

The Impact of the Digital Economy on the Income Gap Between Urban and Rural Residents - An Empirical Analysis Based on Panel Data from Heilongjiang Province

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Abstract: This paper examines the impact of the digital economy on the income gap between urban and rural residents using relevant data from cities and regions in Heilongjiang Province from 2013 to 2022. The research reveals that the digital economy can narrow the income gap between urban and rural residents, with the greatest reduction effect observed in second-tier cities in Heilongjiang Province, followed by third-tier cities, and the smallest effect in fourth-tier cities. Furthermore, for cities of different population sizes, the role of the digital economy in narrowing the income gap between urban and rural residents exhibits variability, with a greater impact on megacities and large cities and a slightly smaller impact on medium-sized and small cities. Based on the conclusions and the actual situation of rural development, relevant policy recommendations are proposed to accelerate farmer income growth, facilitate smooth economic circulation between urban and rural areas, narrow the income gap between urban and rural residents, and achieve common prosperity for all.

Keywords: Digital Economy; Income Gap Between Urban and Rural Residents; Common Prosperity

1. Introduction

"The way to govern a country begins with enriching its people." President Xi Jinping has emphasized that common prosperity for all is an overall concept that applies to the entire society, rather than being divided into separate indicators for urban and rural areas, or for the eastern, central, and western regions. The income gap between urban and rural residents, as well as the need to accelerate integrated

urban-rural development, have always been prominent issues in China's development process and pose a significant challenge on the path towards common prosperity (Cheng Xiejun et al., 2024) [1]. In "The Whole Party Must Comprehensively Implement the New Development Concept in a Complete, Accurate, and Thorough Manner," President Xi Jinping pointed out that in entering a new stage of development, to comprehensively implement the new development concept in a complete, accurate, and thorough manner, we must consciously and actively address issues such as the urban-rural gap and income disparity. The 2024 Government Work Report mentioned that in the past year, per capita disposable income of residents grew by 6.1%, and the income gap between urban and rural residents continued to narrow. However, while showing positive changes, the foundation for the sustained recovery and improvement of China's economy is still not solid. Problems in economic development, public services, primary distribution, redistribution, and educational resources make the issue of the income gap between urban and rural residents complex and multifaceted. With the deepening advancement of the global technological revolution and industrial transformation, digital technologies represented by the internet, big data, and artificial intelligence are comprehensively penetrating various sectors of the economy and society. The digital economy has become a new frontier for global competition among countries and a typical representative of the new round of industrial revolution. In this process, the issue of the urban-rural income gap, a long-standing social problem, has also been profoundly influenced by the digital economy. On one hand, the rapid development of the digital economy has provided more employment opportunities and income sources for urban residents, promoting

the prosperity of urban economies, while rural areas, due to limitations in infrastructure and educational resources, have difficulty benefiting from the dividends brought by the digital economy, leading to a further widening of the urban-rural income gap. On the other hand, the digital economy can better integrate rural areas into the wave of digital economic development by strengthening digital infrastructure construction in rural areas and improving farmers' digital literacy and skills. At the same time, the development of the digital economy also provides new opportunities for industrial upgrading and transformation in rural areas, helping to increase farmers' per capita disposable income and narrow the income gap between urban and rural residents. Therefore, studying the impact of the digital economy on the urban-rural income gap not only helps us gain a deeper understanding of the shaping role of the digital economy on the socioeconomic landscape, but also provides important reference for formulating more scientific and reasonable policies and measures. This paper will conduct comprehensive analysis and research using multi-dimensional and multi-layered data and theories. By organizing relevant data and applying statistical models for empirical analysis, we will determine the impact of the digital economy on the income gap between urban and rural residents, and provide academic support for this field based on the research findings. Meanwhile, targeting the actual situation of rural development, we will propose relevant policy recommendations to accelerate farmers' income growth, facilitate smooth economic circulation between urban and rural areas, narrow the income gap between urban and rural residents, and achieve common prosperity for all.

