

## The Impact of College Students' Returning Entrepreneurship in Rural on the Multidimensional Relative Poverty of Farming Households: The Mediating Effects of Digitalisation Capability

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### Abstract

The paper aims to develop a framework regarding the impact of college students' returning entrepreneurship in rural on the multidimensional relative poverty of farming households with the mediating effects of digitalisation capability, and seeks to explain the relationship between them. An extensive review helps to develop the possible relationship between the variables. The proposed framework of this study is useful for the future researchers to expand more studies on multidimensional relative poverty of farming households in China. In order to fill the gap and inconsistencies found in the past studies, it is assumed that the role of college students' returning entrepreneurship in rural is important to alleviate the multidimensional relative poverty of farming households through organisational digitalisation capability.

**Keywords:** college students' returning entrepreneurship in rural, multidimensional relative poverty of farming households, digitalisation capability

### 1.0 Introduction

China historically won the battle against poverty in 2020, realizing the important goals of the first hundred years of struggle, building a moderately prosperous society in all aspects and eliminating all poor people. The goal of eliminating all poor people refers to the elimination of absolute poverty above the international absolute poverty line (Han & Xin, 2020). This is an important milestone in China's anti-poverty endeavour. Although China has successfully solved the problem of absolute poverty, it does not mean that poverty no longer exists in China (Zhou et al., 2019). After 2020, China has entered the "post-poverty alleviation era", and poverty management has shifted to solving the problem of relative poverty, which is mainly manifested by the lack of basic viability (Wang & Sun, 2021). Relative poverty is subjective, long-term and multidimensional, and requires a shift from the single dimension of income to the multiple dimensions of economic, social development and ecological environment (Luo, 2020; Wang & Feng, 2020; Huang & Ni, 2022). Compared with absolute poverty governance, relative poverty governance is more difficult, the governance cycle is longer, and the means of governance is more complex, requiring more precise and systematic comprehensive governance (Zhou & Shen, 2021). Stated differently, China's poverty governance in the new development stage faces a significant challenge in addressing the multidimensional relative poverty (MRP) issue. Rural inhabitants in China are more susceptible to relative poverty and poverty vulnerability than urban residents are, as rural areas are the disadvantaged areas in the urban-rural dual system. As a result, rural relative poverty and poverty vulnerability should be given more attention than urban poverty. (Qi & Zhang, 2023).

As China enters the era of digital economy, the domestic digital economy is realizing a higher-quality development. According to the data of China Digital Economy Development Research

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Report (2023), the scale of China's digital economy reached 50.2 trillion yuan in 2022, with a year-on-year nominal growth of 10.3%, which has been significantly higher than the nominal growth rate of GDP in the same period for 11 consecutive years, and accounted for a share of GDP of 41.5% (China Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, 2023). However, the goal of sharing the digital dividend equally has not been realized simultaneously (World Bank, 2016), and farmers do not benefit from the spillover of the digital dividend, and even face income divergence brought by the digital economy (Li & Ke, 2021). In this regard, the No. 1 Document of the Chinese Central Government in 2018 proposed the "implementation of the digital village strategy", and scholars believe that the digital village strategy can solve the "last kilometre" of the construction of digital China (Wang et al., 2021). (Wang et al., 2021; Huang & Ni, 2022). As an important carrier to promote the construction of digital countryside, returning entrepreneurial firms are an important factor to drive the employment of farmers and broaden their sources of income, so as to solve the problem of MRP (Wang & Xiong, 2018). Therefore, on the way to build a long-term mechanism for managing relative poverty, encouraging returning entrepreneurship in rural (REIR) and changing from "blood transfusion" to "blood creation" is one of the main ways to alleviate the MRP of poor groups in rural areas (Chen, 2018; Wang & Liu, 2020).

When it comes to REIR, the subject of "people" is indispensable. The college students' returning entrepreneurship in rural (CSREIR) has led to the convergence of all kinds of factors of production, especially data factors, to the countryside, which has injected a strong kinetic energy for the revitalization of the countryside (Zhang et al., 2024). Over the years, the Chinese government has been committed to actively encouraging colleges and universities as well as society to emphasize the improvement of innovation and entrepreneurship ability of college students, and encouraging and actively guiding rural college students to establish the ideal belief of returning to their hometowns to start their own businesses (Fei, 2024). Specific research and analysis of China's current social development reveals that China's current economic development is characterized by the common phenomenon that urban college students are difficult to find job, have a narrow employment surface, and are under great pressure of employment (shows in Table. 1), and that fewer people are involved in the development of rural industries, which affects the layout and development of various industries in China at the present time (Bie, 2023). Analysing from the perspective of sustainable development of China's economy, CSREIR not only helps to alleviate the current employment difficulties of college graduates, but also fully promotes the flow and coordination of human resources between urban and rural areas, and facilitates the structural adjustment of the rural industry and the construction of the economy (Li et al., 2024).

