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## **#MARRIAGEISSCARY: EMPOWERING STUDENTS THROUGH MULTIDISCIPLINARY LITERACY AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The rapid proliferation of the #MarriageIsScary trend on social media has constructed a new, daunting narrative regarding marital life, leading to increased premarital anxiety among Gen Z students. This research explores how university students perceive the discourse of marriage amidst the influx of digital information and how Islamic Religious Education (IRE) addresses this phenomenon. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with ten students from diverse majors at a prominent state university in Indonesia. The findings reveal a spectrum of responses: while some students utilize the trend as a reflective tool for self-improvement, others exhibit significant avoidance behaviours, including delaying marriage or choosing a childfree lifestyle. Critically, the study finds a significant gap in classroom delivery; most students reported that the IRE curriculum as taught to them often struggled to address contemporary marital crises due to various pedagogical and administrative constraints. This paper argues for a multidisciplinary shift in IRE, integrating critical media literacy to empower students in deconstructing digital discourses and fostering mental readiness for family life. By collaborating with marriage counsellors and adopting a critical pedagogical approach, IRE can better equip students to navigate multicultural digital narratives in the modern era.

***Keywords: Marriage is Scary, Islamic Religious Education, Critical Media Literacy, Premarital Anxiety***

### **INTRODUCTION**

The narrative regarding the collapse of the marriage institution has now become a global crisis that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries. Fundamental problems arise when digital disruption to social institutions triggers shifts in perception among the younger generation, who tend to construct a pejorative understanding of long-term commitments. This reality is confirmed by data from international institutions over the last decade. Reports from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) show a sharp decline in



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marriage rates, from a prevalence of 5 to 7 marriages per 1,000 population in 1990 to only 3 to 4 in 2022 (OECD, 2024; OECD Korea Policy Center, 2024).

This phenomenon is reinforced by Eurostat data highlighting anomalies in family structures, where births outside marriage are projected to surge to 41.1% as a result of weakening public trust in the sanctity of domestic institutions (Eurostat, 2025). Furthermore, long-term analysis from Our World in Data confirms that the global divorce rate increase reaching a critical point of 2.7 per 1,000 marriages has created systematic skepticism toward family resilience in the future (Herre et al., 2020). This skepticism is then massively amplified by digital media algorithms that tend to prioritize traumatic narratives over harmonious domestic realities. As a result, statistics on marriage failures are no longer just numbers for the younger generation but transform into existential threats that trigger premarital anxiety and deep fear of commitment.

This anxiety escalation is further amplified by information overload conditions not accompanied by critical filtration abilities among students. Currently, students are in a digital information ecosystem where the boundary between objective reality and content dramatization becomes very blurred. Massive exposure to the dark side of marriage, from viral public figure infidelity phenomena to domestic violence exploitation, constantly dominates their cognitive space (Shahrzadi et al., 2024a). This triggers sharp cognitive dissonance, where negative information on social media clashes harshly with ideal values received in family environments or classrooms. Consequently, decision-making paralysis occurs from confusion in navigating pejorative discourse storms. The fear experienced by students no longer stems from personal empirical experiences but from mass-produced simulacra constructions by digital platforms (Graf & Antoni, 2023). In information fatigue conditions, students lose critical power to distinguish between extreme casuistic cases and general household life realities. Ultimately, they are trapped in paralyzing ambivalence between primordial desires to fulfill human nature and fears of failure projections aggressively haunting their phone screens daily.

### **MarriageIsScary Trend**

The most evident manifestation of this collective fear is recorded in the viral hashtag trend #MarriageIsScary dominating various social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram. This hashtag is not merely a temporary digital linguistic activity but has transformed into a curation vessel for traumatic narratives representing youth anxiety. Through highly personalized algorithms, the MarriageIsScary phenomenon presents compilations of negative experiences, from infidelity issues, financial and emotional instability, to loss of self-autonomy constructed in such a way that it seems like the absolute reality in marriage (Lestari et al., 2024; CNN Indonesia, 2024; MetroTV, 2025).

