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The Impact of New Media E-Commerce Channels on Farm Household Income from an Internet Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Under the Internet context, the integrated development of new media technology and rural e-commerce provides both technical tools and practical pathways for increasing farmers' income. Focusing on new media e-commerce channels, this study uses data from the 2020 China Rural Revitalization Survey (CRRS) to empirically analyze the effect of new media e-commerce on farm household income. The results show that, first, the use of new media e-commerce significantly increases rural household income, and Internet development moderates the income-enhancing effect of new media; that is, as the Internet becomes more widely available and used, new media e-commerce can be adopted by more farm households and contribute to their income growth. Second, transaction channels based on opening stores on platforms, short-video platform formats, and pro-agricultural intermediary links are more conducive to strengthening the income-enhancing effect of new media e-commerce. Third, new media e-commerce channels with stronger interaction can promote farm household income more significantly through media interaction functions. This study therefore provides policy evidence for strengthening the promotion of new media channels in rural areas and for promoting the integrated and mutually reinforcing development of farm household income growth and new media.

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Introduction

With the deepening development of the Internet, new media technologies have become powerful tools and technical means for promoting farmers' income growth. The 2023 No. 1 Central Document emphasized the need to further implement the Digital Commerce for Agriculture initiative and the Internet Plus project for moving agricultural products from villages to cities, encourage models such as direct e-commerce procurement and customized production of agricultural products, and build live-streaming e-commerce bases for agricultural and sideline products. In the development of the Internet and rural e-commerce, new media plays an increasingly important role as a platform and channel carrier. Unlike traditional media, new media is characterized by digitization, convergence, interactivity, and Internet-based operation [1]. New media e-commerce combines the advantages and characteristics of new media technology and rural e-commerce. On the one hand, the adoption and use of new media in rural areas have continued to expand. A statistical report by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) shows that as of June 2022, the number of rural Internet users in China had reached 293 million, the Internet penetration rate in rural areas had reached 58.8%, and the overall number of short-video users had reached 962 million. On the other hand, new media empowers farm household income growth and rural development. New media presentation forms represented by Internet video, short video, and Internet live streaming have become important channels through which farmers engage in non-agricultural employment and entrepreneurship.

How do the distinctive functions of new media e-commerce promote farm household income growth? How does the popularization of rural Internet access affect the income-enhancing effect of new media e-commerce? What effects do differentiated new media channels and platforms have on farm household income? Around these questions, this study uses data from the 2020 China Rural Revitalization Survey (CRRS) to empirically examine the effect of new media e-commerce on farm household income growth. The marginal contribution of this study lies in considering, from an Internet perspective, the heterogeneous effects of differentiated new media e-commerce channels and platforms on farm household income growth, thereby providing an important reference for constructing an extensible and expandable paradigm for rural new media use.

Literature Review and Research Hypotheses

With the widespread application of mobile Internet and smart terminal devices in rural areas, online transactions have broadened sales channels for agricultural products, and the role of new media in increasing rural income has become increasingly prominent. Related research has therefore grown. Existing studies have already anticipated the distinctive value and significance of new media e-commerce for rural development. Traditional business models often fail to respond promptly to farmers' needs along the production, sales, and circulation chain, whereas new media e-commerce provides a new way to overcome the development obstacles of traditional rural business models. New media e-commerce has the economic functions of rural e-commerce in reducing circulation costs and improving information efficiency. On the one hand, e-commerce adoption can significantly promote farmers' agricultural income. With the help of rural e-commerce, farm households can not only reduce operating costs but also connect their agricultural and sideline products more effectively with larger markets [2]. On the other hand, new media e-commerce gives farm households development opportunities to use digital skills [3]. It not only strengthens farmers' ability to obtain information, expands their market pathways and financing channels, and increases employment and entrepreneurial opportunities [4], but also helps build agricultural industry value chains, reshape agricultural industry organization, and promote the simultaneous growth of farm household interests, brand benefits, and industrial value [5].

