

Research Article

Perceptions of Early Adult Women Toward the Narrative #MarriageIsScary on the TikTok Account @bobahagia19

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Abstract: The institution of marriage in Indonesia has long been considered a social and moral milestone. However, in the digital era, shifting gender roles and the rise of social media have significantly transformed how young women perceive marriage. This study aims to explore the perceptions of early adult women (aged 18–25) toward the #MarriageIsScary narrative on TikTok, focusing on content from the account @bobahagia19. The research employs a qualitative descriptive approach using interviews, observations, and content analysis of selected TikTok videos. The findings reveal that the #MarriageIsScary trend represents a collective expression of emotional anxiety, self-awareness, and social critique of traditional marriage norms. Participants perceived marriage as an uncertain institution, often associated with emotional instability, betrayal, and loss of autonomy. Yet, the same discourse also fostered empowerment and solidarity among women, forming what scholars describe as *digital sisterhood*. The discussion integrates sociological and media theories (Giddens, 1992; Papacharissi, 2015; Banet-Weiser, 2018) to illustrate how digital narratives both reflect and reshape cultural meanings of marriage in contemporary Indonesia. Overall, the study concludes that TikTok functions as a participatory space where young women redefine marital expectations through shared emotions, storytelling, and online community engagement.

Keywords: Interpersonal Communication; Single Mothers; Fatherlessness; Family Communication; Bekasi City.

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1. Introduction

Marriage, as a social institution, holds significant cultural and psychological meaning within Indonesian society. It is not only perceived as a union between two individuals but also as an essential social marker that defines adulthood, stability, and family integrity (Aripudin, 2024). Traditionally, marriage represents a moral and social responsibility expected from both men and women, symbolizing the fulfillment of social norms and religious values. However, in contemporary society, these perceptions are undergoing transformation, particularly among younger generations who are exposed to modern lifestyles, shifting gender roles, and pervasive digital influence.

In recent years, Indonesia has experienced a noticeable decline in marriage rates. Data from the Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS, 2024) show a consistent decrease in the number of marriages since 2018. For instance, the number of marriages recorded in 2021 reached 1,742,049, which declined to 1,705,348 in 2022, and further dropped to 1,577,255 in 2023. This statistical trend reveals that a growing number of individuals—especially among younger generations—are either delaying marriage or choosing to remain unmarried altogether.

Several sociocultural and economic factors contribute to this phenomenon, such as the pursuit of higher education, career prioritization, economic uncertainty, and evolving gender expectations (Kusumawati, 2019). For many women, the concept of marriage is no longer regarded as an inevitable life milestone but as a personal choice that demands emotional, psychological, and financial readiness (Karamat, 2016; Lestari et al., 2024).

This evolving perspective is strongly influenced by media exposure—particularly social media platforms such as TikTok, which has become one of the dominant channels for self-expression and social discourse among Indonesian youth. Within this context, the viral hashtag #MarriageIsScary emerged as a cultural narrative expressing fear, anxiety, and ambivalence toward marriage. This trend gained traction through accounts such as @bobahagia19, a TikTok creator who shared personal stories about marital challenges, infidelity, and emotional trauma, highlighting the darker realities of marriage.

The #MarriageIsScary narrative offers a critical window into understanding how young adult women perceive marriage in the digital age. Through emotionally charged storytelling, users are not only sharing individual experiences but also collectively constructing social meanings around marriage, gender, and emotional well-being. For many women in early adulthood (ages 18–25), these narratives shape how they interpret and negotiate societal expectations surrounding marriage and personal freedom.

Given this context, the present study seeks to explore how early adult women perceive the #MarriageIsScary narrative on TikTok, particularly as represented by @bobahagia19's content. This research aims to reveal how social media discourse mediates young women's understanding of marriage and the psychological, cultural, and social factors that influence their perceptions.

The study's significance lies in its contribution to understanding digital narratives and gendered perceptions within Indonesia's sociocultural context. Furthermore, it highlights how media representations can influence decision-making processes related to intimate relationships and personal development.

