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Article

The Influence of Economic Uncertainty and Social Media Use on Religious Belief: Evidence from China

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Abstract: Although economic uncertainty and social media use are recognized as having a significant impact on religiosity, their role in religiosity has yet to be extensively examined in developing countries. This study explored the effects of economic uncertainty and social media use on religiosity in the Chinese context. By analyzing the publicly available data from the Chinese General Social Survey and World Values Survey, the findings showed that economic uncertainty significantly increased people's religious beliefs, while social media use had no significant impact on religious beliefs. Furthermore, social media use did not significantly moderate the relationship between economic uncertainty and religious belief. In contrast, educational level positively moderated the relationship between economic uncertainty and religious belief. These findings differ in part from the results of previous studies, presenting new evidence for theoretical integration in the field and revealing potential group differences in the strength of the relationship between economic uncertainty and religious belief.

Keywords: economic uncertainty; social media; religious belief; educational level; China

1. Introduction

Religion has significantly influenced the extensive development of human society (Boyer and Bergstrom 2008; Peoples, Duda, and Marlowe 2016), resulting in the widespread presence of faiths worldwide and a substantial following of believers. Nevertheless, as society progresses, religious advancement encounters novel challenges. Rapid societal change is marked by a significant rise in uncertainty, with economic uncertainty having a particularly substantial influence (Pinquart and Silbereisen 2008; Koffman et al. 2020; Leach et al. 2021). The presence of economic uncertainty has the potential to significantly alter individuals' cognition and actions (Molteni et al. 2021; Rettie and Daniels 2021).

Scholars have conducted theoretical analyses on the impact of economic uncertainty on public belief from different perspectives. In general, economic uncertainty increases people's religious beliefs (Barber 2011; Storm 2017). However, there is still a lack of empirical research on the impact of economic uncertainty on Chinese people's religious beliefs. In China, there are about 200 million people with religious beliefs, and the interest of the Chinese people in religious beliefs seems to be on the rise recently (Hu 2017). However, in the unique cultural and political context of China, the characteristics of the Chinese population with religious beliefs are significantly different from those of believers in European and American countries (Yang 2014; Wang and Uecker 2017; Francis-Tan and Tian 2022). For example, people with religious beliefs in China have higher incomes but worse health levels, which are opposite to the findings of European and American studies (Silverstein and Bengtson 2018; Francis-Tan and Tian 2022). Therefore, exploring the mechanism of the impact of economic uncertainty on the religious beliefs of Chinese people is still of unique value and needs further empirical investigation.

The advent of new media technologies on the Internet has ushered humanity into the age of social media (Buckley, Gainous, and Wagner 2023). The impact of social networking on religious engagement and beliefs among the Chinese population is currently under investigation, as social networks have become an integral part of people's lives. Moreover, utilizing social networks is an

effective way for individuals to alleviate themselves from the distress of real-life circumstances and provides a crucial avenue for acquiring social assistance (Cheikh-Ammar 2020; Bae 2022; Wolfers and Utz 2022). An important research question that has not been adequately explored in either China or developed countries is whether the use of social media moderates the impact of economic uncertainty on public beliefs.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Economic Uncertainty and Religious Belief

The progress of human societies is marked by various uncertainties, including economic instability, health unpredictability, and natural and institutional ambiguity. How humans cope with these uncertainties is an essential research topic (McGregor et al. 2001). Many researchers have suggested that religion is a coping mechanism that people use to deal with uncertainty (Hogg, Adelman, and Blagg 2010; Barber 2011; Sosis and Handwerker 2011; Kumar and Voracek 2022; Wulandari, Milla, and Muluk 2022; Molteni 2024). A study conducted by Sinding Bentzen (2019) discovered that individuals tend to become more religious following earthquakes, indicating that people resort to religion to deal with unforeseeable natural occurrences. Regarding economic uncertainty, individuals experiencing financial strain or unpredictability often turn to religion for comfort, support, and a sense of belonging, which can significantly reduce individual distress (Brandt and Henry 2012; Immerzeel and Van Tubergen 2013). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, increased economic stress was associated with increased psychological distress, but this effect was mitigated for those who relied more on religious beliefs (Lucchetti et al. 2021; de Diego-Cordero et al. 2022; Saraei and Johnson 2023).

