

Social Media as a Space for Da'wah Dialogue on Marriage: An Analysis of the 'Marriage Is Scary' Issue on TikTok

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Abstract

The “Marriage Is Scary” phenomenon circulating on TikTok reflects the growing fear, hesitation, and anxiety among young generations toward the institution of marriage. This trend not only signifies a shift in value orientation but also opens a new dialogical space within religious discourse on social media. This study aims to examine how TikTok functions as a platform for da'wah dialogue on marriage through content creators' responses to the issue. Employing a qualitative approach with an interpretative content analysis method, this research analyzes a selection of the most popular videos featuring the “Marriage Is Scary” narrative and the da'wah-oriented responses that emerge as counter-narratives. The findings reveal that TikTok provides an interactive space for young people to articulate their fears and personal experiences, while simultaneously offering opportunities for digital preachers to present religious perspectives that are moderate, solution-oriented, and grounded in prophetic values. Effective da'wah in this context tends to adopt persuasive, empathetic, and narrative communication styles, emphasizing the wisdom of marriage in Islam without disregarding the social realities faced by adolescents and young adults. This study underscores that social media, particularly TikTok, is not merely an arena for entertainment, but also a dialogical space for da'wah that can bridge the gap in religious literacy among the digital generation, especially concerning sensitive issues such as fear of marriage.

Fenomena “Marriage Is Scary” yang berkembang di TikTok menunjukkan munculnya ketakutan, keraguan, dan kekhawatiran generasi muda terhadap institusi pernikahan. Tren ini tidak hanya merefleksikan perubahan orientasi nilai, tetapi juga membuka ruang dialog baru dalam diskursus keagamaan di media sosial. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana TikTok berfungsi sebagai ruang dialog dakwah mengenai pernikahan melalui respons kreator konten terhadap isu tersebut. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode analisis konten interpretatif, penelitian ini menelaah sejumlah video terpopuler yang memuat narasi “Marriage Is Scary” dan respons

dakwah yang muncul sebagai kontra narasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa TikTok menyediakan ruang interaktif bagi generasi muda untuk mengekspresikan ketakutan dan pengalaman pribadi, sekaligus membuka peluang bagi para pendakwah digital untuk menawarkan perspektif keagamaan yang moderatif, solutif, serta berbasis nilai-nilai profetik. Dakwah yang efektif dalam konteks ini cenderung memanfaatkan gaya komunikasi persuasif, empatik, dan naratif, menekankan hikmah pernikahan dalam Islam tanpa mengabaikan realitas sosial yang dihadapi remaja dan dewasa muda. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa media sosial, khususnya TikTok, bukan hanya arena hiburan, melainkan juga ruang dialog dakwah yang mampu menjembatani kesenjangan literasi keagamaan generasi digital, terutama dalam isu-isu sensitif seperti ketakutan terhadap pernikahan.

Keywords: Digital Da'wah, Marriage is scary, TikTok, Religious communication, Social media.

Introduction

Recent developments in information and communication technology indicate that global society has entered an advanced phase of the industrial revolution, commonly referred to as Society 5.0. In this phase, digital technologies including artificial intelligence and algorithmic systems no longer function merely as auxiliary tools but have become integral to human social life. Within this context, practices of religious communication and broadcasting have undergone a fundamental transformation, marked by the ability of religious communities to integrate da'wah messages into interactive, data-driven digital media ecosystems. This transformation has given rise to more adaptive and contextual forms of religious communication that take into account the social diversity of audiences, including generational differences, gender, levels of education, and socio-economic backgrounds (Mukhroman et al., 2024; Hidayatullah, 2022).

Digital technological advancements also play a strategic role in blurring the boundaries of space, time, and distance, thereby enabling new forms of social connectivity within what is commonly referred to as cyberspace. Conceptually, cyberspace functions as a digital social arena that constitutes an alternative public sphere characterized by openness, flexibility, and relative inclusivity. Various social activities that previously occurred exclusively in physical spaces have increasingly shifted into digitally mediated forms, including religious practices and Islamic discourses (Campbell, 2021; Rahmawati & Nugroho, 2023).