For students, this trend functions as a more dominant alternative learning source in shaping their minds compared to formal religious material in lectures. The existence of this hashtag becomes empirical proof of how digital discourse can shift



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theological convictions into pragmatic anxiety. Therefore, MarriageIsScary must be viewed as an urgent media literacy phenomenon to dissect, as it has successfully formulated personal fears into a social identity hindering students' readiness for family life stages.

### **Role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI)**

In Indonesia's national education system, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) is not merely dogmatic education but a mandatory personality development course for all Muslim students in higher education, as mandated by Law No. 12 of 2012 on Higher Education. Ideally, PAI functions as an ethical compass equipping students with reflective abilities and becoming God-fearing individuals (taqwa) in roles from individuals to society (Firmansyah, 2019). One crucial material in the PAI curriculum is discussion on family ethics and law (family values), designed to provide a foundation for mental readiness and philosophical understanding of marriage. This material plays a strategic role in shaping students' domestic resilience, where marriage institutions are not only viewed as religious aspects but also as the smallest unit supporting social stability. Amid digital discourse assaults triggering anxiety, marriage material in PAI should transform into cognitive protectors validating between traditional moral values and complex modern life realities. Thus, PAI in higher education has great urgency in providing critical discussion spaces to neutralize students' negative perceptions of future commitments.

### **Literature Review and Research Gap**

Although studies on the MarriageIsScary phenomenon have begun to develop in academic literature, most previous research tends to focus on describing causal factors (Tirta & Arifin, 2025) or psychological impact analysis for women through counseling services (Lestari et al., 2024). On the other hand, some researchers have attempted to examine this issue through normative theological perspectives like Maqasid al-Shariah (Sari & Musyafaah, 2025) and emphasize the importance of general premarital education (Riswandi et al., 2025; Sulfinadia et al., 2025). Literature on digital literacy in marriage contexts is emerging, but most research aims to prevent early marriage practices (Jannah et al., 2025; Martins da Silva, 2025) or is limited to technical aspects like financial management and mental health (Amijaya et al., 2024; Nurmala et al., 2024).

There is a crucial research gap where no efforts integrate Critical Media Literacy into the reconstruction of marriage material in PAI courses at universities. Unlike Sampurna et al. (2024) research focusing on religious counseling in the wider community, this research offers systematic pedagogical transformation through classroom learning models. The novelty of this research lies in combining PAI theological values with critical media analysis abilities to neutralize fear ecosystems produced by social media algorithms, thus equipping students with cognitive protection in navigating digital information disruption.



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## Research Objectives

This research aims to explore students' perceptions of marriage discourse amid digital information flows, while formulating responsive PAI learning reconstruction to this phenomenon. Specifically, the study seeks to mitigate negative impacts of the MarriageIsScary trend, such as avoidance behaviors, extreme marriage delays, and confusion triggered by digital anxiety through strengthening critical media literacy. The results are expected to contribute to developing a more inclusive and multidisciplinary PAI curriculum, equipping Gen Z with the mental and spiritual resilience needed to face family life challenges in the modern era.

## METHODS

This qualitative research applies a hermeneutic phenomenological design based on Creswell's framework to explore the essence of students' lived experiences related to the digital MarriageIsScary trend and its relation to PAI learning (Creswell, 2013). Participant selection was done through purposive sampling involving 10 students from various study programs at a university in Bandung, Indonesia. This number aligns with Creswell's recommendations for depth in phenomenological studies. Inclusion criteria include participants who have completed PAI courses on Munakahat material and have active interaction with digital marriage narratives on social media.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews allowing researchers to explore information flexibly yet directed. The interview protocol focused on four main areas: (a) subjective perceptions of the MarriageIsScary trend, (b) impact of digital narratives on marriage decision-making, (c) critical evaluation of experiences learning Munakahat material in conventional PAI classes, and (d) expectations for more relevant and adaptive learning models in the digital era. All interview processes were recorded and transcribed verbatim to maintain data authenticity. Informant coding used the letter M for mahasiswa (student) followed by a number for interview sequence.

Data analysis procedures followed Creswell's Data Analysis Spiral, including data organization, memo reading, to systematic coding. Researchers identified significant statements from interview transcripts to build major themes describing students' response spectrums and pedagogical-administrative constraints. The final analysis stage involved compiling an essence description combining all participant experiences into a multidisciplinary pedagogical solution framework. To ensure research credibility, member checking strategies were applied by reconfirming findings to participants for authenticity and interpretation accuracy.