2. Theoretical Hypotheses

Under the traditional economic model, resource flows between urban and rural areas are constrained by multiple factors such as geography and transportation, making it difficult for rural residents to access the same resources and services as urban residents. The digital economy, by breaking geographical barriers, enables information, technology, capital, and other elements to flow more freely and efficiently (Ji Fujun, 2023)[2], thereby narrowing the resource gap between urban and

rural areas and achieving optimal allocation of resources. At the same time, rural residents can enhance their knowledge and skill levels through online education and network training, strengthening their employment competitiveness and entrepreneurial capabilities, and upgrading their human capital (Huang Qinghua et al., 2023)[3]. This, in turn, leads to better employment opportunities and higher income levels, further reducing the income gap with urban residents.

However, differences in the mastery and application of digital technology contribute to widening the income gap between urban and rural residents. Due to advantages in education levels and information access channels, urban residents are more likely to master and apply digital technology, enabling them to better leverage the opportunities presented by the digital economy. Rural residents, on the other hand, face limitations in resources and abilities, making it difficult for them to fully benefit from the dividends of the digital economy, thereby further widening the income gap with urban residents. Additionally, in the realm of the digital economy, resources such as capital and talent tend to flow more towards urban areas, which possess more developed infrastructure, richer market demand, and a more vibrant atmosphere for innovation and entrepreneurship. In contrast, rural areas are constrained by a lack of resources, limiting the development of their digital economy and affecting the income growth of rural residents (Wang Shuailong, Sun Peilei, 2023)[4]. Furthermore, urban areas often have more complete industrial systems and innovative environments, better adapting to the development needs of the digital economy. Rural areas, which may still rely heavily on traditional agriculture, struggle to fully integrate into the tide of digital economic development, resulting in significant disparities between urban and rural residents in terms of employment opportunities and income levels. Based on the above theoretical analysis, the following hypotheses are formulated:

Hypothesis 1a: The digital economy can narrow the income gap between urban and rural residents.

Hypothesis 1b: The digital economy can widen the income gap between urban and rural residents.

Differences in digital economic development, industrial structure, economic development level, and social policies exist among cities of different tiers and population sizes, influencing the impact of the digital economy on the income gap between urban and rural residents (Jia Caiyan, Hua Yiran, 2023)[5]. First-tier, second-tier, and third-tier cities possess strong economic strength and innovation capabilities, with rapid digital economic development, complete industrial chains, and concentrations of high-end talent, all of which promote income growth for urban residents. Meanwhile, although rural areas in first-tier cities are relatively fewer, they benefit from the radiation effects of the urban economy, and farmers' incomes also show a steady growth trend. Therefore, the income gap between urban and rural residents in first-tier, second-tier, and third-tier cities is relatively smaller. However, fourth-tier and fifth-tier cities lag in digital economic development, with relatively simple industrial structures and a lack of high-end industries and talent support, constraining the development of the digital economy and its role in improving the income gap between urban and rural residents (Wang Fang, Wang Jing, 2024)[6].

Similarly, cities with larger populations not only possess vast consumer markets and labor resources but also exhibit high industrial agglomeration effects and innovative vitality, enabling the rapid development of digital industries and attracting substantial investments and innovative resources. This, in turn, drives overall economic growth in the city, increases employment opportunities, and raises residents' income levels, helping to

$$theilt = \sum_{i=1}^2 \left(\frac{lit}{It} \right) \ln \frac{lit/It}{Nit/Nt} = \left(\frac{1t}{It} \right) \ln \frac{1t/It}{N1t/Nt} + \left(\frac{2t}{It} \right) \ln \frac{2t/It}{N2t/Nt} \quad (2)$$

In Equation (2), the Theil index, denoted as 'theil', indicates that a smaller value represents a smaller income gap between urban and rural residents in Heilongjiang Province. Here, 1t, 2t, and It represent the income of urban residents, rural residents, and the total income of both at time t, respectively; similarly, the symbols represent the population of urban residents, rural residents, and the total population at time t, respectively.