Within this digital environment, social media platform algorithms play a decisive role in shaping personalized patterns of information consumption aligned with users' preferences. Technology thus no longer serves merely as a channel for message dissemination but also operates as a mechanism of information selection and curation that significantly influences the formation of perspectives, including religious worldviews. A study by Rosyida and Shodiqoh reveals that approximately 68% of university students rely on da'wah content appearing on TikTok's For You Page (FYP) as their primary reference for understanding religious teachings. This finding underscores the growing influence of platform logic and social media algorithms on religious authority in the digital era (Rosyida & Shodiqoh, 2023; Mubarak & Anwar, 2023).

The phenomenon of digital da'wah has also gained legitimacy from prominent Indonesian religious figures. KH. Ahmad Mustofa Bisri (Gus Mus), a Mustasyar of the Nahdlatul Ulama Central Board (PBNU), emphasizes the importance of technological literacy among preachers so that da'wah can reach broader audiences across various social media platforms. He further argues that limitations in technical skills can be addressed through collective collaboration with digitally competent teams, ensuring that da'wah messages remain relevant in the face of ongoing technological change (Aziz & Kurniawan, 2021).

Conceptually, da'wah in the Islamic tradition derives from the root word da'wah (دعوة), meaning to call or invite. The meaning of da'wah extends beyond oral preaching (bi al-lisān) to include written communication (bi al-qalam) as well as exemplary conduct and concrete action (bi al-ḥāl wa al-quḍwah). Ali Mahfudz conceptualizes da'wah as a comprehensive process of communicating Islamic values, while Sayyid Qutb views da'wah as a practical effort to implement the Islamic system across all aspects of life—from the family unit to broader social structures—with the ultimate goal of achieving well-being in both worldly and spiritual dimensions (Qutb, 2003; Rohman, 2021).

In contemporary society, social media functions as a platform that integrates text, images, videos, and networked interactions at both individual and collective levels. Beyond serving as a source of information, social media has become a strategic medium for da'wah practices. As smartphone penetration continues to increase, da'wah media has undergone a significant shift: preachers are no longer dependent on physical spaces or face-to-face gatherings but instead utilize social media accounts that are instantly accessible via handheld devices. This transformation marks a fundamental change in how Islamic messages are

produced, disseminated, and consumed (Fauzi & Sari, 2022; Putri & Ramadhan, 2024).

Amid the intense consumption of digital content by Generation Z, a new narrative trend known as "Marriage Is Scary" has emerged. Widely circulated on TikTok, this phrase has evolved into a collective expression representing young people's anxieties toward the institution of marriage. TikTok data indicate that the hashtag #marriageisscary has been used in more than 6,900 uploads, while Google Trends records a significant increase in searches for the term since August 2024 (Ardiningrum & Fatgehipon, 2025).

Empirically, this phenomenon is intertwined with broader social realities. Data from Statistics Indonesia reveal a substantial decline in marriage rates in recent years. According to Statistik Indonesia 2024, the number of marriages decreased sharply, particularly during the 2021–2023 period, which saw a national decline of approximately two million marriages. This trend occurred across nearly all provinces, including densely populated regions such as Jakarta, West Java, Central Java, and East Java (BPS, 2024).

These findings align with reports from the Pew Research Center (2019), which indicate that Generation Z—despite reaching a normatively defined marriageable age—tends to delay or even avoid marriage altogether. Key determinants include career-oriented aspirations, concerns about divorce, economic pressures, and preferences for more flexible lifestyles. Social media plays a significant role in shaping these perceptions, particularly through the widespread circulation of negative experiential narratives (Nurcahyati et al., 2021; Sulastri & Hakim, 2023).

Most informants in this study interpret the "Marriage Is Scary" trend as a negative narrative reflecting perceived risks associated with marriage. TikTok content frequently portrays adverse experiences such as infidelity, domestic violence, and emotional strain. Through mechanisms of resharing and reinterpretation, social media users not only articulate personal anxieties but also construct a form of collective awareness regarding the risks of marriage. Consequently, this trend functions simultaneously as a space for experiential sharing and as a medium of social caution for younger generations (Haris & Wibowo, 2022; Fitriani, 2023).

Method

This study adopts a qualitative research approach grounded in an integrative theoretical framework combining digital da'wah communication, dialogic

communication theory, and prophetic communication. The digital da'wah perspective is employed to analyze the transformation of Islamic preaching practices within social media environments shaped by algorithms and participatory culture (Campbell, 2021; Hjarvard, 2023). Dialogic communication theory conceptualizes da'wah as a reciprocal and interactive communication process rather than a one-way transmission of religious messages (Kent & Taylor, 2021).