New media e-commerce represents the deep integration of rural e-commerce and new media technology, and it also has a distinctive social function in stimulating farmers' agency and creativity. Stimulating farmers' agency is an inevitable requirement of rural revitalization, as farmers enjoy the rights to participate, express themselves, and benefit from rural construction and development [6]. In the actual context of rural China, rural society has accumulated profound and deeply rooted local culture, and new media can present the production and living features as well as the cultural symbols of rural China in a visualized way [7]. At the same time, new media e-commerce can empower farm households by lowering the threshold for employment and entrepreneurship, stimulating learning potential, and strengthening self-confidence [8]. It can also reinforce their status as participating subjects through the demonstration effect of e-commerce farm households, the value co-creation effect of multi-actor collaboration, and the wealth-distribution effect of smallholder participation [9]. In summary, farmers connect production and business activities with new media e-commerce through new media communication, expand the sales of their agricultural and sideline products, and thereby demonstrate initiative and enthusiasm for self-development. This further reflects the awakening of self-development needs and the improvement of capabilities.

Accordingly, this Paper Proposes Hypothesis 1
H1: New media e-commerce can significantly increase farm household income.

New media e-commerce is an emerging model that integrates the Internet and sales modes, and the breadth and depth of Internet development will affect both the emergence and the effectiveness of new media e-commerce behavior [10]. On the one hand, the Internet enables more farm households to accept information technology tools, and effective Internet embedding can influence farm households' willingness to start e-commerce businesses and their channel choices [11]. On the other hand, because households differ in human capital and social capital, households with different income and endowment conditions also differ in their willingness and ability to adopt rural e-commerce [12]. Among them, middle- and high-income groups tend to have relatively abundant household endowments and technical conditions, enabling them to access new media tools and use them more deeply. However, the Internet is inclusive and has lower costs of use, and it has a stronger income-enhancing effect for middle- and low-income groups [13], helping to improve the imbalance and inequality in the adoption of new media e-commerce and the use of resources.

On this Basis, this Paper Proposes Hypothesis 2
H2: Internet development is a moderating variable through which new media promotes farm household income growth.

At present, new media has penetrated rural areas and released tremendous vitality and potential. New media platforms represented by WeChat, Weibo, and short-video platforms have continuously demonstrated powerful product sales functions, creating room to explore reforms in online marketing methods for agricultural products [14]. The core of new media technology is information interaction among multiple actors. Within the framework of new media technology, new marketing models are people-centered and establish deep connections with users, helping branded goods understand user preferences [15]. By using new media e-commerce and leveraging its information-interaction function, farmers can better understand consumer profiles and other information, interact with users more deeply, expand sales, and improve returns.

Accordingly, this Paper Proposes Hypothesis 3
H3: New media e-commerce channels with stronger interaction have stronger income-enhancing effects for farm households.

Research Design

Data Source

The data used in this study come from the 2020 China Rural Revitalization Survey (CRRS) conducted by the Rural Development Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. From August to September 2020, the CRRS project team carried out a large-scale nationwide survey of farm households and villages. To improve data representativeness, the project team first randomly selected 10 sample provinces according to economic development level, regional location, and agricultural development conditions. These provinces and regions were Guangdong, Zhejiang, Shandong, Anhui, Henan, Heilongjiang, Guizhou, Sichuan, Shaanxi, and Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, covering the eastern, central, western, and northeastern regions. Sample counties were then selected by systematic random sampling based on county-level per capita GDP within each province, while also seeking to cover the province or region spatially as fully as possible. The same method was used to randomly select sample villages according to the economic development level of local townships and villages. Finally, based on household rosters provided by each village committee, 12 to 14 farm households were selected from each administrative village by systematic sampling [16]. Accordingly, the CRRS survey data cover 50 counties or county-level cities and 156 townships nationwide, yielding questionnaires from 308 administrative villages, 3,833 households, and 15,554 individuals.

Variable Definitions

Explained Variable: total household income. At the data-processing level, annual household income is used as the basis. By comparing total household income with the sum of its component income items, abnormal and missing values are checked and screened to determine total rural household income. Because the values fluctuate considerably, total household income is winsorized at the upper and lower 1% tails and then log-transformed.