Explanatory Variable. The explanatory variable is the digital economy index. Based on the availability of relevant data from various urban areas in Heilongjiang Province

narrow the income gap between urban and rural residents. In contrast, cities with smaller populations have limited market demand due to their smaller population bases, restricting the speed and scale of digital industry development. Furthermore, cities with smaller populations may also be weaker in attracting talent, capital, and technology, further constraining their potential for digital economic development. This results in less significant improvements in the income gap between urban and rural residents in cities with smaller populations. Based on the above theoretical analysis, the following hypothesis is formulated:

Hypothesis 2: The impact of the digital economy on the income gap between urban and rural residents varies across cities of different tiers and population sizes.

3. Indicators and Data

3.1 Variable Selection

Explained Variable. Reducing the income gap between urban and rural residents can not only expand effective domestic demand and achieve domestic circulation, but also promote balanced development and create a new pattern of common prosperity. Based on the research objective, the Theil index is selected as the explained variable, as it captures changes in relative disparities among different urban and rural areas, providing a more accurate reflection of the inequality in income gaps between urban and rural residents. The formula for calculating the Theil index is as follows:

and considering comprehensive domestic and international digital economy measurement index systems, this paper measures the digital economy from two aspects: internet development and digital inclusive finance. With reference to Chen Fugui et al. [7] (2022), indicators such as internet penetration rate, number of internet-related practitioners, related output, and mobile phone penetration rate are used to measure internet development. Drawing on the measurement method of Zhao Tao et al. [8] (2020), the entropy method is applied for relevant calculations to measure the level of digital economy development in

various urban areas.

Control Variables. To more comprehensively analyze the impact of the digital economy on the income gap between urban and rural residents in Heilongjiang Province, this paper selects economic development level (loggdp), urbanization (urban), economic openness (logopen), and fiscal expenditure (logfin) as control variables.

3.2 Data Sources and Processing

Based on data availability and accuracy, this paper selects panel data from Heilongjiang Province spanning from 2013 to 2022. Among these, the Digital Inclusive Finance Index is compiled by the Institute of Digital Finance at Peking University. Other relevant data are sourced from the "Heilongjiang Provincial Statistical Yearbook," the "China Statistical Yearbook," the National Bureau of Statistics, and various government work reports. Missing data is supplemented using linear interpolation.

4. Empirical Analysis

4.1 Model Construction

This paper investigates the impact of the digital economy on the income gap between urban and rural residents. An initial sample of 12 cities and 1 region in Heilongjiang Province from 2013 to 2022 is selected to construct panel data. The basic model formula is established as follows:

$$theilit = \alpha + \beta digital + \lambda Controlsit + \eta i + Yt + \Upsilon it(1)$$

Where 'theil' represents the income gap between urban and rural residents in various cities and regions of Heilongjiang, 'digital' represents the digital economy index, η and Y are introduced as fixed effect models, α is the intercept term, and Υ represents the residual error.

4.2 Benchmark Regression

To accurately analyze the differences between different regions and further improve the model's predictive ability, this paper uses a fixed model for regression. The regression results are presented in Table 1.

Columns (1) to (5) represent the estimation results without control variables, with the addition of economic development level, urbanization, economic openness, and fiscal expenditure, respectively, to ensure the

robustness of the results. The empirical results show that as relevant control variables are added, the sign of the regression coefficient does not change and is significant at the 1% level. This indicates that the digital economy can narrow the income gap between urban and rural residents in Heilongjiang Province, and the effect is significant. These empirical results reject Hypothesis 1a and support Hypothesis 1b.

