

IN DEPTH

Population decline in APAC countries: why is the reproduction messaging not working?

By Shawn Lim - July 2, 2021



The advertising messaging in APAC countries facing population decline is typically based on reinforcing cultural norms

Population decline is a global issue that is a product of the rising middle class and all developed nations are facing this issue. However, the decline is much more pronounced in Asia Pacific as countries like China, Japan and Singapore are facing a population decline crisis. The Drum finds out how marketing has played a crucial part in this challenge.

China announced in May 2021 it will allow couples to have up to three children, having scrapped its decades-old one-child policy four years earlier. The move has failed to create a sustained upsurge in births after census data showed birth rates continue to decline steeply.

The census showed that around 12 million babies were born in 2020, a six million decrease from 18m in 2016, and the lowest number of births recorded since 1960.

It is the same story in Japan, where the Covid-19 pandemic is being blamed for falling birth rates. The country's pregnancy decline was extremely steep in May 2020, the month Japan declared a state of emergency to combat the virus, as pregnancies fell by 17.6%.

Overall, births in the country fell from 865,000 in 2019 to 840,000 in 2020 and are projected to decrease further to 769,000 in 2021. This is alarming because Japan's birthrate is not predicted to fall to this level until 2034.

For Singapore, the latest census shows the country's population rose by about 1.1% each year over the past decade, the slowest rate since its independence in 1965. While the number of Singaporean citizens increased to 3.52 million from 3.23m, more are staying single and those who marry are having fewer children.

The average number of children born to a resident female, who has been married, aged 40 to 49 years dropped to 1.76 in 2020, from 2.02 in 2010. The median age of the resident population, which includes citizens and permanent residents, increased to 41.5 years in 2020 from 37.4 years in 2010.

Are the messages addressing the population decline accurate?

The advertising messaging in APAC countries facing population decline is typically based on reinforcing cultural norms regarding procreation and is designed to encourage, couples of reproductive age to have one, or typically three offspring.

However, what these ads in these countries do not address are issues that young people are facing, like high pressure, housing prices, and insufficient social benefits.

For example, Singapore has seen rap videos, produced by BBH, to try to boost the birth rate in 2016 with lyrics like "Singapore's population, it needs some increasing." "I'm a patriotic husband, you're my patriotic wife, let's do our civic duty and manufacture life!"

There were also ads by early parenthood groups that were widely panned by the public. They showed sperm and eggs in situations such as rowing together in a boat or playing darts with slogans like "Even the best marksman could miss the target" and "Women are born with a finite number of eggs".

In China, a recent Father's Day ad that encouraged people to take advantage of the three-child policy which only interviewed men and addressed none of the women's concerns about having another child, was slammed. The Chinese state media has also come under fire for constantly lecturing Chinese women for being "too picky".

Kelly Leow, communications manager at gender equality group AWARE, notes that over the last few decades, women have entered the workplace in droves as more girls graduate from universities than boys in Singapore. However, she says these changes are asymmetrical as men have not moved into the



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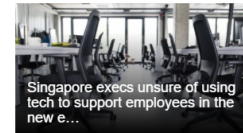
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domestic sphere at the same rate.

"This asymmetry makes child-rearing much less attractive for women. Put simply, women in Singapore are faced with substantial empirical evidence that having kids is detrimental to their productivity, financial independence and retirement adequacy. The childcare burden that women are expected to shoulder hampers their ability to work, and vice versa," she explains.

She adds: "The unadjusted gender pay gap figure of 16.3% - which takes into account occupational segregation, or the unequal distribution of women into lower-paying jobs - has not seemed to change much over the years. This tells us that the core problems of work-care allocation are persisting without much action. It's not surprising, therefore, that our fertility rate is worsening."

In addition, Darren Woolley, the founder, and global chief executive at TrinityP3 says communications strategies in APAC countries are failing because the cultural traditions have been fundamentally changed through the knowledge and availability of fertility control.

He argues the solution has to be more than just a communications message and a cash incentive as having children is a lifetime commitment as any parent will testify.

"The communications are largely emotive and to be effective the strategy must also address the pragmatic considerations of childcare, health, and education cost. Many governments are offering a cash payment, but again, pragmatically it is usually a fraction of the lifetime cost of having and raising children in the middle classes, where expectations are high and costly," he explains.

"Population control requires a multifaceted approach to address the multitude of barriers facing young couples. Issues like housing affordability, childcare for working families, affordable access to healthcare and education, and more must all be addressed as offering a cash payment or interest-free loans and an advertising campaign will not make any significant difference except perhaps for couples that have one child and perhaps are considering a second.

He adds: "Even then the numbers will be too small to make a huge difference in the face of the economic and social pressures that have arisen in the growing middle class. If you educate people, offer them the opportunity for good jobs with great salaries and then say, please sacrifice this to have more than one child or any children at all, if an ad campaign enough to achieve this?"

What needs to change?

The state, the market, and the individual all play a part in influencing fertility decisions, explains Leow, who points out that in terms of messaging, both the government and workplaces are sending continuous signals that fertility and child-rearing are mostly women's responsibility.

For example, there is a disparity in maternity and paternity leave entitlements, with women receiving four months versus the two weeks received by men.

"Many men want to play a more active role in their children's lives, but the combined effect of unequal leave policies and old-fashioned company cultures make that nearly impossible. Paternity leave take-up rates in the last few years have been low, falling from 47% in 2016 to 35% in 2018. And less than 10% of eligible fathers used shared parental leave from 2014 to 2018," she explains.

"Overall we need concerted measures to encourage men to take up equal care duties and allow women a better chance at balancing work with unpaid responsibilities. Some measures AWARE has suggested include legislating the right for all workers to request flexible work arrangements."

"We also suggest equalizing maternity and paternity leave and making them mandatory, tackling bias (whether conscious or unconscious) in recruitment, promotion, and pay by giving more and better training to managers. There should also be ceasing to index jobs by workers' last-paid salaries, and instead, indexing jobs by job scope."

One long-term messaging that governments could look at is addressing LGBTQIA+ couples. As Singapore, China and Japan have relatively conservative societies, it means LGBTQIA+ marriages are not recognized, hence harder for same-sex couples to go through IVF or adoption.

The number of LGBTQIA+ couples that have been recognized in these societies as legitimate and then moved on to wanting to create a family with children unit is relatively small to the total population and it will take a significant amount of time for this cultural transformation and acceptance to happen.

This is certainly worthy of consideration, but highly unlikely to be addressed anytime soon because of the deep cultural conservatism of these countries and the small benefit to population growth that would result.


The answer seems to be that, while marketing messaging can help to a degree, until social marketing is combined with progressive actions, the change won't happen fast enough.

This article is about: Singapore, Gender Equality, Diversity & Inclusion, Mental Health, Work & Wellbeing, Modern Marketing

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