Explanatory Variable: new media e-commerce. The question, 'Since last year, has your household sold any products through Internet transactions?' is used as the proxy variable for new media e-commerce. If the answer is 'yes,' the variable is assigned a value of 1; otherwise, it is assigned 0. In addition, the heterogeneous effects of different new media channels and platforms are examined.

Control Variables: This study selects household-head characteristics, household characteristics, and regional characteristics as control variables. In general, the household head is an important role and decision maker within the household, and optimal household decisions help improve household income; village development levels may also constrain or promote household income growth. Among the control variables, household-head characteristics include gender, age, educational attainment, and marital status. Household characteristics include whether a household member holds a village office, the number of laborers, household Internet facilities, medical and health security, economic poverty status, and migrant-work experience. Regional characteristics include the village poverty rate and the region in which the household is located. Some variables with large numerical fluctuations are log-transformed.

Table 1: Variable Definitions and Descriptive Statistics

Variable type	Variable	Description	Mean	Std. dev.
Explained variable	Annual income	Annual household income (log)	10.67	1.17
Core explanatory variable	New media e-commerce	Whether products were traded via the Internet	0.06	0.24
Household-head characteristics	Gender	Gender of household head (female = 0, male = 1)	0.93	0.25
	Age	Age of household head (years)	57.34	12.52
	Educational attainment	Years of schooling	7.83	3.22
	Marital status	Married with spouse = 1; divorced/widowed/ unmarried = 0	0.92	0.28
Household characteristics	Village office	Whether any member serves on the village Party branch or village committee: yes = 1, no = 0	0.10	0.30
	Number of laborers	Number of working-age laborers in the household (16 <= age <= 60)	2.12	1.96
	Household Internet facilities	Per-capita smartphone ownership	0.68	0.34
	Medical and health security	Medical expenses (net of reimbursements, log)	4.76	3.77
	Poverty status	Ever registered as a targeted poverty-alleviation household: yes = 1, no = 0	0.14	0.35
	Migrant-work experience	Whether any member migrated for work last year: yes = 1, no = 0	0.67	0.47
Regional characteristics	Village poverty rate	Registered poor households / total registered households in the village	0.10	0.11
	Regional effect	East = 1; Northeast = 2; Central = 3; West = 4	2.71	1.28

Model Specification

This study first examines the effect of new media e-commerce on farm household income and estimates the model using ordinary least squares (OLS). The model is specified as follows:

lnIncome_i = alpha + beta NME_i + gamma X_i + epsilon_i (1)

where ln Income_i denotes the logarithm of total household income for rural household i; alpha is the constant term; NME_i indicates whether household i participates in new media e-commerce, taking the value 1 if the household sells products through an Internet platform and 0 otherwise; beta is the estimated coefficient for new media channels; X i is a vector of control variables including household-head characteristics, household characteristics, and regional characteristics; and epsilon_i is the random disturbance term.

To examine the moderating effect of the Internet on the income-enhancing effect of new media e-commerce, this study sets an interaction term between centered new media e-commerce and household Internet facilities:

lnIncome_i = alpha + beta NME_i + theta(NME_i x Internet_i) + gamma X_i + epsilon_i (2)

Finally, to examine the heterogeneous effects of different new media e-commerce channels and platforms on farm household income growth, Channel_i in the following equation represents different new media channels and platforms, while the remaining variables are the same as above.

lnIncome_i = alpha + beta Channel_i + gamma X_i + epsilon_i (3)

Empirical Results

Effect of New Media E-commerce on Farm Household Income Growth

Table 2 reports the estimated effect of new media e-commerce on total rural household income. Household-head characteristics, household characteristics, and regional characteristics are gradually added as three types of control variables in Columns 1-3. The estimated coefficient in Column 3 is 0.585 and passes the 1% significance test. This means that, all else being equal, compared with rural residents who do not engage in new media e-commerce, those who do so have total household income that is approximately 58.5% higher. This reflects the strong impetus of new media e-commerce for increasing farm household income. On the one hand, new media e-commerce provides a new option for realizing sales of agricultural and sideline products and helps transform business revenue from products into income sources [17]. On the other hand, new media e-commerce has also generated many emerging forms that help expand farm households' employment channels and increase total wage income, thereby verifying Hypothesis 1.