2. Preliminaries or Related Work or Literature Review

Studies on Marriage Perceptions and Emotional Maturity

Previous research has examined the complex relationship between emotional development and perceptions of marriage among young adults. Lybertha and Desiningrum (2016) found a positive correlation between emotional maturity and attitudes toward marriage—individuals with higher emotional maturity tended to hold more positive views of marriage, while those with lower maturity levels were more likely to express fear or skepticism. Similarly, Yohana Dian Maharani (2022) noted that anxiety levels among women entering early marriages were strongly linked to social pressure and emotional preparedness.

Khairul Fadhillah Mahfuzhatillah (2018) emphasized that the decision to delay marriage among early adult women (aged 28–40) was influenced by the desire for autonomy, career development, and prior traumatic experiences related to family or divorce. Such findings suggest that emotional readiness and social experiences significantly shape how individuals interpret the concept of marriage.

Social Media and the Construction of Marital Narratives

Media, particularly social media, has become a powerful platform for constructing and disseminating social narratives about marriage. According to Anggi Dewi et al. (2023), influencers play a central role in shaping public perceptions and lifestyle patterns through repetitive, emotionally engaging content. Muhammad Syafiq (2024) analyzed the role of influencers in the “Married is Scary” trend, revealing that these narratives often portray marriage as emotionally exhausting and restrictive, thereby influencing the younger audience to view it with apprehension.

TikTok, as a short-form video platform, enables users to engage with content that combines visual storytelling, humor, and emotion, creating a participatory digital culture. Febriantika (2024) notes that TikTok's appeal lies in its capacity to merge personal narratives with collective experiences, fostering empathy and dialogue among users. Consequently, narratives such as #MarriageIsScary resonate strongly with young women who identify with shared experiences of relational anxiety and societal pressure.

Gender, Culture, and Marriage in Contemporary Indonesia

According to Bowlby's attachment theory (1969), a mother provides the primary emotional base from which a child explores the world. Hurlock (in Thompson, 2014) describes mothers as moral models whose behavior directly shapes a child's cognitive and

emotional growth. In single-parent families, mothers frequently assume both nurturing and disciplinary roles simultaneously, balancing affection with authority.

The Emergence of #MarriageIsScary as a Digital Discourse

The #MarriageIsScary trend first gained prominence in 2021 and has since become a recurring topic in TikTok discussions about gender, relationships, and emotional health (Maulana, 2025). The trend functions as both a coping mechanism and a form of digital activism, enabling women to express fears about commitment, gender inequality, and domestic violence. Studies such as M. Habib Aji (2025) and Yuwanda Zanuba Khafsoh (2025) highlight that this narrative reflects a generational anxiety rooted in the contradictions of modern marriage—between love and control, security and autonomy, and tradition versus self-fulfillment.



Figure 1. @bobahagia19 Content.

Within this context, @bobahagia19's TikTok account serves as a microcosm of the larger discourse. Her content, featuring raw emotional storytelling and symbolic acts (such as shaving her head), embodies resistance against societal expectations and reclaims personal agency through digital storytelling. This study positions her content as a focal point for examining how early adult women perceive, interpret, and internalize these digital narratives.

3. Proposed Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design, aiming to explore the perceptions of early adult women (aged 18–25 years) regarding the #MarriageIsScary narrative disseminated on TikTok, particularly through the account @bobahagia19. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows a deep and nuanced understanding of social meaning construction, emotional response, and interpretation within digital narratives.

According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research seeks to interpret phenomena based on participants' perspectives in their natural settings. Therefore, this study emphasizes how digital discourse on marriage influences the ways young women conceptualize relationships, fear, and identity in online spaces.

Research Subject and Data Source

The subjects of this research were early adult women aged 18–25 years who actively use TikTok and are familiar with or follow the hashtag #MarriageIsScary and/or the account @bobahagia19. The selection of participants employed purposive sampling, meaning individuals were chosen deliberately based on their experience with and exposure to the phenomenon under study.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with participants who provided detailed reflections on their reactions, emotions, and understanding of marriage-related content. Additionally, content analysis was performed on selected TikTok videos from @bobahagia19, which prominently featured the #MarriageIsScary narrative. Secondary data sources included academic journals, prior studies on marriage perception and digital media, books, and online reports related to gender and media discourse.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were gathered through three main techniques:

Observation: The researcher observed TikTok content tagged with #MarriageIsScary, focusing on narrative style, visual expression, and comment section engagement.