Furthermore, individuals experiencing economic uncertainty usually experience a diminished sense of control. Consequently, they may pursue a specific belief system to divert their attention from their frustration or to rationalize the current situation, thereby regaining self control (Engstrom and Laurin 2020). Hence, the above reasoning can also elucidate the decline in belief in developed nations while faith continues to flourish in developing nations (Norris and Inglehart 2011). This can be attributed to the fact that individuals belonging to low-income groups encounter more significant uncertainties in life, while those belonging to high-income groups experience the reverse. It is yet to be confirmed whether this phenomenon holds in China. China, as a secular society, has a relatively low percentage of religious adherents—approximately 1/7 of the population (Chen, Zhao, and Wang 2020). Religion may not serve as the primary means of coping for those with economic instability. Earlier research has also revealed that individuals with religious beliefs in China exhibit higher levels of wealth (Francis-Tan and Tian 2022). This finding contradicts conventional research findings in Europe and the United States. Hence, Question 1 is posed as follows:

Q1: *In the Chinese context, does economic uncertainty lead to an increase in religious belief?*

In addition, considering that different individuals have different tolerance levels for uncertain situations (Rettie and Daniels 2021), this might lead to different effects of economic uncertainty on religious beliefs among individuals with different levels of uncertainty tolerance. Previous studies have shown that uncertainty tolerance is related to demographic variables, such as age and gender (Kossowska, Jaśko, and Bar-Tal 2012; Miglietta et al. 2023). Therefore, the impact of economic uncertainty on religious beliefs may also be moderated by demographic factors. Based on empirical evidence, individuals born in the 1990s and 2000s comprised approximately 50% of the individuals who made reservations for temple tourist attractions in China, following the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Adolescents are increasingly assuming a dominant role in temple prayers (Ctrip Black-board 2023). Hence, question 2 is posed as follows:

Q2: *Can demographic variables moderate the impact of economic uncertainty on religious belief?*

2.2. The Impact of Social Media Use

With the rapid development of new media technologies emphasizing interpersonal interaction, social media communication has gradually become influential (Neubaum and Krämer 2017). About 70% of American adults use social media platforms every day (Auxier and Anderson 2021), while more than 99% of Chinese college students use social media every day, and nearly three-quarters of college students use social media for more than 4 hours per day (Mao and Zhang 2023). Social media, as an essential way for individuals to perceive social changes, may affect the impact of economic uncertainty on religious beliefs.

Social media enables users to easily access and engage with spiritual messages, which, in turn, helps them attain a state of self-transcendence, reinforce their values and identity, and provide positive inspiration to others (Williams and Krisjanous 2023). Previous studies have demonstrated that social media can function as a tool for alleviating stress (Wiederhold 2020; Wolfers and Utz 2022). When individuals encounter psychological threats, they will reduce their threat perception and anxiety levels by using social media (Griffioen et al. 2021). Prior research has indicated that as an individual's feeling of safety and protection grows, the positive correlation between economic uncertainty and religious belief will diminish (Wichman 2009). This implies that using social media, which can offer individuals a feeling of safety and assurance, might influence the impact of economic uncertainty on religion. Therefore, Question 3 is posed as follows:

Q3: *Does the utilization of social media moderate the correlation between economic uncertainty and religious belief?*

In terms of social media use and religious beliefs, the impact of social media use is complex. On one hand, as a personalized form of media, social media use is considered detrimental to collective religious activities (Song 2009). For example, McClure (2020) found that the more people use the Internet, the less they participate in religious activities and pray. On the other hand, social media use can also increase interactions among believers, thereby strengthening the cohesion of religious communities and organizations and attracting more potential believers through the dissemination of religious content on social media platforms (Golan and Stadler 2016; Campbell and Tsuria 2021). Therefore, social media use might also increase individual religious beliefs. A study on the impact of social media use on teenagers found that it did not pose a challenge to teenagers' religious beliefs (Uecker and McClure 2023). Therefore, Question 4 is posed as follows:

Q4: *In the context of China, does social media use affect people's religious belief?*

3. Methodology

3.1. Data

This study utilized two datasets from extensive surveys conducted in China as the primary analytical data. The two datasets were sourced from the China General Social Survey and the World Values Survey.

The Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) is a nationwide survey conducted by the National Survey Research Center, Renmin University of China, starting in 2003. The survey aims to gather a wide range of social and personal data in a thorough and organized manner. It includes both objective demographic questions and subjective questions. A biennial update was recently implemented in the CGSS, making it accessible to the public. This analysis utilized data from the 2021 survey, comprising 8148 valid samples from 19 provinces.