Table 1. Benchmark Regression Results

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	theil	theil	theil	theil	theil
digital	-0.0223*** (0.0000)	-0.0192*** (0.0000)	-0.0109*** (0.0000)	-0.0092*** (0.0000)	-0.0074*** (0.0005)
loggdp		-0.0006 (0.2235)	-0.0022*** (0.0000)	-0.0026*** (0.0000)	-0.0023*** (0.0000)
urban			-0.1920*** (0.0000)	-0.1935*** (0.0000)	-0.1752*** (0.0000)
logopen				-0.0014*** (0.0000)	-0.0014*** (0.0000)
logfin					0.0084** (0.0468)
cons	0.0645*** (0.0000)	0.0649*** (0.0000)	0.1846*** (0.0000)	0.2008*** (0.0000)	0.1180** (0.0012)
Fixed Effects	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
N	130	130	130	130	130

Looking at the estimation results for the control variables in column (5), economic development level, urbanization, and economic openness have a positive effect on narrowing the income gap between urban and rural residents. This may be because economic growth provides more development opportunities and resources to rural areas, thereby increasing farmers' income levels. Secondly, the process of urbanization accelerates resource flow and population migration between urban and rural areas. The transfer of rural population to cities not only increases the employment rate of rural labor but also brings higher wage incomes. Furthermore, increased economic openness helps to attract foreign investment, advanced technology, and management experience, promoting the upgrading and transformation of domestic industries. This can not only enhance the competitiveness of the urban economy but also bring more development opportunities to rural areas, increasing rural residents' income levels and narrowing the income gap between urban and rural residents.

Fiscal expenditure shows a positive correlation with the income gap between urban and rural residents. Specifically, for every unit increase in fiscal expenditure, the consumption gap between urban and rural residents widens by

0.0084 units. The reason for this result may be that local governments may be more inclined to allocate fiscal expenditure to urban infrastructure construction, industrial development, and other aspects, while neglecting the development needs of rural areas. This unreasonable structure of fiscal expenditure further exacerbates the imbalance in urban and rural development, leading to an widening of the income gap between urban and rural residents.

4.3 Robustness Test

To further verify the reliability of the results, this paper conducts robustness analysis by processing the model through the following three methods.

Lagging the Dependent Variable by One Period

Due to the lag in development strategies across various cities and regions, to mitigate the variance caused by omitted variables and simultaneously verify the causal relationship between the digital economy and the income gap between urban and rural residents, the core explanatory variable, the digital economy index (digital), is lagged by one period and substituted into the regression test. The results are shown in column (1) of Table 2. According to the regression results in column (1), the regression coefficient of the lagged explanatory variable L.digital is significantly negative at the 1% level, indicating robust results.

Table 2. Robustness Test Replacement of the Dependent Variable

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	theil	rate	theil
L.theil	-0.0182*** (0.0000)		
digital		-0.0115*** (0.0000)	-0.0094*** (0.0000)
loggdp	-0.0013 (0.7904)	-0.0984*** (0.0000)	-0.0029*** (0.0000)
urban	-0.0163*** (0.0003)	-0.0927*** (0.0000)	-0.1729*** (0.0000)
logopen	-0.1428*** (0.0000)	-0.0899*** (0.0000)	-0.0010*** (0.0006)
logfin	0.0011** (0.0043)	0.3042** (0.0019)	0.0094** (0.0268)
fir			-0.0029** (0.0469)
_cons	0.0139*** (0.0002)	2.5842*** (0.0008)	0.1117** (0.0018)
Fixed Effects	YES	YES	YES
N	130	130	130

In this paper, the measurement of the

dependent variable, the income gap between urban and rural residents, is changed to the ratio of per capita disposable income between urban and rural residents to analyze the impact of this change on the research findings. The results are shown in column (2) of Table 2. The results indicate that with the growth of the digital economy index, the income gap between urban and rural residents significantly narrows, once again proving that the development of the digital economy can reduce the income disparity between urban and rural areas.

