles illuminate a contrasting narrative. These findings suggest that within these social networks, there may be prevailing norms or pressures that actively discourage participation in institutionalized political processes. Such dynamics could stem from collective attitudes of political apathy, skepticism about the efficacy of political involvement, or even shared perceptions of political engagement as being outside the normative behavior expected within these circles. This negative influence highlights the complex role of social conformity and the potential for social sanctions in shaping the political participation landscape for elderly women.

These observations significantly contribute to the theoretical understanding of political participation by challenging simplistic notions of social networks as mere facilitators of political engagement. They highlight the nuanced ways in which social structures—through enabling or constraining mechanisms—impact the likelihood of institutionalized political participation among elderly women. This complexity calls for a broader theoretical framework that can accommodate the diverse roles of social networks in influencing political behavior, recognizing that social influence can both mobilize and restrict political engagement. Particularly, the negative impact of neighborhoods and social circles invites deeper exploration into the social mechanisms that govern political behavior within these groups. It raises critical questions about the role of social norms, identity, and collective expectations in mediating political engagement, suggesting a fertile ground for future research to unpack the social dynamics at play. In sum, the analysis sheds light on the multifaceted influence of social circles on the institutionalized political participation of elderly women, revealing a layered and complex interplay of social forces. This insight not only advances our theoretical understanding of political behavior but also underscores the importance of considering the social context in efforts to enhance political participation among specific demographic groups.

Finally, these insights offer a critical lens through which to view the intersection of age, gender, and socioeconomic status in political behavior studies. They suggest that elderly women's political participation cannot be adequately understood without considering the intersecting effects of these factors. This calls for an intersectional approach in political participation research, which considers how various identities and social positions interact to influence political engagement. In sum, the findings call for a reevaluation of existing theories of political engagement, highlighting the need for frameworks that can accommodate the complexities of socioeconomic impediments, social influences, and media consumption patterns. These theoretical implications pave the way for more nuanced understandings of political participation, particularly among demographics traditionally marginalized or overlooked in political science research.

Implications for Practice

The insights derived from the influence of socioeconomic factors, social circles, and media consumption on elderly women's institutional political participation have practical implications for policymakers, civic organizations, and other stakeholders interested in enhancing political engagement within this demographic. These can be outlined as follows. First, based on the explicit findings from the regression analysis, it is evident that elderly women's social networks play a significant role in shaping their institutionalized political participation. The analysis revealed mixed effects of social circles, with neighborhoods and social circles showing negative associations with political engagement. This suggests that the composition and dynamics of social networks can either enable or hinder political participation among elderly women. Specifically, the negative impact of homogenous social circles on political engagement highlights the need to broaden these networks to foster a more inclusive environment for political discussion. Efforts should be made to broaden elderly women's

social networks beyond their immediate, possibly homogenous circles. This recommendation is based on the understanding that diverse social networks can provide access to a wider range of perspectives and information, thus enriching political discourse and engagement. By creating community groups or clubs that bring together individuals with diverse viewpoints, elderly women can be exposed to a variety of political opinions and perspectives. Similarly, organizing civic education programs that encourage dialogue and understanding across different social groups can help break down the echo chambers that limit political engagement. In summary, the recommendation to broaden elderly women's social networks is grounded in the explicit findings of the regression analysis, which highlighted the negative influence of homogenous social circles on political participation. By creating opportunities for interaction and dialogue across diverse social groups, stakeholders can create a more inclusive environment for political discussion, ultimately enhancing the institutionalized political participation of elderly women.

Second, the analysis highlights a notable reliance on traditional media, particularly television, among elderly women as a primary source of political information. This finding underscores the significance of traditional media channels in reaching and engaging this demographic. Given the digital divide that limits elderly women's access to and interaction with new media platforms, traditional media emerges as a potent and effective tool for communication and mobilization. Specifically, the positive coefficients associated with traditional media exposure in the regression analysis reinforce the importance of leveraging television, radio, and print media in political campaigns targeting elderly women. By recognizing and capitalizing on the prevailing media consumption patterns of this demographic, campaigns can effectively disseminate information, raise awareness about political issues, and motivate elderly women to participate in institutional political processes. Therefore, the strategic recommendation to prioritize traditional media channels in political campaigns for elderly women is grounded in the explicit findings of the analysis, highlighting the need to tailor communication strategies to the media preferences and habits of this demographic.

Lastly, the analysis reveals the negligible impact of new media, represented by Internet usage, on elderly women's political participation. Despite the growing importance of digital platforms in shaping political discourse, the regression coefficients indicate that Internet usage among elderly women does not significantly influence their engagement in institutional political processes. This finding underscores the existing digital divide within this demographic and highlights the need for targeted interventions to address this gap. Given the limited impact of new media on elderly women's political participation, there is a clear imperative for tailored digital literacy programs that cater to their specific needs and interests. These programs should focus on enhancing their digital skills and confidence in navigating online platforms, particularly those relevant to political information and engagement. By addressing the generational digital divide, these programs aim to gradually integrate new media into elderly women's repertoire of information sources, empowering them to access a broader range of political content and participate more actively in digital political discourse. The basis for these recommendations lies in the explicit findings of the regression analysis, which demonstrate the minimal influence of Internet usage on elderly women's political participation. This empirical evidence underscores the urgency of addressing the digital literacy gap among this demographic to ensure their meaningful inclusion in digital political processes. Moreover, by improving digital literacy, these programs have the potential not only to enhance political participation but also contribute to the overall social inclusion of elderly women, enabling them to access various services and opportunities available in the digital age.

Implementing these strategies requires a collaborative effort among government agencies, non-governmental organizations, community leaders, and media outlets. By working together, these entities can create a supportive ecosystem that encourages and facilitates the political participation of elderly women, ultimately leading to more inclusive and representative political processes.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the use of public data mitigating concerns related to sample limitations and data reliability, there are still noteworthy limitations in this study. Firstly, due to the extensive nature of the data, there may be information gaps for specific subgroups or regions, potentially affecting the generalizability of the research findings in certain contexts. Secondly, variable selection in public databases could be constrained by data providers, leading to an incomplete consideration of all essential factors influencing political participation among elderly women. Additionally, while public data is typically subject to professional oversight, the data collection and processing phases may still introduce errors or biases. Lastly, the timeframe of public data may fall short in capturing long-term or recent social changes, necessitating caution when interpreting study results. In future research, including additional analytical models, such as neural networks, alongside inferential analyses could further enhance the depth of the investigation.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

We wish to confirm that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication and there has been no significant financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome.

FUNDING STATEMENT

No funding was received for this work.

PROCESS DATES

Received: This manuscript was initially received for consideration for the journal on 11/17/2023, revisions were received for the manuscript following the double-anonymized peer review on 04/24/2024, the manuscript was formally accepted on 04/06/2024, and the manuscript was finalized for publication on 04/24/2024.

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