Table. 1: Number of New Urban Jobs Nationwide and Number of College Graduates Nationwide, 2019-2023.

Year	Number of New Urban Jobs Nationwide (Million Person)	Number of College Graduates Nationwide (Million Person)
2019	1352	834
2020	1186	874
2021	1269	909
2022	1206	1076
2023	1244	1158

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2023; Ministry of Education of China, 2023

As a very vibrant part of employment in rural areas, REIR is an important way to release the vitality of rural economic development and promote the effective connection between the MRP

alleviation and rural revitalization (Liao et al., 2023). Relevant data from the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (CMARA) show that in 2020, the number of various types of REIR will exceed 10.1 million, leading to the creation of more than 10 million new jobs in rural areas. At the same time, according to the data of County Entrepreneurship Report released by 58Town in cooperation with County Governance Research Center and Social and Financial Research Center of Tsinghua University's School of Social Sciences, the number of CSREIR accounted for 1/6 of the total number of various types of REIR that year, as 1.683 million (58Town in cooperation with County Governance Research Center and Social and Financial Research Center of Tsinghua University's School of Social Sciences, 2020). Meanwhile, in the era of digital economy, digital technology, as a powerful driving force and significant symbol of the new round of industrial change and technological revolution, brings great opportunities for REIR, especially for the CSREIR. The China E-Commerce Report (2020) shows that the national rural e-tailing sales in 2020 will reach 1.79 trillion yuan, accounting for 15.3% of the total national e-tailing sales, of which, the rural physical e-tailing sales will reach 1.63 trillion yuan, accounting for 90.93% of the national rural e-tailing sales. The report further shows that 55% of the daily operations of REIR firms use digital information technology, such as e-commerce, live broadcasting, and no-touch delivery, and that digitalisation is becoming the new normal for REIR (China Ministry of Commerce, 2021).

The study of REIR for alleviating MRP of farm households has received wide attention from all walks of life. Most scholars believe that REIR has a positive effect on the poverty of farm households. On the one hand, through independent entrepreneurial activities to broaden the income channels of farm households, to create conditions for the sustainability of farm household income, with income-generating effects (Zhang et al., 2015). On the other hand, REIR will drive talent, capital and other factors to return to the countryside, enhance the level of human resources in the region, and stimulate the endogenous motivation of poor groups to escape poverty. REIR will bring back the labour force to form a demographic dividend in rural areas, which will drive the employment and income growth of neighbouring farm households through spillover effects (Wang et al., 2020). However, some studies have also shown that REIR does not necessarily alleviate the relative poverty level in rural areas. Since entrepreneurship is a high-risk choice activity, self-employment activities to alleviate poverty possess a certain threshold (Peng & Liu, 2016). At the same time, poor access to information and communication channels for REIR in poor areas can hinder the improvement of farmers' ability to lift themselves out of poverty and deepen their relative deprivation (Fan et al., 2019). He (2020) argues that due to the relative saturation of rural entrepreneurial markets, REIR may face greater entrepreneurial risks, which will increase the probability that farmers will fall into poverty.

## 1.1 Problem Statement

Alleviating MRP of farm households is a major global issue, especially in developing countries. Various countries around the globe are conducting in-depth research on this issue and trying out feasible programs. The G20 High-Level Principles for Digital Inclusive Finance, announced at the Hangzhou G20 Summit in September 2016, advocate the use of digital technology to promote inclusive finance, improve the availability of formal credit to farmers by alleviating the information asymmetry between farmers and financial institutions, and increase the probability of farmers engaging in non-farm employment, such as in business and industry, thus promoting income growth and alleviating multidimensional relative poverty among farmers (Xiong & Huang, 2022). The Chinese government has introduced a series of

precise poverty alleviation guidelines and policies after 2020, and continues to promote the governance of MRP of farm households (Wu et al., 2022).