Addition of Control Variables

In September 2023, General Secretary Xi Jinping presided over a symposium on promoting the comprehensive revitalization of Northeast China in the new era, emphasizing the need to "always prioritize ensuring national food security." The primary industry contributes significantly to the economic growth of Heilongjiang Province. With the modernization of agriculture and the optimization of the agricultural industrial structure, the development of the primary industry not only drives the development of related industrial chains, such as agricultural product processing and agricultural machinery manufacturing, but also promotes rural labor employment, improves farmers' living standards, and narrows the income gap between urban and rural residents. Therefore, this paper conducts a robustness test from the perspective of the development of the primary industry. The results are shown in column (3) of Table 2. Through regression analysis, it is found that the regression coefficient is -0.0094, passing the test at a significant level of 1%, indicating that the development of the primary industry can reduce the income gap between urban and rural residents.

4.4 Heterogeneity Test

Considering the differences among various cities and regions in Heilongjiang Province in terms of the degree of digital economy development and economic development level, it suggests that there is heterogeneity between the digital economy and the income gap between urban and rural residents. Therefore, by referring to China's city tier classification and city size classification, the sample is divided into three sub-samples: second-tier cities, third-tier cities, and fourth-tier cities, as

well as four sub-samples: megacities, large cities, medium-sized cities, and small cities, for separate regression analyses. The regression results are shown in Table 3, where

(1)-(3) represent the regression results by city tier, and (4)-(7) represent the regression results by city size tier.

Table 3 Heterogeneity Test

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
	theil	theil	theil	theil	theil	theil	theil
digital	-0.0064** (0.0014)	-0.0057*** (0.0000)	-0.0174*** (0.0000)	-0.0125** (0.0202)	-0.0138*** (0.0000)	-0.0082** (0.0022)	-0.0093*** (0.0000)
loggdp	-0.0052* (0.0572)	-0.0051*** (0.0000)	-0.0006 (0.3736)	-0.0237*** (0.0000)	-0.0007 (0.3594)	-0.0034** (0.0368)	-0.0031* (0.0762)
urban	-0.0121*** (0.0000)	-0.1681** (0.0133)	-0.2157*** (0.0000)	-0.2802*** (0.0000)	-0.1336** (0.0372)	-0.1292** (0.0112)	-0.0011*** (0.0000)
logopen	-0.0003 (0.6019)	-0.0032*** (0.0000)	-0.0014*** (0.0000)	-0.0048*** (0.0002)	-0.0006** (0.0233)	-0.0031** (0.0216)	-0.0048** (0.0187)
logfin	0.0209** (0.0016)	0.0074*** (0.0000)	0.0148*** (0.0010)	0.0299** (0.0035)	0.0134** (0.0088)	0.0206** (0.0014)	0.0203 (0.4245)
cons	0.1262** (0.0028)	0.1418 (0.1062)	0.3018*** (0.0000)	0.0455 (0.1815)	-0.1625** (0.0219)	0.1512 (0.4259)	-0.1830 (0.3985)
Fixed Effects	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
N	10	40	80	30	70	20	10

Based on the results presented in columns (1)-(3) of Table 3, it can be seen that for cities of different tiers in Heilongjiang Province, the digital economy significantly reduces the income gap between urban and rural residents, but the extent of reduction varies. According to the regression coefficients, the digital economy has the greatest impact on narrowing the income gap between urban and rural residents in fourth-tier cities in Heilongjiang, while the reduction in second-tier and third-tier cities is basically the same. This may be because fourth-tier cities are relatively lagging in the development of the digital economy and have a more prominent urban-rural dual structure. With the popularization and application of the digital economy, sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and services in fourth-tier cities are beginning to integrate elements of the digital economy, breaking down information asymmetry between urban and rural residents. This enables farmers and urban residents to more fairly access resources and opportunities, improving production efficiency, increasing farmers' incomes, and thereby narrowing the consumption gap between urban and rural residents. In contrast, second-tier and third-tier cities have already achieved certain accomplishments in the development of the digital economy, and the income gap between urban and rural residents is relatively smaller. The development of the digital economy in these cities is already relatively mature, and digital technology has penetrated various

sectors. Urban and rural residents have relatively equal access to resources and opportunities. Therefore, although the digital economy also plays a role in narrowing the income gap between urban and rural residents in these cities, the effect may not be as significant as in fourth-tier cities.