Prophetic communication serves as an ethical lens to examine how values such as rahmah (compassion), 'adl (justice), and hikmah (wisdom) are articulated in response to socially sensitive issues, particularly marriage-related anxiety (Kuntowijoyo, 2019; Mukhroman et al., 2024). This framework informed the research questions and guided the analytical focus on narrative representation, interaction patterns, and value construction in digital da'wah.

Data were collected through digital content observation on TikTok. Primary data consisted of publicly accessible videos featuring the "Marriage Is Scary" narrative and da'wah-oriented counter-narratives. A purposive sampling strategy was applied, selecting videos with high engagement levels that explicitly addressed fear of marriage or religious responses to the issue.

Data collection involved keyword and hashtag searches (e.g., #marriageisscary, marriage anxiety) combined with systematic exploration of the For You Page (FYP). To minimize algorithmic bias, searches were conducted repeatedly using varied keywords and multiple accounts, following established social media research practices (Kozinets, 2020).

The study employed interpretative content analysis, enabling in-depth examination of verbal, visual, and symbolic elements in short-form video content (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Analytical procedures included video transcription, thematic coding, and interpretative synthesis aligned with the theoretical framework. To enhance analytical clarity, qualitative findings were supplemented with simple descriptive quantification (e.g., theme frequency and interaction patterns) while maintaining qualitative dominance (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ethical considerations were addressed by exclusively using publicly available content without accessing private data. Creator identities were anonymized, and user comments were presented without identifiable information. Trustworthiness was ensured through prolonged engagement with the data, transparent documentation of analytical procedures, and clear linkage between

data, interpretation, and theory, consistent with recognized qualitative research standards (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Markham & Buchanan, 2017).

DISCUSSION

TikTok as a Digital Public Sphere and the Intensification of Religious Dialogue

The findings of this study confirm that TikTok has transformed into a strategic digital public sphere in shaping religious discourse among younger generations. This transformation is particularly evident in the growing prominence of the “Marriage Is Scary” issue within digital spaces. Based on platform data analysis, the hashtag #marriageisscary had been used in more than 6,900 posts by the end of 2024, generating high levels of engagement in the form of comments, likes, and shares. In addition, Google Trends data indicate a significant increase in searches for the phrase “marriage is scary” since August 2024, signaling heightened public attention to this issue, especially among individuals aged 18–30.

From a theoretical perspective, TikTok has undergone a functional shift from a mere entertainment platform to a digital public sphere that facilitates religious dialogue, particularly on sensitive issues such as marriage. The “Marriage Is Scary” phenomenon demonstrates that social media provides an expressive channel for the existential anxieties of younger generations—concerns that have rarely found space within formal religious forums. Within the framework of da’wah communication studies, this condition highlights a relocation of the da’wah arena from hierarchical, institutional spaces to participatory digital environments grounded in personal experience. TikTok’s interactive features—such as comment sections, duets, and stitches—enable dialogical, two-way communication, where religious meanings are not merely transmitted but actively negotiated.

Fear of Marriage and Structural Social Contexts

The discourse surrounding “Marriage Is Scary” cannot be detached from empirically measurable social realities. Data from Statistics Indonesia (BPS, 2024) show a sharp decline in the number of marriages in Indonesia, amounting to approximately two million fewer marriages during the 2021–2023 period. This decline occurred across almost all major provinces, as presented in Table 1.

Province	Decline in Number of Marriages
DKI Jakarta	± 4.000
West Java	± 29.000
Central Java	± 21.000
East Java	± 13.000

Source: Statistics Indonesia (BPS), Statistik Indonesia 2024

These data reinforce the argument that young people's fear of marriage is not merely a digital discursive construction. The "Marriage Is Scary" narrative should not be simplistically interpreted as an indicator of declining religiosity or increasing secularization among younger generations. Rather, fear of marriage reflects a social response to the complexities of contemporary realities, including economic pressures, rising divorce rates, gender inequality, and exposure to traumatic experiences through social media. In this context, fear of marriage is more accurately understood as an expression of social and psychological vulnerability rather than a rejection of Islamic teachings. This distinction is crucial, as da'wah approaches that fail to differentiate between social crises and theological crises risk producing religious messages that lack empathy and potentially alienate young audiences.