The World Values Survey (WVS, www.worldvaluessurvey.org) offers information about global social, cultural, and political transformations. The World Values Survey (WVS) encompasses nationwide surveys carried out in over 90 countries and regions. These surveys employ a standardized questionnaire that addresses various topics such as beliefs, values, economic progress, democratization, religion, gender equality, social capital, and subjective wellbeing. This analysis utilized data from the 2018 World Values Survey in China, comprising 3036 valid samples.

3.2. Variables

Religious belief: In the 2021 CGSS data, an individual's religious beliefs were measured with one question: "How often do you attend religious activities?". The score ranged from 1 to 9, with higher scores indicating that the individual participated in more religious activities. In the 2018 WVS data, an individual's religious beliefs were measured with two questions: "How often do you attend religious services?" and "How often do you pray?". These two questions reflect religious beliefs' dimensions of external practice and personal practice (Pearce, Hayward, and Pearlman 2017). Given that the scores for the two questions were 1-7 and 1-8, the scores were standardized. The average of the two standardized scores was then used to measure religious belief. In this study, higher scores indicated that an individual participated in more religious activities ($\alpha = 0.823$).

Economic uncertainty: In the CGSS 2021 data, individual economic uncertainty was measured with the following question: "In the past year, have you used advance overdrafts (such as credit cards) to buy daily necessities?". The answer options ranged from 1 to 3, representing "often", "occasionally", and "never". In order to facilitate interpretation, this study reordered the codes. The higher the score, the more overdraft consumption and the higher the individual's economic uncertainty. In the WVS 2018 data, individual economic uncertainty was measured with four questions, such as "frequency you/family (last 12 month): gone without a cash income", with the answer options ranging from 1 to 4. In this study, the higher the score, the higher the perceived economic uncertainty ($\alpha = 0.694$).

Social media use: Social media usage was only included in the WVS 2018 data, and the measurement question was "Frequency of using social media (such as WeChat and Weibo)", with scores ranging from 1 (daily) to 5 (never), indicating a lower frequency of use. In order to facilitate the interpretation of the results, this study converted the scores. In this study, higher social media use scores indicated a higher frequency of use.

Demographic variables: Previous studies have shown that demographic factors can significantly affect people's religious beliefs (Kaufmann, Goujon, and Skirbekk 2012; McCleary et al. 2011), so this study included gender (1 = male, 2 = female), age, education level, health, income, and self-rated social status in the analysis model.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Analysis

Table 1 provides a summary of the attributes of the participants. In the CGSS data, the average age of the respondents was 54.64, ranging from 21 to 102 years old, of which 54.8% were female. In the WVS data, the average age of the respondents participating in the survey was 42.643, ranging from 18 to 70 years old, of which 50.5% were female. Compared with the CGSS sample, the WVS sample was relatively younger. In terms of income, both samples had a high proportion of low-income groups—about 77%. In terms of social status, the proportion of high-social-class groups in the WVS sample was higher. In terms of education, they were mainly composed of groups with junior education or below, and they were relatively healthy. In terms of religious beliefs, there were fewer individuals with religious beliefs in the CGSS data, while there were relatively more individuals with religious beliefs in the WVS data. In terms of economic uncertainty, about 40% of the respondents faced certain economic difficulties. In terms of social media use, 71% of the respondents used social media at least once per month. Overall, except for the large difference in religious beliefs, the demographic characteristics of the two groups of samples were relatively similar. The research findings derived from the two sets of samples could be utilized for cross-validation.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for all variables.

Variables	CGSS sample	WVS sample
	<i>N (%)</i>	<i>N (%)</i>

Gender		
Male	3679 (45.2)	1503 (49.5)
Female	4469 (54.8)	1533 (50.5)
Income		
Lower than average	5662 (77.2)	2336 (77.7)
Equal to or higher than average	1672 (22.8)	672 (22.3)
Social class		
Middle and lower class	4599 (56.6)	1331 (44.3)
Upper class	3532 (43.4)	1674 (55.6)
Educational level		
Junior high school and below	4967 (61.1)	1952 (65.1)
Junior high school above	3160 (38.9)	1048 (34.9)
Self-rated health status		
Relatively healthy and above	4366 (53.5)	1894 (62.4)
Relatively healthy and below	3786 (46.5)	1139 (37.6)
Religious beliefs		
Religious	7502 (92.1)	2238 (78.9)
Non-religious	646 (7.9)	597 (21.1)
Economic uncertainty		
Rarely and above	781 (39.3)	1215 (40.2)
Never	1207 (60.7)	1808 (59.8)
Social media use		
Less than monthly		877 (29.0)
Equal to or more than monthly		2146 (71.0)

4.2. Results of Regression Analysis

First, we constructed two models based on the CGSS data to conduct a regression analysis on religious belief, as shown in Table 2. In Model 1, we used control variables as predictors; in Model 2, we added economic uncertainty as an additional predictor. The results showed that among the demographic factors, only educational level was able to significantly predict religious belief ($\beta = -.007$, $p < 0.05$). Economic uncertainty could significantly and positively predict religious belief ($\beta = 0.059$, $p < 0.05$). The results showed that economic uncertainty can promote people's religious belief behavior in China.