Interviews: In-depth interviews were conducted to capture participants' interpretations of the #MarriageIsScary trend and their own beliefs about marriage. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes.

Documentation: Screenshots, captions, comments, and transcripts from the analyzed videos were collected to support qualitative interpretation. Data were collected through triangulated qualitative methods—namely, observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation—to ensure the credibility and completeness of findings (Rizky Fadilla & Wulandari, 2023).

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using **Miles and Huberman's (1994)** interactive model, which includes three stages:

Data Reduction: Selecting, simplifying, and organizing data relevant to the research objectives.

Data Display: Presenting data in narrative and thematic form for easier interpretation.

Conclusion Drawing and Verification: Interpreting findings to draw conclusions supported by consistent patterns and evidence.

The researcher identified key themes emerging from participants' narratives and TikTok content, focusing on emotional tone, symbolic imagery, and social commentary related to marriage.

Validity and Reliability (Trustworthiness)

To ensure validity, the researcher applied triangulation by cross-checking interview responses with content analysis results and relevant literature. Peer debriefing was conducted to minimize bias in interpretation. The research also maintained transparency in coding procedures and ethical confidentiality in participant data.

4. Results and Discussion

Result

Overview the #MarriageIsScary Narrative

The #MarriageIsScary trend on TikTok emerged as a digital reflection of shifting marital values among Indonesia's younger generation. The hashtag functions as a discursive and emotional space where women articulate fears and criticisms toward traditional expectations of marriage. Analysis of the @bobahagia19 account revealed recurrent themes—fear of betrayal, economic burden, emotional trauma, and the perceived loss of personal freedom.

Her content often merges personal storytelling, humor, and symbolic performance. The viral video where she shaved her head after a failed marriage became a striking metaphor for self-liberation and psychological healing. This act captured public attention and encouraged thousands of women to discuss emotional resilience, gender inequality, and personal autonomy.

Participants in this study described the content as *relatable, emotional, and liberating*, emphasizing that it allowed them to question established marital norms. According to Jenkins (2006), this kind of participatory storytelling exemplifies *convergence culture*, where media consumers become co-creators of meaning. In this context, the #MarriageIsScary narrative becomes both a personal and collective means of expressing ambivalence toward marriage.

Thematic Findings

The thematic analysis produced seven major themes that reflect early adult women's perceptions toward marriage as represented in the #MarriageIsScary narrative. These themes capture emotional, cultural, and digital dimensions of how marriage is understood and redefined in the context of social media.

1). Marriage as an Uncertain Institution

Most participants viewed marriage as a risk-laden commitment rather than a guaranteed source of happiness. Many described it as something that “can ruin a woman’s peace of mind” if undertaken without emotional or financial readiness. This perception aligns with Kusumawati (2019) and Karamat (2016), who found that young women often postpone marriage to focus on self-development and career stability.

The data mirror national statistics: according to Badan Pusat Statistik (2024), Indonesia’s marriage rate has consistently declined since 2018. Aripudin (2024) interprets this as a cultural shift from collectivist values—where family continuity is central—to individualist perspectives that prioritize personal well-being.

From a sociological standpoint, this pattern resonates with Giddens (1992), who describes modern intimacy as a *pure relationship*—sustained only by mutual satisfaction. In such relationships, trust becomes fragile, and dissolution carries less social stigma than in the past. Thus, many women now see marriage as uncertain because its traditional assurances (stability, loyalty, lifelong security) are no longer guaranteed.

2). Influence of Digital Storytelling on Emotional Perception

TikTok’s algorithm amplifies emotionally charged content, making videos about heartbreak, betrayal, and disappointment go viral quickly. Participants admitted that repeated exposure to #MarriageIsScary content intensified their fear of marriage. As one respondent said:

“Every time I see a video about cheating or financial abuse, I feel marriage is dangerous, especially for women. It’s like the same story keeps happening.”