According to columns (4)-(7), the digital economy has a significant effect on reducing the income gap between urban and rural residents in cities of different sizes, but the degree of reduction varies. The digital economy has a greater impact on the consumption gap between urban and rural residents in megacities and large cities, while the impact on medium-sized and small cities is slightly smaller. This may be because factors such as industrial structure, labor distribution, and market demand in cities of different population sizes also affect the effectiveness of the digital economy in reducing the income gap. Megacities and large cities usually have more diversified industrial structures, providing more high-quality employment opportunities and attracting the concentration of more high-quality labor, thereby promoting balanced growth in the incomes of urban and rural residents. On the other hand, the industrial structure of medium-sized and small cities may be relatively simple, and there may be limitations in labor quality and market demand, which to some extent restricts the role of the digital economy in narrowing the income gap between urban and rural residents. This empirical result supports Hypothesis.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on relevant data from cities and regions in Heilongjiang Province spanning from 2013 to 2022, this article conducts an in-depth study on the impact of the digital economy on the income gap between urban and rural residents through theoretical and empirical analysis. By organizing and analyzing the results, the following conclusions are drawn: The digital economy has the ability to narrow the income gap between urban and rural residents, with the greatest reduction effect observed in second-tier cities in Heilongjiang Province, followed by third-tier cities, and the smallest effect in fourth-tier cities. Additionally, for cities with different population sizes, the role of the digital economy in narrowing the urban-rural income gap exhibits variations, with a more significant impact on megacities and large cities, and a slightly smaller impact on medium-sized and small cities.

Based on the theoretical research, practical research, and the current status of China's digital economy development presented in this article, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

(1) Promote High-Quality Development of the Digital Economy. It is essential to accelerate the construction of digital infrastructure, enhance network coverage and quality, and strengthen the development of key information infrastructure such as broadband networks, mobile communication networks, the Internet of Things, cloud computing, and big data centers. Improving network bandwidth and transmission speed ensures the rapid circulation and processing of digital information, providing a solid foundation for the development of the digital economy. Furthermore, promoting the deep integration of digital technology and the real economy, leveraging digital technology to upgrade traditional industries, and cultivating new industries, new formats, and new models are crucial. By introducing advanced technologies such as big data, cloud computing, and artificial intelligence, the digital transformation of traditional industries can be facilitated, pushing them towards high-end, intelligent, and green development. This not only reduces operating costs, improves production efficiency, enhances the added value and market competitiveness of

traditional industries, but also drives the development of related industrial chains, forming a more complete industrial ecosystem. (2) Encourage Digital Technology Innovation and Actively Cultivate New Models that Benefit Farmers. By introducing advanced technologies such as the Internet of Things, big data, and artificial intelligence, precise agricultural management can be achieved, improving agricultural production efficiency and quality. Simultaneously, new models that benefit farmers can be developed, promoting the transformation and upgrading of rural industries, and fostering the integrated development of rural primary, secondary, and tertiary industries, thereby cultivating new economic growth points. For example, emerging industries such as rural tourism and rural e-commerce have rapidly developed with the support of digital technology, bringing new economic growth impetus to rural areas.

(3) Enhance the Digital Literacy of Farmers. Through the application of digital technology, farmers can more accurately grasp market demand, improve agricultural production efficiency and quality, and drive the transformation and upgrading of rural industries. The enhancement of farmers' digital literacy also contributes to the modernization of rural education, cultivating a new generation of farmers equipped with digital thinking and innovation capabilities. To enhance farmers' digital literacy, it is necessary to actively carry out digital training and educational activities, provide targeted training courses and teaching materials based on the actual needs of farmers, and strengthen cooperation with universities and research institutions to introduce advanced digital technology and talent resources, providing technical support and consulting services to farmers. Additionally, exemplary roles should be played to establish typical examples and models of digital development, stimulating farmers' enthusiasm for learning and applying digital technology.

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