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Young and Older Adults' Acceptance of Intergenerational Cohabitation in China

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Abstract

As population aging continues to deepen in China, traditional elderly-care arrangements face increasing pressure, while many young people experience high housing costs and social isolation. Intergenerational cohabitation, which combines shared housing with mutual support, may help address the needs of both generations. This study examines the willingness of young and older adults to accept intergenerational cohabitation and explores the factors that shape their attitudes. A questionnaire survey was conducted in 2026 among 54 valid respondents, including 37 young adults aged 18 - 30 and 17 older adults aged 55 and above. The findings indicate that both groups generally hold a positive attitude toward intergenerational cohabitation, although older adults show slightly higher acceptance than young adults (71% vs. 51%). The most frequently reported concerns are differences in daily routines and living habits, followed by privacy and personal space. The findings suggest that intergenerational cohabitation has potential as a mutual-aid elderly-care model, but its development requires clearer agreements, effective matching and mediation mechanisms, and stronger institutional protection. Given the small and non-random sample, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory rather than representative of the wider population.

Subject Areas

Sociology

Keywords

Intergenerational Cohabitation, Acceptance, Intergenerational Comparison, Mutual-Aid Elderly Care, Shared Housing

1. Introduction

China is experiencing a rapid demographic transition. According to the 2025 Na-

tional Bulletin on the Development of Aging Programs released by the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the Office of the National Working Commission on Aging [1], by the end of 2025, the population aged 60 and above nationwide reached 323.38 million, accounting for 23.0% of the total population. This proportion increased by 4.3 percentage points compared with 18.70% at the time of the Seventh National Population Census in 2020, indicating a marked acceleration in the aging process. At the same time, family size has gradually shrunk, and there are more and more empty-nest older adults. Data from the Ministry of Civil Affairs show that among China's older population, the proportion of empty-nest older adults has exceeded half, and in some rural areas this proportion is even above 70% [2].

In traditional Chinese families, the intergenerational support model of "raising children for old-age support" has long existed. Guo and Yan [3] pointed out that intergenerational support within families is both an emotional bond and an economic arrangement. The study by Sun *et al.* [4] shows that older adults who live with their children or maintain close interaction with them have significantly lower depression levels than those living alone. However, with the advancement of delayed retirement policies, this balance is being broken. Feng and Han [5] found that after retirement, older adults' participation in family caregiving rises, while their labor force participation declines. Geng and Sun [6] further pointed out that delayed retirement reduces older adults' time for caring for grandchildren. Kang [7] also noted that delayed retirement indirectly affects the intergenerational allocation of family resources.

On the other hand, urban youth face the pressure of high housing prices. According to a report released by the Beike Research Institute and covered by CNR [8], the average rent-to-income ratio in the four first-tier cities and Hangzhou is above 30%, and in Shenzhen, Beijing, and Shanghai, it exceeds 40%. Against this background, intergenerational cohabitation has begun to attract attention. In recent years, some Chinese cities have begun to experiment with this model. For example, the "Multi-generation Co-living" project launched in Binjiang District, Hangzhou [9], requires young people to pay a small management fee and offset rent by providing companionship services. Similarly, an elderly care institution in Foshan, Guangdong, allows young people to pay a discounted rent by providing at least 20 hours of volunteer services to the elderly per month [10].

Therefore, this study addresses the following questions: (1) How willing are young and older adults to accept intergenerational cohabitation? (2) What individual and relational factors are associated with their willingness? (3) What concerns do the two generations share, and where do their concerns differ?

2. Literature Review

In this study, intergenerational cohabitation refers specifically to a voluntary living arrangement in which young adults and older adults from different families share a residential space and exchange companionship or practical assistance. Liu

and Xie [11] define it as a living arrangement centered on mutual-aid exchange, emphasizing resource complementarity. Liu and Zhang [12] showed that intergenerational co-residence was once a primary form of elderly care in history, but its patterns differed significantly from contemporary motivations.

International experience suggests that intergenerational cohabitation usually requires more than an informal housing arrangement. Mature systems exist, such as Germany's "Multi-generational Mutual-Aid Housing" (Mehrgenerationenhaus) initiated in the 1990s and supported by federal programs [13], as well as Spain's "Llares" project which pairs older homeowners with young tenants [14]. These models have accumulated rich experience in legal protection and conflict mediation.

Domestic intergenerational cohabitation is still at the pilot exploration stage. These pilot projects have accumulated preliminary experience but also reflect problems such as non-standard institutions. Furthermore, "grandchild care" is common in Chinese families. Guo *et al.* [15] pointed out that this informal care arrangement greatly reduces the time cost for young parents, which is a key motivation for older adults to participate.