This aligns with Cahyono (2016), who argues that repetition in digital media reinforces cognitive framing and shapes public perception. Similarly, Syafiq (2024) notes that influencers serve as emotional opinion leaders who construct and normalize fear-based narratives around marriage.

Consequently, TikTok functions not merely as entertainment but as a cultural amplifier of emotional contagion, spreading empathy and anxiety simultaneously. Through algorithmic exposure, fear becomes both personal and collective, turning the hashtag into a shared emotional identity among young women.

3). Social Expectations and Gender Roles Conflict

Despite greater education and career opportunities for Indonesian women (Lestari et al., 2024), traditional gender norms still define success in terms of marriage and motherhood. Many respondents felt **torn between social obligation and personal freedom**—a dilemma consistent with **Santrock’s (2019)** psychosocial stage of “intimacy vs. isolation,” where young adults must balance closeness and autonomy.

The persistence of patriarchal ideals exacerbates this tension. **Pahlevi (2023)** highlights that gender inequality remains embedded in domestic labor expectations, limiting women’s agency even within modern marriages. Several participants expressed concern that marriage might hinder their professional or creative ambitions.

As one participant remarked:

“I’m not against marriage. I just don’t want it to take away my sense of self.”

This ambivalence echoes **Beri & Beri (in Alexander, 2022)**, who note that modern women seek egalitarian partnerships grounded in mutual respect rather than traditional dependency.

4). Empathy, Community, and Healing

In Indonesia, Yuwanda Zanuba Khafsoh (2025) interprets this phenomenon as morally constructive—warning women to be more discerning about marriage readiness (*sadd al-dzari’ah*). Likewise, M. Habib Aji (2025) asserts that Islamic perspectives encourage emotional maturity before marriage, suggesting that fear may function as self-protection rather than rejection.

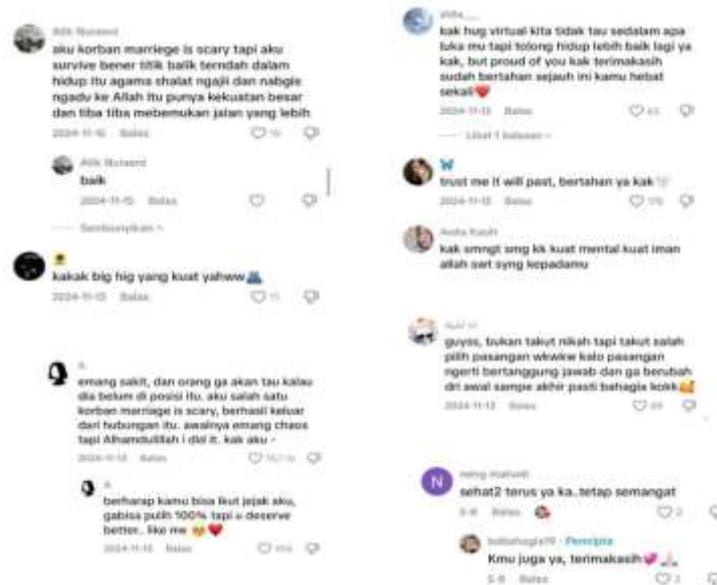


Figure 2. Some Examples of Comments on @bobahagia19's Account.

While the tone of the #MarriageIsScary discourse often seems pessimistic, it also fosters empowerment. Comment sections on @bobahagia19's videos frequently evolve into supportive discussions where women share coping strategies and emotional solidarity.

This aligns with Banet-Weiser's (2018) notion of *popular feminism*, where digital media transforms vulnerability into collective strength. Similarly, Papacharissi (2015) conceptualizes online feminist spaces as *networked affective publics*, emphasizing empathy as the glue of digital sisterhood.

Therefore, the #MarriageIsScary trend should not be viewed as an anti-marriage movement but as a critical emotional discourse—a negotiation of safety, equality, and preparation in modern relationships.

5). Cultural Negotiation and Future Aspirations

Many participants clarified that their fears do not stem from cynicism but from a desire for a redefined marital ideal—one built on partnership and mutual growth. This corresponds with Giddens (1992) and Beri & Beri (in Alexander, 2022), who describe a cultural evolution from hierarchical marriages toward negotiated intimacy.