Table 2. Regression results for religious belief based on the CGSS data.

Variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	β	p	β	p
Age	-0.037	0.163	-0.025	0.357
Gender	0.022	0.357	0.019	0.419
Education	-0.07**	0.008	-0.082**	0.002
Health	-0.032	0.178	-0.027	0.253
Social status	-0.025	0.288	-0.025	0.278
Income level	0.007	0.781	0.007	0.76
Economic uncertainty			0.059*	0.017
ΔR^2	0.003		0.005*	

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Next, we constructed four models based on the WVS data to conduct a regression analysis on religious belief, as shown in Table 3. In Model 1, we used control variables as predictors; in Model 2, we added economic uncertainty as an additional predictor. In model 3, we added social media use as an additional predictor. In model 4, economic uncertainty and social media use were used as predictors.

Table 3. Regression results for religious belief based on the WVS data.

Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	β	p	β	p	β	p	β	p
Age	0.024	0.262	0.026	0.239	0.036	0.126	0.036	0.108
Gender	0.045*	0.018	0.043*	0.023	0.044*	0.021	0.045*	0.019
Education	-0.054*	0.014	-0.048*	0.027	-0.059**	0.008	-0.052*	0.016
Health	-0.017	0.402	-0.008	0.697	-0.017	0.404	-0.007	0.753
Social status	0.062*	0.011	0.052*	0.037	0.062*	0.012	0.053*	0.029
Income level	0.087***	0.000	0.088***	0.000	0.084***	0.001	0.085***	0.000
Economic uncertainty			0.067***	0.001			0.067***	0.001
Social media use					-0.033	0.144	-0.028	0.209
ΔR^2	0.012***		0.004***		0.001		0.005***	

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

The results showed that among the demographic factors, gender was able to significantly predict religious belief behavior ($\beta = 0.045$, $p < 0.05$); women participated in religious activities more than men. Education level was able to significantly negatively predict religious belief ($\beta = -0.054$, $p < 0.05$). Social status could significantly positively predict religious behavior ($\beta = 0.062$, $p < 0.05$), and income level could significantly positively predict religious behavior ($\beta = 0.087$, $p < 0.001$). Economic uncertainty could significantly and positively predict religious belief ($\beta = 0.067$, $p < 0.05$), even after controlling for the impact of social media use. However, social media use had no significant predictive effect on religious belief ($\beta = -0.033$, $p = 0.158$). The results showed that in China, economic uncertainty can promote people's religious belief behavior, while social media use has no significant impact on religious belief.

4.3. Moderating Effects of Social Media Use and Demographic Factors

In this section, we analyzed the potential moderating effects of social media use and demographic factors through the process plug-in of SPSS. The results show that the interaction term between social media use and economic uncertainty had no significant predictive effect on religious belief ($\Delta R^2 = 0.0001$, $p = 0.61$); social media use did not affect the relationship between economic uncertainty and religious belief. Regarding demographics, gender, age, and social class had no significant moderating effects on economic uncertainty and religious belief. In contrast, the moderating effect of education level reached a significant level ($\Delta R^2 = 0.002$, $p < 0.05$).

Through a further simple slope analysis, the results showed that economic uncertainty significantly impacted the religious beliefs of individuals with higher education ($b = 0.23$, $p < 0.001$). In comparison, it had no significant impact on the religious beliefs of individuals with lower education ($b = 0.04$, $p = 0.50$). The results showed that people with higher education and higher income were more likely to participate in religious behavior due to the influence of economic uncertainty. As shown in Figure 1, people with higher education levels were more likely to be affected by economic uncertainty and participate in religious behavior.