The existing research landscape on rural entrepreneurship and rural development underscores a critical gap in understanding the MRP alleviation within farm households. While significant attention has been devoted to exploring the impact of entrepreneurship on poverty, particularly in terms of income generation, scant literature delves into the nuanced relationship between entrepreneurship and the MRP. Moreover, amidst the growing discourse on rural revitalization, the pivotal role of CSREIR remains underexplored, despite its emerging significance in shaping the digital countryside. Huang (2024) advocates for the integration of CSREIR into China's rural revitalization strategy, emphasizing its potential to drive economic development in rural areas. However, the lack of focused research on the specific contributions of CSREIR, particularly regarding its digitalisation capabilities, to mitigate the MRP of farm households presents a pressing knowledge gap. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by empirically analysing the impact of CSREIR on the MRP of farm households, with a particular focus on the mediating role of digitalisation capability. By doing so, it seeks to contribute both theoretically and practically to the understanding and promotion of MRP reduction strategies tailored to the unique context of rural China. The research framework of this paper is shown below.

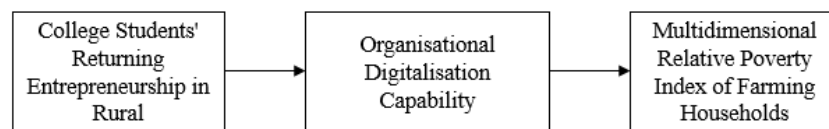


Fig. 1: Research Framework.

## 2.0 Literature Review

### 2.1 MRP of Farming Households

Poverty is a topic of common concern to human society, and its eradication is a great ideal and an important goal for all countries in the world to realize harmonious and sustainable development. Throughout the research on poverty by scholars at domestic and abroad, it has gone through the evolution process from absolute poverty to relative poverty to multidimensional poverty and MRP. In the 1970s, the British economist Townsend firstly defined the concept of relative poverty based on the perspective of "relative deprivation", and put forward the living pattern index based on the measurement of relative poverty (Townsend, 1979). Sen (1999) put forward the Feasible Ability Theory based on the Theory of Welfare Economics, and then expanded the research on poverty from a single economic perspective to a multidimensional perspective that combines the economic and the non-economic, and constructs a MRP index that includes the three dimensions of health, education, and life, and 10 indicators below these three dimensions. Zhou & Shen (2021) pointed out that relative poverty is a subjective feeling, and its reference frame is generally the group of similar household registration, which is a universal, dynamic, and long-term type of poverty. Meanwhile, Zhou & Shen (2021) further pointed out that the relatively low income of MRP groups is the symptom, and the relative lack of self-development ability is the kernel. Wang & Feng (2020) constructed a MRP evaluation system adapted to China's rural areas from a dual perspective based on the actual status quo of rural areas in China, and put forward that firstly, the relative insufficiency of economic well-being measured in terms of income, secondly reflects the relative inadequacy of public services in non-monetary aspects. On this basis, many scholars have measured and analysed MRP in rural areas by using the "double critical value

method" (A-F method) proposed by Alkire and Foster, which selects indicators from the dimensions of income, education, health care, and social security (Wang & Wang, 2021; Qi & Yang, 2022). Some studies have also pointed out that attention should be paid to human development capacity and social integration (Wang & Liu, 2020; Pei & Jiao, 2021). More recent studies have begun to add rural ecological influences to the indicator system (Wang & Feng, 2020; Wang & Sun, 2021; Huang & Ni, 2022). This paper will synthesize the results of previous studies, focusing on the economic dimension, the social development dimension and the ecological environment dimension of farmers, and take these three dimensional indicators as the dependent variable of this paper's study, the MRP of farmers.

## **2.2 CSREIR**

This study defines the scope of the study, according to the preferential policy requirements for CSREIR of CMARA. That is to say, the independent variable, CSREIR, in this study refers to rural household college students or college graduates who return to their hometowns to start their own businesses within two years of graduation and complete formal business registration.