Hurlock (2011) explains that early adulthood involves striving for stable, emotionally intimate relationships while maintaining identity. This developmental tension—between readiness and uncertainty—was strongly reflected in participants' narratives.

As Jenkins (2006) and Papacharissi (2015) argue, digital media not only reflects culture but actively co-produces it. The viral spread of #MarriageIsScary exemplifies this co-production: social media platforms transform individual fears into a collective discourse of gender consciousness.

In this way, TikTok serves as both a mirror and a maker of cultural change, amplifying women's redefinition of marriage in the digital age.

6). Mediated Authenticity and the Performance of Fear

One of the most striking features of the #MarriageIsScary discourse is its performance of vulnerability. Users like @bobahagia19 craft narratives that blend personal confession, performative authenticity, and aestheticized emotion. These performances align with what Abidin (2020) calls "calibrated amateurism"—the strategic display of sincerity that appears unfiltered yet is carefully curated to invite empathy and engagement.

Participants described such videos as "honest" and "raw," reflecting a hunger for authenticity in an online ecosystem often dominated by perfection. According to Marwick and boyd (2011), this phenomenon exemplifies context collapse—the merging of private and

public boundaries in social media, where individuals expose personal experiences to large audiences to reclaim agency and emotional truth.

Through this lens, the #MarriageIsScary trend is not merely about fear; it becomes a performative act of emotional authenticity. The digital expression of fear allows women to reframe vulnerability as strength. Rather than viewing marriage as an unavoidable destiny, they present it as a conscious, emotionally informed decision.

This aligns with Banet-Weiser's (2018) concept of popular feminism, which celebrates empowerment through emotional honesty and self-disclosure. By sharing stories of betrayal, disappointment, or growth, women use TikTok as a participatory stage for self-definition. As Papacharissi (2015) notes, affective publics thrive on these emotional performances, binding individuals through shared sentiment rather than ideology.

The authenticity of fear, therefore, becomes a digital strategy of survival—a way to transform private anxieties into collective understanding. This process also demonstrates the paradox of social media: while it amplifies fear, it simultaneously provides tools for healing, solidarity, and identity reconstruction.

7). Digital Fear and Gendered Emotional Labor

The emotional narratives embedded in the #MarriageIsScary discourse reflect what Illouz (2007) describes as the emotionalization of culture, in which feelings—especially fear and anxiety—become public resources circulated within media economies. TikTok's algorithm rewards emotionally charged content, privileging confessional and dramatic storytelling. This dynamic creates what feminist scholars identify as gendered emotional labor: women become responsible not only for managing their own emotions but also for producing content that resonates emotionally with others (Hochschild, 1983).

Participants in this study often reported feeling empathy and exhaustion simultaneously when consuming such videos. They empathized with women's suffering yet also absorbed collective anxiety about relationships. This dual response reveals a tension between solidarity and emotional fatigue. As one participant expressed:

“Sometimes I feel comforted that other women experience the same pain—but also scared that maybe I will face it too.”

The emotional economy of #MarriageIsScary thus functions as both resistance and reproduction. On one hand, it challenges patriarchal ideals by voicing pain traditionally silenced within domestic life. On the other, it reaffirms women's cultural position as emotional caretakers—expected to articulate, heal, and mediate collective fear.

Ahmed (2014) expands this notion through the concept of affective economies, where emotions circulate and stick to bodies, ideas, and social categories. Within this framework, fear of marriage becomes not only an individual feeling but a socially contagious affect that binds women through shared vulnerability. The repetitive circulation of these stories on TikTok transforms personal trauma into cultural discourse, showing how media infrastructures sustain emotional communities.

8). Cultural Implications and Future Perspectives

The findings suggest that digital narratives like #MarriageIsScary have deep sociocultural implications for Indonesia's evolving family landscape. In a society where marriage remains a moral expectation, such online discourses introduce new vocabularies of critique, irony, and self-awareness. They allow women to express ambivalence without direct confrontation, softening resistance through humor and collective emotion.