Table 2 also estimates the moderating effect of the diffusion of Internet facilities on the income-enhancing effect of new media e-commerce. Column 4 introduces the interaction term between centered new media e-commerce and household Internet facilities; its estimated coefficient is negative (-0.968) and passes the 5% significance test. To ensure the robustness of the results, Column 5 uses the number of household online stores as an alternative variable for new media e-commerce, with the approach otherwise largely the same; the coefficient of the interaction term remains significantly negative (-0.983). In summary, as mobile Internet smart terminals become more widespread and more widely used, new media e-commerce can be adopted by more farm households, helping to improve imbalances in user groups and resource allocation in the use of new media e-commerce, thereby verifying Hypothesis 2.

Among the control variables, the age of the household head is negatively related to total household income, while marital status has a significant positive effect ($P < 0.01$), reflecting the effect of household-member structure on farm household income growth. Having a household member serve on the village Party branch or village committee, having a household member migrate for work, the development of Internet infrastructure, and an increase in the number of laborers all have positive incentive effects on increasing farm household income. At the same time, it is also noteworthy that formerly poor households have relatively lower income than non-poor households. Finally, village development is internally consistent with farm household income growth. The regression coefficient of the village poverty rate is significantly negative (-0.802), indicating an internal association between the level of village economic development and rural household income growth.

Table 2: Effect of New Media E-commerce on Farm Household Income Growth

Variable	Baseline model			Moderating effect	
New media e-commerce	0.709***	0.614***	0.585***	0.712***	
	(0.079)	(0.081)	(0.080)	(0.092)	
New media e-commerce x Internet facilities				-0.968**	
				(0.385)	
Number of online stores					1.294*** (0.316)
Online stores x Internet facilities					-0.983** (0.384)
Household Internet facilities		0.578*** (0.068)	0.564*** (0.068)	0.559*** (0.064)	0.573*** (0.066)
Gender	-0.129	-0.123	-0.091	-0.093	-0.071
	(0.082)	(0.082)	(0.082)	(0.080)	(0.079)
Age	-0.018*** (0.001)	-0.003 (0.002)	-0.003* (0.002)	-0.003* (0.002)	-0.004** (0.002)
Educational attainment	0.012** (0.006)	0.010* (0.006)	0.007 (0.006)	0.007 (0.006)	0.006 (0.006)
Marital status	0.597*** (0.071)	0.483*** (0.070)	0.478*** (0.071)	0.474*** (0.070)	0.488*** (0.070)
Village office		0.344*** (0.060)	0.320*** (0.060)	0.319*** (0.060)	0.329*** (0.060)
Number of laborers		0.092*** (0.013)	0.095*** (0.013)	0.092*** (0.013)	0.093*** (0.013)
Medical and health security		-0.004 (0.005)	0.000 (0.005)	0.000 (0.005)	0.002 (0.005)
Poverty status		-0.144***	-0.037	-0.038	
Number of online stores					1.294*** (0.316)
Online stores x Internet facilities					-0.983** (0.384)
Household Internet facilities		0.578*** (0.068)	0.564*** (0.068)	0.559*** (0.064)	0.573*** (0.066)
Gender	-0.129 (0.082)	-0.123 (0.082)	-0.091 (0.082)	-0.093 (0.080)	-0.071 (0.079)
Age	-0.018*** (0.001)	-0.003 (0.002)	-0.003* (0.002)	-0.003* (0.002)	-0.004** (0.002)
Educational attainment	0.012** (0.006)	0.010* (0.006)	0.007 (0.006)	0.007 (0.006)	0.006 (0.006)