## RESULTS



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### **Digital Fear Construction: Identifying Gender Bias in MarriageIsScary Trend**

Research data shows that the MarriageIsScary phenomenon is understood by students as a narrative dominated by women's perspectives on the dark side of domestic life. M2 explained her observation: "As far as I know, Marriage is Scary depicts women's perspectives... men who were previously seen as good, turn out after marriage they can commit crimes." This is reinforced by M4 highlighting role burden imbalance: "Scary in marriage is one-sided heavy. Like women whose burden is heavier than their partners." This fear is not merely fictional but an accumulation of viral content on domestic violence (KDRT) and infidelity creating stigma that men are potential threats in marriage institutions, thus building collective negative perceptions among female students.

### **Spectrum of Student Responses: Between Literacy Strengthening and Avoidance Behavior**

Exposure to this trend triggers polarized responses. A small portion of students use it as a self-reflection instrument, as expressed by M1: "This content has potential as a warning system for the young generation about unprepared marriage risks." However, most students respond with extreme avoidance behavior. M3 bluntly stated her priority to delay commitment: "After graduation, I want to get married. If now, I still want to be happy-happy. Still want to build a cat castle... make my own colony." Delay reasons often relate to concerns over loss of freedom and mental unpreparedness facing role demands depicted so terrifyingly on social media.

### **Pedagogical Failure of PAI: Theoretical and Rigid Curriculum**

The most crucial finding is the wide gap between PAI material and contemporary marriage crises reality. Students feel what is taught in class lacks bite against their anxiety. M2 reflected: "Nothing relates PAI material to marriage desire. Because PAI doesn't have it, right? The knowledge doesn't enter." PAI curriculum is deemed too focused on technical-normative aspects without space for sociological issues. Consequently, students see PAI classes as mere academic formalities failing as moral compasses in navigating toxic digital information flows.

### **Administrative and Methodological Constraints in Classroom Learning**

Besides content issues, administrative constraints and boring teaching methods are main student criticisms. Absent lecturers and one-way lecture methods kill learning enthusiasm. M9 and M10 shared similar experiences: "The method is just ordinary, or the lecturer rarely attends... so we don't get deep insights." This is worsened by memorization or administrative assignment models. Without educator presence capable of deep dialogue, students feel cognitively paralyzed facing distorting digital narratives on marriage values.



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## **Aspirations for Learning Reconstruction: Toward Critical Inquiry and Dialogic Models**

Students voice urgent needs for PAI learning model transformation that is more interactive and real-case based. M7 proposed shift to critical thinking: "To see what's special called more critical speaking... can use case study method. Case studies from surroundings, not far away." Additionally, students expect innovations in assignments more relevant to their digital culture. M12 suggested: "Maybe make videos or content, so others can learn... benefits not just for us." These expectations show students want PAI classes not as dalil memorization places but social laboratories for tabayyun and deconstruction of social media narratives through reflective and multidisciplinary approaches.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Deconstructing Digital Narratives through Critical Media Literacy**

Research findings on Digital Fear Construction show students tend to passively consume gender-biased narratives in the MarriageIsScary trend. This confirms cognitive vulnerability where dramatic and anecdotal social media information is seen as objective marriage reality representation (Sulfinadia et al., 2025). This phenomenon indicates that without strong filter abilities, social media algorithms can shape mental schemas distorting student optimism (Shahrzadi et al., 2024b). This discussion underscores that anxiety experienced by informants like M2 and M4 is not merely personal psychological issues but results from socio-digital constructions requiring structured educational interventions.

As a solution, integrating Critical Media Literacy in PAI serves as an instrument to dismantle ideologies behind such content. Learning no longer centers only on religious texts but uses viral content as analysis objects or critical inquiry (Kaeophanuek et al., 2019). By adopting M7's suggestion on local case study methods, PAI transforms into digital tabayyun space. Students are invited to question sources, motives, and validity of social media narratives, enabling distinction between extreme individual cases and general Islamic marriage principles upholding justice and affection (sakinah).