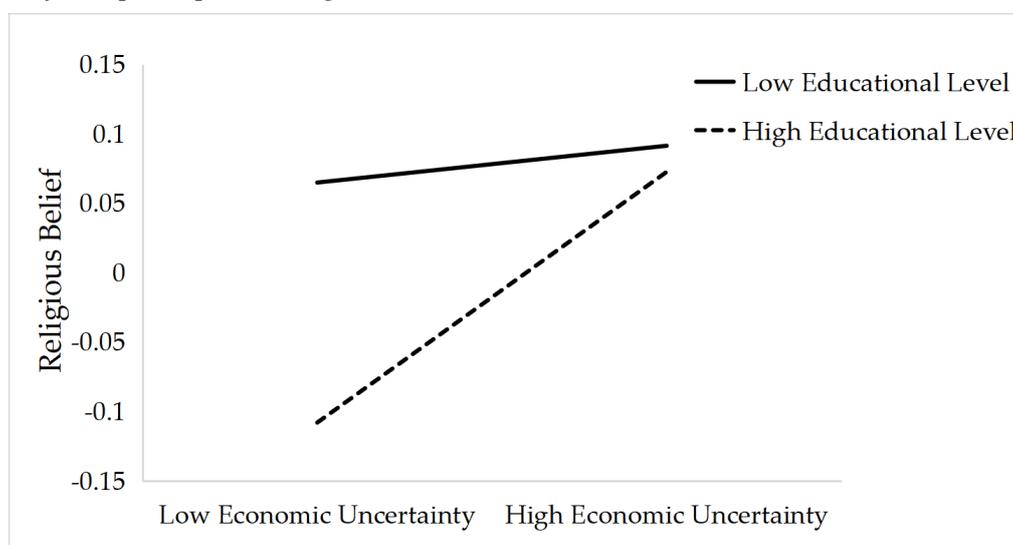


Figure 1. The moderating effects of educational level on the relationship between economic uncertainty and religious belief.

5. Discussion

In this study, we investigated the impact of economic uncertainty and social media on religious belief in the context of China through two large-scale social surveys (CGSS and WVS) and explored the potential moderating factors. According to the uncertainty hypothesis of religious belief (Van Den Bos, Van Ameijde, and Van Gorp 2006; Zuckerman 2007), economic uncertainty can lead to an individual's increased engagement in religious behavior. This is because religious behavior can alleviate the psychological stress that arises from economic uncertainty (Sosis and Handwerker 2011).

The findings of this study indicate that economic uncertainty in the Chinese context can positively impact individuals' engagement in religious activities. These results are robust and align with the majority of existing research (Barber 2011; Storm 2017; Höllinger and Muckenhuber 2019; Molteni et al. 2021). A study conducted by Ruan, Vaughan, and Han (2023) revealed that the religious beliefs of Chinese citizens increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in religious areas, where the epidemic was most severe.

In the Chinese context, religion remains an important means for individuals to deal with environmental threats and instability (Ruan, Vaughan, and Han 2023), as supported by the findings of this study. Empirical observations can also validate this logic. Ctrip, China's travel platform, has released statistics indicating that orders for temple-type scenic spots have increased by over 300% compared with the previous year during the post-epidemic period (Ctrip Blackboard 2023). This

suggests that the economic uncertainty resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic has increased individuals' engagement in religious activities.

Researchers are increasingly focusing on the influence of social media on human value systems due to its widespread usage. The current study found that people's use of social media has no significant impact on religious beliefs. Prior research has determined that social media exerts both beneficial and detrimental impacts on religious convictions. On one hand, the widespread use of social media results in the displacement of religious content by personalized content, resulting in a decrease in individuals' religious convictions (McClure 2020; Young et al. 2014). On the other hand, social media's strong capacity for interpersonal communication can bolster communication among religious adherents, amplify religious identity, and consequently elevate the level of faith within religious communities (Brubaker and Haigh 2017; Åhman and Thorén 2021).

For example, in China, religious organizations use social media to conduct digital religious practices to increase their influence (Xu and Campbell 2021). This shows that the impact of social media on belief systems is quite complex. Uecker and McClure (2023) suggested that social media may have varying psychological effects on individuals based on their religious beliefs. This suggests that social media's influence on religious belief is nonlinear and subject to multiple moderating factors.