Marital status	0.597*** (0.071)	0.483*** (0.070)	0.478*** (0.071)	0.474*** (0.070)	0.488*** (0.070)
Village office		0.344*** (0.060)	0.320*** (0.060)	0.329*** (0.060)	0.329*** (0.060)
Number of laborers		0.092*** (0.013)	0.095*** (0.013)	0.092*** (0.013)	0.093*** (0.013)
Medical and health security		-0.004 (0.005)	0.000 (0.005)	0.000 (0.005)	0.002 (0.005)
Poverty status		-0.144*** (0.048)	-0.037 (0.052)	-0.038 (0.052)	-0.043 (0.052)
Migrant-work experience		0.114*** (0.039)	0.112*** (0.039)	0.108*** (0.039)	0.118*** (0.039)
Village poverty rate			-0.802*** (0.187)	-0.787*** (0.187)	-0.817*** (0.186)
Constant	11.130*** (0.133)	9.731*** (0.172)	9.927*** (0.173)	9.947*** (0.172)	9.942*** (0.172)
R-squared	0.086	0.143	0.156	0.160	0.149
Observations	3,665	3,591	3,591	3,591	3,690

Note: Robust standard errors are shown in parentheses. ***, **, and * indicate significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively. To save space, the results for control variables and related estimates are omitted below.

Effects of New Media E-Commerce Channels on Farm Household Income Growth

(1) Heterogeneity of Internet transaction channels. As a development form that integrates new media technology and rural e-commerce, new media e-commerce has stronger information-interaction and communication characteristics. This study first examines how differences in Internet transaction channels within new media affect farm household income growth. In the variable setting, Internet transaction links are mainly divided into sales through platform stores, social channels, and intermediary purchases. Columns (1)-(3) of Table 3 report the regression results for the three variables. All three-transaction links have significant positive effects on farm household income growth and are significant at the 1% level. However, sales through platform stores show a stronger income-enhancing effect (0.990), whereas the income-enhancing effect of social channels is relatively weaker (0.510). This is because sales through platform stores not only ensure the orderly development of e-commerce operations through formal institutions, but also strengthen two-way interaction between audiences and information communicators through the wider dissemination of Internet information. This helps operators attract audiences in diversified ways and convert them into actual buyers of products. By comparison, although social channels can reduce operating costs, they are limited by the scope of audience influence and find it more difficult to realize the information-dissemination and knowledge-diffusion functions of new media technology.

(2) Heterogeneity of new media e-commerce platforms. Platforms are carriers of new media communication and marketing. This study next examines the heterogeneous effects of differences among new media e-commerce platforms on farm household income growth. The questionnaire mainly includes four platform forms: large e-commerce platforms, local e-commerce platforms, short-video platforms, and social platforms. As shown in Columns (4)-(7), all results show significant positive effects on farm household income growth and pass the 1% significance test. In terms of income-enhancing effects, the regression coefficient of local e-commerce platforms reaches 1.284, reflecting the pro-agricultural character of local e-commerce in increasing the income of regional farm households. Local e-commerce platforms can drive sales of agricultural and sideline products and increase farm household income within specific regions. At the same time, short-video platforms also show a strong income-enhancing effect (1.044). Short-video marketing methods, including live-streaming sales, can create scenario-based live streams to reproduce contexts and gather traffic within a relatively short time [14]. Large e-commerce platforms have broad influence and large social audiences; they can expand the sales range of agricultural and sideline products and drive and absorb more employment, and therefore also show strong income-enhancing effects. Although social platforms are close to farm households' daily lives, they are mainly limited to farm household groups that master specific social expression strategies and new media social methods. This also restricts their scope of influence in new media communication and marketing, so their overall effect on farm household income growth is limited.

Table 3: Effects of Different New Media Channels and Platforms on Farm Household Income Growth

	Internet transaction channel				First Internet sales platform		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Selling through platform stores	0.990*** (0.195)						
Social channels		0.510*** (0.087)					
Intermediary purchase			0.705** (0.323)				
Large e-commerce platform				0.763*** (0.250)			
Local e-commerce platform					1.284*** (0.322)		
Short-video platform						1.044*** (0.357)	
Social platform							0.480*** (0.093)
Control variables	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	3,685	3,685	3,685	3,685	3,685	3,685	3,685
R-squared	0.149	0.149	0.141	0.144	0.142	0.142	0.147