### **Transformation from Normative to Reflective Learning**

Sharp student criticisms of rigid, disconnected PAI curriculum signal failure of information transfer-only models (banking concept of education) (Bezio, 2023; Yung, 2021). Munakahat material so far tends to focus on legal-formal aspects like rukun and valid conditions but neglects mental readiness and contemporary conflict resolution. This gap causes students to seek external references often reinforcing fears due to lack of comprehensive value guidance from educators. To address this, Reflective Learning approaches must become PAI pedagogy foundations (Boyd &



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Fales, 1983). Reflective learning enables internal dialogue between religious values and personal anxieties. As M1's aspiration views digital content as warning systems, PAI must facilitate turning fear into planned vigilance. Through reflective essays or deep discussions, students are encouraged to build personal, realistic marriage visions, feeling empowered with spiritual and emotional readiness (Weng et al., 2022).

### **Overcoming Constraints through Digital Pedagogy and Assignment Innovation**

Complaints about administrative constraints like rare lecturer attendance or ordinary methods (M11, M12) are serious obstacles in student character formation. In higher education contexts, physical or emotional educator absence causes loss of authority figures to straighten disinformation. This creates empty spaces filled by toxic social media narratives. Methodological problems demand repositioning lecturer roles from mere teachers to adaptive digital culture facilitators. M12's proposed video educational content innovation is strategic for increasing student engagement. Involving students in producing positive content indirectly forces deep material dives and research. This task solves classroom boredom and serves systematic digital dakwah efforts. Students become change agents spreading counter-narratives to MarriageIsScary, expanding PAI social impact in digital spaces.

### **Mitigating Avoidance Behavior and Mental Readiness Reconstruction**

Emergence of avoidance behaviors like extreme marriage delays or childfree lifestyle choices due to media exposure (M3, M5) shows PAI needs deeper sociological touches. PAI must not give dogmatic answers to socio-psychological problems. If students feel marriage burdens are one-sided for women, PAI learning must boldly dissect equality and household cooperation concepts more contextually and applicatively, not just textually (Dawood, 2024; Wettstein & Baur, 2016). Thus, mental readiness reconstruction in PAI must include validating student fears. Classrooms must become safe spaces to discuss trauma and concerns without judgment. By combining family psychology perspectives into Munakahat material, educational institutions can help students distinguish healthy vigilance from excessive marriage phobia. This is crucial to ensure marriage or delay decisions are based on mature thinking and spiritual readiness, not irrational collective fears.

### **Urgency of Multidisciplinary Collaboration in Family Education**

Final discussion emphasizes era disruption information challenges cannot be solved by monodisciplinary PAI. Findings that students trust podcasts or psychology books more than class material show PAI needs to open to cross-discipline collaboration. University family education requires professional touches from various fields to answer increasingly complex student doubts, from financial issues, mental health, to positive laws protecting household rights. Practical implementation is inviting



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expert resource persons like marriage counselors or family law practitioners into PAI learning processes. This collaboration answers student expectations for real, applicative learning. With this multidisciplinary approach, PAI not only equips students with religious dalils but also real life skills. This synergy births generations digitally smart yet mentally and spiritually strong in building future family institutions.

## CONCLUSION

This research concludes that the digital MarriageIsScary phenomenon has created significant cognitive dissonance among Gen Z students, where social media fear narratives dominate their perceptions more than formal classroom materials. Findings show contrasting response spectrums: some students use the trend as self-reflection instruments, but most exhibit avoidance behaviors like extreme marriage delays to childfree lifestyle choices. This is exacerbated by PAI pedagogical failures trapped in normative-theoretical methods and administrative constraints, failing as cognitive protectors for students navigating digital information distortions.

As practical implications, this research formulates strategic recommendations for reconstructing higher education family education. First, PAI educators are encouraged to adopt contemporary case study-based approaches and utilize digital platforms as creative assignment media to increase student engagement. Second, higher education institutions need to facilitate more flexible curricula by opening multidisciplinary collaboration spaces between PAI lecturers and student counseling centers for holistic premarital anxiety handling. Finally, for future researchers, this study provides foundations for large-scale Research and Development to test Literasi Media-Reflective learning model effectiveness experimentally across universities. Through these steps, PAI is expected to transform into critical thinking laboratories equipping students with mental, spiritual, and social resilience facing modern family institution complexities.

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