Existing studies have explored factors affecting cohabitation willingness. From the perspective of family relationships, daily communication and emotional closeness are considered core variables. Regarding attitudes toward supporting parents, previous literature distinguishes between filial obligation (the perceived duty to care for parents) and reciprocal support (mutual care between generations); one-way obligation can bring pressure, whereas reciprocal support promotes equal cohabitation. From the perspective of economic factors, housing costs are an important motivation for young people. In addition, Guo and Yan [16] pointed out that rising relative wages for women increase the opportunity cost of childbearing. However, limited attention has been paid to comparing unrelated young and older adults together. This study responds to these gaps.

3. Research Design and Methods

3.1. Study Design and Sampling

Data were collected in January 2026. The survey was primarily distributed online via WeChat (using Wenjuanxing), employing a snowball sampling strategy where younger respondents were encouraged to share the link with family groups so older adults could participate. To supplement the online data, a small number of offline face-to-face interviews were also conducted with older adults during community activities in Huzhou.

All participants confirmed their age eligibility before answering, and informed consent was obtained. A total of 60 questionnaires were distributed, with 57 returned and 54 deemed valid (response rate 90%). The final sample consisted of 37 young adults and 17 older adults (see **Table 1**). Due to convenience sampling and the geographically limited nature of the supplementary offline interviews, the findings are exploratory and cannot be generalized nationally.

Table 1. Basic sample characteristics (N = 54).

Demographic variable	Young people (n = 37)	Older adults (n = 17)
Gender		
Male	17 (45.95%)	8 (47.06%)
Female	20 (54.05%)	9 (52.94%)
Education		
Below a bachelor's degree	20 (54.05%)	13 (76.47%)
Bachelor's degree or above	17 (45.95%)	4 (23.53%)
Monthly personal income		
Below CNY 6000	28 (75.68%)	11 (64.71%)
CNY 6000 or above	9 (24.32%)	6 (35.29%)

3.2. Questionnaire and Data Analysis

The survey explicitly described non-kin intergenerational cohabitation to participants as a "voluntary living arrangement where unrelated young people and older adults share a home and mutually provide companionship or practical help". The questionnaire utilized a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Key measures included family closeness ("I have a close relationship and smooth communication with my older/younger family members"), filial obligation ("Caring for aging parents is the bounden duty of children"), reciprocal support ("Parents and children should support each other rather than give unilaterally"), and concerns (regarding daily habits, privacy, and relatives' opinions).

The collected data were processed and analyzed using the built-in statistical functions of the Wenjuanxing platform. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were utilized to summarize demographic characteristics and compare the differing attitudes between the two groups. To calculate the willingness percentages, the Likert response categories of "4" (agree) and "5" (strongly agree) were combined and classified as "willing". Regarding data cleaning, the online survey system was configured to require answers to all core questions, preventing missing responses. However, out of the 57 returned questionnaires, 3 were excluded because they failed the age screening questions (respondents outside the 18 - 30 or 55+ target groups), or showed obvious invalid response patterns (e.g., completing the survey in an abnormally short time or selecting the exact same option for all items). Therefore, 54 valid questionnaires were retained for the final descriptive analysis.

4. Current Situation and Problems of Intergenerational Cohabitation

4.1. Current Development of Intergenerational Cohabitation

Domestically, intergenerational cohabitation is at the pilot exploration stage. Internationally, mature systems exist, accumulating rich experience in legal protec-

tion, organizational operation, and conflict mediation.

4.2. Basic Attitudes of Young People and Older Adults toward Intergenerational Cohabitation

The survey found that about 70% of young adults and older adults, respectively, reported close relationships with their family members. More than 80% of both groups agreed that "caring for aging parents is the bounden duty of children" (filial obligation), and nearly 80% believed that parents and children should support each other (reciprocal support). Although both generations felt that supporting parents was necessary, they preferred equal coexistence rather than one-way obedience.

In terms of willingness to accept, approximately 51% of young adults and 71% of older adults reported willingness to try non-kin intergenerational cohabitation. Around 59% of young adults and 71% of older adults agreed that it can achieve a "win-win effect". Over 57% of young adults and 71% of older adults were willing to offset rent through companionship. Roughly 60% of young adults and 76% of older adults considered it worthy of promotion. Overall, older adults demonstrated moderately higher acceptance than young adults. Although not all respondents expressed an intention to participate, both groups acknowledged the potential value of this model.

4.3. Main Problems Facing Intergenerational Cohabitation

Concerns are concentrated in institutional, social, individual, and operational aspects.

At the institutional level, there is a lack of legal protection regarding cohabitation agreements. Liu and Xie [11] pointed out that improved policies and clarification of rights are urgently needed. Additionally, a lack of regulatory mechanisms may discourage participation.