(3) Heterogeneity of intermediary links in new media e-commerce. Intermediary links serve as bridges and ties connecting final new media consumer groups and farm households. Different intermediary links also reflect the degree to which farm households obtain benefits and participate in income distribution in this process. In the past, farm households often relied on purchases by agents. This method once played an important role in external sales from rural areas, but its drawbacks are also particularly obvious. Weak interaction functions erode farmers' agency, and the related profit space of farm households is squeezed in the process. On the one hand, new media becomes a medium for realizing product sales. E-commerce enterprises possess rich media resources, and their emergence breaks the long-standing bottleneck of single sales channels faced by rural areas. With mutual support and collaboration among multiple sales channels, rural product forms are more likely to attract consumers' attention. On the other hand, new media strengthens the media-interaction function of product forms. Products that are available online in real time can establish relationships and interact with consumers in real time, making it easier to understand consumer interests while also helping optimize products and improve service quality.

The results in Table 4 show differences in this income-enhancing effect. Among them, intermediary links involving e-commerce enterprises, cooperatives, and supply and marketing cooperatives have significant positive effects on farm household income growth and are significant at least at the 10% level, whereas the intermediary-link variables for village-level e-commerce stations and agents do not pass significance tests. E-commerce enterprises reflect the participation of social capital in rural e-commerce links. They have significant scale advantages and occupy a central position in media communication, enabling them to gather larger audiences in a relatively short time. Cooperatives have a natural advantage in being close to farm households and can also make use of the semi-acquaintance society characteristic of rural areas. In terms of income distribution, cooperatives can reflect the shared will of farm household groups within villages [18]. Supply and marketing cooperatives can integrate village resources for special agricultural products and are generally conducive to increasing farm household income. Village-level e-commerce stations do not show a significant income-enhancing effect for farm households. This may be because, limited by their development level, their ability to connect media communication and drive farmer participation is weak, making it difficult to translate their presence into a real force for income growth. Purchasing agents show a negative effect (-0.007), indicating that they may even have a negative impact on farm household income growth. This may be because the relative squeezing of farm households' returns restricts income growth.

In summary, differentiated new media channels and platforms have heterogeneous effects on farm household income growth, but diversified channels, platforms, and functions of new media e-commerce all contribute to income growth. Among them, new media platforms with stronger interaction promote farm household income growth more significantly through media-interaction functions, thereby verifying Hypothesis 3.

Table 4: Effects of Different New Media Intermediary Links on Farm Household Income Growth

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
E-commerce enterprises	0.403* (0.232)				
Cooperatives		0.364** (0.164)			
Supply and marketing cooperatives			0.322* (0.168)		
Village-level e-commerce stations				0.337 (0.377)	
Purchasing agents					-0.007 (0.037)
Control variables	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	3,685	3,685	3,685	3,685	3,685
R-squared	0.142	0.141	0.141	0.140	0.140

Conclusions and Discussion

In the process of realizing rural revitalization, the issue of increasing farm household income has attracted considerable attention. The essence of new media is mediation. Media situation theory, proposed by Meyrowitz, a representative figure of the media ecology school, holds that electronic communication media profoundly influence social change because they can effectively reorganize social environments and weaken the connections between natural environments and material places. New media e-commerce is an organic combination of new media technological tools and rural e-commerce, and it has gradually become a powerful tool and technical means for promoting farmers' income growth.

Using data from the 2020 China Rural Revitalization Survey (CRRS), this study empirically analyzes the effect of new media e-commerce on farmers' income growth. The results show that, first, the use of new media e-commerce can significantly increase rural household income, and Internet development is a moderating variable through which new media promotes farmers' income growth; that is, with the popularization and use of the Internet, new media e-commerce can be adopted by more farmers and help increase their income. Second, transaction channels involving opening stores on platforms, short-video platform forms, and pro-agricultural intermediary links are more conducive to strengthening the income-enhancing effect of new media e-commerce. Third, differentiated new media channels and platforms have heterogeneous effects on farmers' income growth, and new media e-commerce with strong interaction can promote farmers' income more significantly through media-interaction functions.

What is the mechanism through which new media e-commerce affects farmers' income growth? Does this mechanism differ across different groups of farm households? This study has not yet addressed these questions. How to promote the integration of new media in rural areas with farmers' development needs and the realities of rural development is an important issue for top-level design and policy design, and it also provides opportunities for further research.

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