In terms of the impact of demographic factors on religious beliefs, the findings of two large-scale questionnaire surveys revealed that only the negative impact of educational level on religious beliefs remained stable. The correlation of social status and income level with religious beliefs was significant only in the WVS data analysis. In fact, the influence of demographic factors on religious beliefs exhibits significant variations across different studies (Francis-Tan and Tian 2022). For instance, certain studies have indicated a negative association of income level and education level with religious beliefs (Han et al. 2017). Conversely, other studies have discovered a positive correlation between religious beliefs and income and education levels (Stark and Liu 2011; Wang and Uecker 2017). This study's findings provide additional evidence to substantiate the hypothesis that education decreases one's religious beliefs. According to other studies, individuals with higher levels of education tend to have a stronger belief in their ability to achieve personal goals, which, in turn, leads to a decrease in their belief in God (Schieman 2010). Additionally, as people receive more education, their ability to think critically and their scientific knowledge typically improve, resulting in a reduced reliance on religion (Van Tubergen and Sindradottir 2011; McPhetres and Zuckerman 2018).

This study explored the factors that moderate the relationship between economic uncertainty and religious belief. First, the use of social media did not exhibit a noteworthy moderating effect, indicating no substantial disparity in the augmentation of religiosity resulting from economic uncertainty, regardless of individuals' frequency of social media use. Social media use does not serve as a psychological coping mechanism to replace religion in the face of uncertainty, although social media has been shown to relieve psychological stress in the past ((Wolfers and Utz 2022). In terms of demographic factors, education level played a significant moderating role between economic uncertainty and religious belief. As the level of education increases, the correlation between economic uncertainty and religious belief becomes stronger. This is inconsistent with the uncertainty hypothesis of religious belief because more educated groups usually have higher self-efficacy, are more adaptable to uncertain situations (Rottinghaus et al. 2002), and should be less affected. This is probably connected to the peculiar cultural environment of China. Chinese religious beliefs do not hold a primary position, and they are characterized by utilitarian characteristics (Zhou and Sun 2019). Consequently, individuals frequently embrace religion to attain a particular objective. Individuals who have attained higher levels of education demonstrate increased cognitive flexibility (Hamtiaux and Houssemand 2012) and are more open to adopting new belief systems (Moore and Ovadia 2006). Consequently, individuals with a high level of education are more inclined to adopt alternative coping strategies, such as embracing religious beliefs, to attain inner tranquility in the face of economic instability. This phenomenon also accounts for the observation that, during regular times, individuals with higher levels of education tend to be less religious. However, during periods of

economic instability, individuals with higher levels of education exhibit a substantial increase in their religious practices.

Based on empirical evidence, the percentage of Chinese university students holding religious beliefs is 13%, slightly below the national average of 1/7 (Song and Fu 2012). However, after the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 50% of temple visitors were young people with higher education (Ctrip Blackboard 2023). These phenomena are consistent with the research results and speculations of this study. Although the moderating effect of education level seems relatively small, the effect obtained based on an analysis of a large sample is usually stable (Funder and Ozer 2019). The effects of demographic variables such as education level can usually accumulate over a long period (Yeager et al. 2019). This impact may eventually be quite significant (Götz, Gosling, and Rentfrow 2022).

As for income level, the results of only one of the analyses based on the two batches of data supported that income level significantly positively predicts religious belief. Previous studies have pointed out that high-income groups in China regard religion as a way to escape uncertainty (Yang 2005). However, more empirical research is needed to explore the relationship between income and religious belief in the Chinese context.

The findings of this study relied on two sets of cross-sectional data, making it challenging to establish the causality of the relationship between the variables. Experimental manipulation may be employed to examine economic uncertainty's effects on individual religious beliefs. Longitudinal tracking can be used in the future to establish the causal relationship between economic uncertainty and religious beliefs during various periods. Additionally, future studies can investigate the potential mediating mechanisms or moderating factors that influence the impact of economic uncertainty on religious beliefs. Furthermore, this study primarily focused on individuals' religious participation when depicting religious beliefs. However, the religious identity aspect of religious beliefs has yet to be analyzed. Considering that this study was conducted in the Chinese context, it is necessary to reassess its findings in various cultural settings.

6. Conclusions

This study examined the influence of economic uncertainty and social media use on the religious beliefs of individuals in China. Analysis of the CGSS 2021 and WVS 2018 data revealed a positive correlation between economic uncertainty and religious beliefs. However, no significant relationship was found between social media use and religious beliefs. Furthermore, the impact of social media on the relationship between economic uncertainty and religious beliefs was not significant. However, the education level did have a significant impact on the relationship between economic uncertainty and religious beliefs. This study reaffirmed the correlation between economic uncertainty and religious beliefs in Chinese culture, discovered additional moderating factors, and presented new evidence contradicting the association between social media and religious beliefs. This study provides additional insights into the intricate process of how religious beliefs are formed and highlights the cultural factors that influence their development.

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