At the social level, stereotypes exist, and public opinion pressure can deter participation. The study by Lu and Gu [17] found that social networks influence young and middle-aged groups' recognition of elderly-care responsibility. Although their study did not directly address housing decisions or non-kin cohabitation, it can be reasonably inferred that community views may shape individuals' attitudes toward living arrangements.

At the individual level, separate group analyses reveal distinct generational differences in concerns. Regarding living habits (e.g., daily routines and eating habits), 24 out of 37 young adults (64.9%) reported concerns, compared to 11 out of 17 older adults (64.7%). Regarding privacy and personal freedom, 21 young adults (56.8%) expressed concerns, whereas only 6 older adults (35.3%) did. Additionally, while a pooled 57% of all respondents indicated they would be influenced by relatives' and friends' opinions, a higher proportion of young adults (62.2%, n = 23) reported this pressure compared to older adults (47.1%, n = 8). This indicates that young adults are more worried about privacy and social pressure than older

adults. Research by Liang *et al.* [18] suggests that older adults often weigh their contributions and returns when considering living arrangements, which may explain why their privacy concerns are lower. However, because the two groups were unequal in size and no statistical significance tests were conducted, these descriptive differences should be interpreted cautiously.

At the operational level, matching is difficult, and there is a lack of conflict mediation mechanisms and clear exit mechanisms. Many projects currently have no clear provisions, leaving participants in a vulnerable position when problems arise.

5. Countermeasures and Suggestions for Promoting Intergenerational Cohabitation

At the policy level, legal protection should be improved. Governments should issue guiding opinions, clarify the legal effect of cohabitation agreements, and establish regulatory mechanisms. Policy incentives, such as recognizing companionship hours as volunteer service or providing property tax exemptions, are recommended.

At the social level, publicity and guidance should be strengthened. As Lu and Gu [17] found that social networks influence elderly-care concepts, it is inferred that utilizing media campaigns to reshape these social networks could help change public stereotypes about intergenerational cohabitation. Experiential activities can also reduce unfamiliarity.

At the operational level, matching mechanisms should be optimized. A digital matching platform can be used for preliminary screening, followed by human interviews. Standard agreement templates should be formulated, including a trial stay period. Conflict mediation and clear exit mechanisms must be established. This aligns with the experience of Miao and He [19] regarding smart elderly care services, suggesting that user-friendly digital tools improve accessibility when combined with proper safeguards.

At the individual level, communication training and psychological counseling should be provided. Family members should participate in cohabitation decisions to reduce unnecessary worries. Reasonable expectations regarding daily routines and dietary preferences should be set before matching.

6. Discussion

This study provides three preliminary findings. First, both groups showed a generally positive attitude toward intergenerational cohabitation, with older adults reporting slightly higher acceptance (71% vs. 51%).

Second, descriptive statistics showed that respondents generally reported positive family relationships and strong filial responsibility. However, because this study relied on descriptive data without regression analysis, we cannot conclude that these factors predict the willingness to participate.

Third, differences in daily routines and living habits were the most common

concerns, followed by privacy. These concerns indicate that the success of intergenerational cohabitation depends on detailed institutional design. Matching procedures, private space, house rules, and exit arrangements must be specified before participants move in.

7. Conclusion

This study examined young and older adults' acceptance of intergenerational cohabitation. The results revealed generally positive attitudes toward intergenerational cohabitation across both groups, while differences in daily habits and privacy concerns emerged as the most prominent challenges. Older adults reported slightly higher acceptance than young adults, while young adults expressed greater concern about privacy and differences in daily routines. The promotion of intergenerational cohabitation requires practical safeguards, including standardized agreements, careful matching, and conflict-mediation services. The small sample limits generalizability, and future research should employ larger, stratified samples to test the statistical relationships between demographic/relational factors and cohabitation willingness.

8. Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was small and recruited through convenience and snowball sampling, introducing selection bias. Second, the unequal group sizes (37 young adults vs. 17 older adults) limit direct comparison reliability. Third, the study relied on self-reported attitudes and hypothetical willingness. Fourth, the analysis was purely descriptive and did not test statistical significance or causal effects. Finally, the sampling was geographically constrained, so the results cannot capture nationwide variations. Future research should address these limitations using probability sampling and inferential statistics.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, Y.W. and Y.N.; methodology, Y.N.; investigation, Y.N.; data curation, Y.N.; formal analysis, Y.N.; writing—original draft preparation, Y.N.; writing—review and editing, Y.W.; supervision, Y.N.; project administration, Y.N.; funding acquisition, Y.N. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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