Moreover, these narratives point to a generational redefinition of female adulthood. Instead of viewing marriage as the sole indicator of maturity, early adult women increasingly associate adulthood with emotional intelligence, economic independence, and self-knowledge. This reflects what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) call individualized biographies, where life paths are no longer standardized but negotiated through personal choice.

From a media perspective, TikTok serves as both a mirror and a catalyst of these changes. It offers an arena for micro-publics—digital communities that sustain dialogue about identity and morality outside institutional authority (Abidin, 2020; Papacharissi, 2015). Yet, this democratization also brings challenges: the risk of misinformation, the commodification of pain, and the oversimplification of complex social realities into viral trends.

Looking forward, scholars and policymakers must recognize how digital cultures influence relational values, particularly among youth. Educational initiatives could integrate media literacy and gender awareness, helping young audiences interpret emotional narratives critically rather than internalizing them as truth.

Finally, future research might expand this study through comparative or longitudinal approaches—for example, examining similar hashtags across different cultures (#MarriageIsHard, #SingleByChoice) or analyzing how perceptions evolve as participants age. Such inquiries would deepen our understanding of how digital platforms shape emotional socialization and gender identity formation in the 21st century.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the #MarriageIsScary narrative operates on two intertwined levels: a). as a personal reflection of women's lived experiences, and b). as a collective cultural discourse reshaping societal norms.

At the psychological level, the fear expressed in these narratives represents the emotional burden of modern relationships—where trust, equality, and stability are increasingly fragile. At the sociocultural level, the trend mirrors a broader gender negotiation, in which young women assert control over their life choices within a conservative society.

This dual function suggests that TikTok is not merely a source of entertainment but an evolving site of feminist digital consciousness. It amplifies marginalized voices and normalizes open conversations about taboo topics, such as marital dissatisfaction and domestic abuse.

Furthermore, this study confirms that digital media has a powerful agenda-setting effect: by continuously exposing audiences to emotionally charged narratives, it redefines what is perceived as “normal” or “expected” in relationships. As a result, early adult women's perceptions of marriage become increasingly shaped by affective engagement with online communities rather than traditional family norms.

5. Comparison

The findings of this study align with and expand upon current scholarly discussions surrounding digital feminism, online affect, and generational shifts in marital attitudes. Compared to existing state-of-the-art research, this study offers a more localized and culturally specific understanding of how social media mediates women's perceptions of marriage in Indonesia.

Globally, research on digital intimacy has explored how emotions and self-disclosure function within online spaces. Papacharissi (2015) introduced the concept of affective publics, while Abidin (2020) emphasized communicative intimacies among influencers and followers. These frameworks explain how emotional engagement drives collective participation. The present study extends these frameworks by showing that in the Indonesian context, affective publics are also spaces for moral negotiation, where fear and skepticism toward marriage coexist with empathy and humor.

In terms of gender discourse, Banet-Weiser (2018) and Gill & Orgad (2018) examined how digital feminism and postfeminist culture shape narratives of empowerment and trauma. However, much of their work focuses on Western societies. The #MarriageIsScary trend demonstrates that similar feminist articulations emerge in Southeast Asia but are expressed through cultural adaptation—using religious, humorous, and communal tones instead of explicit activism. Thus, this study contributes a non-Western perspective on digital feminism, highlighting how Indonesian women reinterpret empowerment through collective emotional expression.

From a media-critical standpoint, Fuchs (2021) argues that social media capitalism commodifies emotions, turning personal narratives into profitable attention economies. This study supports that view but also identifies a paradox: while TikTok's algorithm amplifies

negative emotions (fear, anxiety), users repurpose these affects into solidarity and emotional resilience. Therefore, rather than simply reproducing capitalist affective patterns, women in this study transform emotional exposure into social bonding.

Finally, compared with regional studies such as Jones (2017) on changing marriage patterns in Asia, the present research introduces a novel dimension — the digitization of marital discourse. While previous works analyze demographic and cultural determinants, this study focuses on how social media aesthetically and emotionally frames those determinants. By examining the #MarriageIsScary narrative, the study bridges traditional sociological concerns (gender, marriage, modernization) with contemporary digital culture, offering a measurable contribution to interdisciplinary research on gendered communication.

6. Conclusions

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