## **2.3 Digitalisation Capability**

In the current ever-changing environment, companies are forced to adopt digital technologies that bring profound and permanent changes to their operational procedures and workflows (Lyytinen & Rose, 2003). This transformation affects product and service transformation and competitiveness (Porter & Heppelmann, 2014; Yoo et al., 2012). Therefore, some scholars have proposed that a company's digitalisation competence is an integrated organisational capability of a company to use new generation digital technologies for rapid problem solving, value creation, management efficiency, and maintaining competitive advantage (Khin & Ho, 2019). Other scholars study digitalisation capability from the perspective of resource value release, which they view as the ability to identify and utilize various types of complementary resources (Wu et al., 2021; Verhoef et al., 2021). This perspective definition highlights the integration and allocation of digitalisation capabilities to various resource elements within the digital ecology. Another group of scholars, considering the increasing volatility, complexity, and uncertainty of the environment in the digital context, considers digitalisation capability as a higher-order capability with the characteristics of dynamic capability in the face of rapid response to environmental changes (Li et al., 2022; Annarelli et al., 2021). This perspective emphasizes that digitalisation capabilities are dynamic adaptive capabilities constructed by firms in response to dynamic environmental changes. In sum, scholars generally agree that possessing digitalisation capabilities becomes an important prerequisite for firms to ensure their growth and maintain a sustainable competitive advantage. In this paper, the ability to apply digital technology and the ability to access external information will be used as the two research dimensions of digitalisation capabilities.

## **2.4 The Impact of CSREIR on the MRP of Farming Households**

CSREIR will have an impact on the alleviation of MRP of farming households by contributing to the following three dimensions, the economic dimension, the social development dimension and the ecological environment dimension. Specifically, first of all, CSREIR can also spread their advanced management concepts and modernisation capabilities, such as digitalisation capabilities, to the countryside, to help farmers broaden the sustainable income channels, and the direct effect of driving the farmers out of poverty. At the same time, it enhances the employment absorption capacity of rural areas, indirectly drives the neighbouring farmers out

of poverty, and solves the problem of sustainable livelihood of farmers (Bruton et al., 2013). Therefore, it has a significant effect on the alleviation of relative poverty in the economic dimension of farming households. Second, the process of CSREIR stimulates the self-development ability of farm households, especially in the era of the digital economy, for the cultivation and application of digitalisation ability, thus enhancing the efficiency of information acquisition and transforming the negative market participation attitude of farm households (Guo & Zhou, 2016). At the same time, it helps farmers have the ability to improve their own and their children's education investment, all of which have a significant effect on the alleviation of relative poverty in the social development dimension of farmers. Finally, the influence of the advanced concepts of cities and colleges on CSREIR makes it easier for them to form the concept of green development, which promotes their pursuit of a better living environment and their responsibility for the protection of the ecological environment in rural areas, and helps rural areas realize the goal of sustainable development (Wu et al., 2022), thus playing a significant role in alleviating the relative poverty of rural households in the ecological environment dimension.

## **2.5 The Impact of Digitalisation Capability on MRP of Farm Households**

Research on digitisation in rural areas has found that the level of digitalisation capability of farmers depends on whether they have good access to and obtain information from the outside world (Yu & Li, 2021). However, the fact is that the "information gap" between urban and rural areas still exists (Wang & Ji, 2023). The most direct way to help farmers cross the "information gap" or share the "digital dividend" is to use modern digital information technology, such as the Internet, data collection and analysis software. However, as the group of CSREIR becomes more active, more and more firms are operating through digital tools. It not only has a positive impact on their own income growth, but may also stimulates entrepreneurial demand from neighbouring farmers through the cohort effect (Yi, 2021).

In addition, digitalisation capability affects MRP in the following ways. First, CSREIR with high-level of digitalisation capacity have easier access to extensive market information and inclusive financial services, breaking through the threshold of entrepreneurial capital, and helping to alleviate the economic dimension of relative poverty of farm households. Second, in the process of improving the organisational digitalisation capability, it can indirectly improve the quality of the digital countryside, and also meet the diversified needs of farm households for a better life, which helps alleviate the social development dimension relative poverty of farm households. Third, higher organisational digitalisation capacity may change the traditional mindset to adopt green production technology and create a green and sustainable living environment, which will help alleviate the ecological environment dimension of relative poverty. In other words, CSREIR are increasingly becoming accelerators and catalysts for fostering the digitalisation capabilities of residents in rural areas, significantly improving the digitalisation capabilities of rural enterprises, and alleviating the degree of MRP of rural households at source.

## **3.0 Conclusion**

In this paper, we attempt to propose a framework to explain the impact of CSREIR on the MRP of farm households, further testing the mediating role of the digitalisation capability of organizations. After that, the authors will further select two villages in the east as well as in the west, and use the entrepreneurs in the database of local entrepreneurs who have enjoyed the preferential policies for CSREIR in that year published by the CMARA as the study population,

to validate the research hypotheses with data through the research method of quantitative analysis, and to give the results.

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