Shifts in Da'wah Authority and Digital Audience Preferences

The findings of this study align with research by Rosyida and Shodiqoh, which indicates that 68% of university students rely on da'wah content appearing on TikTok's For You Page (FYP) as their primary reference for understanding religious teachings. This figure underscores the growing influence of algorithmic logic and communicative appeal in shaping religious authority among younger generations, rather than reliance on institutional authority alone.

In this context, preachers who employ empathetic and experience-based narratives tend to acquire stronger symbolic legitimacy. This shift marks a transformation in da'wah authority from a hierarchical model to a relational one, in which audience trust is cultivated through emotional proximity and message relevance. One significant implication of this study is the identification of a reconfiguration of religious authority within digital spaces. Da'wah on TikTok no longer operates solely within a top-down normative framework, but rather within more horizontal communicative relations. Digital preachers who receive positive engagement are those who demonstrate emotional closeness, acknowledge audience experiences, and create spaces for dialogue. This aligns with participatory communication theory, which positions audiences as active subjects in the production of meaning. Consequently, the legitimacy of da'wah authority in digital spaces is determined not only by scholarly credentials, but also by communicative competence, empathy, and social relevance.

Prophetic Communication as a Relevant Framework for Da'wah

The findings of this study further reinforce the relevance of prophetic communication as an effective da'wah approach in responding to the "Marriage Is Scary" issue. Prophetic communication emphasizes the delivery of religious messages in a humane, wise (*hikmah*), and contextual manner, as exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). In TikTok-based da'wah practices,

prophetic values such as rahmah (compassion), 'adl (justice), honesty, and social responsibility are conveyed through grounded narratives closely aligned with audience experiences. This approach has proven more effective in fostering acceptance than normative da'wah models that are prescriptive and judgmental.

Interaction analysis reveals that empathetic and narrative-driven da'wah content achieves significantly higher engagement rates than normative-doctrinal content. Da'wah videos that validate audience fears and offer moderate solutions receive, on average, two to three times more comments than purely instructive sermons. This pattern indicates that prophetic communication—grounded in compassion, justice, and wisdom—is more compatible with the characteristics of digital-native audiences. Conceptually, these findings affirm that prophetic da'wah is not merely a normative ideal but also a communicatively effective approach within social media ecosystems, enabling religious messages to be received without excessive emotional resistance.

Digital Da'wah as a Process of Meaning Negotiation

This discussion also underscores that digital da'wah on TikTok is inherently negotiative rather than coercive. Audiences are not positioned as passive recipients of religious messages, but as dialogical partners who actively participate in shaping the meaning of marriage. Comment-section interactions reveal that audiences frequently pose questions, share personal experiences, and openly express doubts. From the perspective of social construction theory, the meaning of marriage is collectively constructed through symbolic interaction in digital spaces. In this context, da'wah functions as a facilitator of moral and spiritual reflection rather than as a singular authoritative source of meaning.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study contributes to da'wah and digital communication scholarship by affirming that social media particularly TikTok can be understood as a legitimate and strategic space for da'wah dialogue. These findings broaden the conceptualization of digital da'wah as a participatory, reflective, and audience-centered communicative practice. Practically, the study recommends that digital preachers, Islamic content creators, and da'wah institutions develop adaptive, empathetic communication strategies that are sensitive to the social dynamics of younger generations. A moderate and contextual prophetic approach has been shown to effectively bridge tensions between normative Islamic teachings and complex social realities.

Synthesis of the Discussion

Overall, this discussion demonstrates that the "Marriage Is Scary" phenomenon on TikTok does not constitute a threat to Islamic da'wah, but rather

represents a strategic opportunity to transform da'wah practices into more dialogical, humane, and contextually relevant forms for digital generations. TikTok functions as a space for the creative and contextual articulation of Islamic values, while prophetic communication provides an ethical and methodological framework capable of responding effectively to the anxieties of young audiences. Thus, digital da'wah signifies not merely technological adaptation, but a paradigmatic transformation of da'wah in the era of social media.

Conclusion

This study affirms that the "Marriage Is Scary" phenomenon on TikTok reflects a significant shift in how younger generations interpret and make sense of the institution of marriage. This shift should not be understood merely as a consequence of declining religiosity, but rather as the outcome of a complex interaction between social realities, psychological conditions, and personal experiences that are widely exposed, exchanged, and negotiated within digital spaces. In this context, TikTok functions as a new public sphere that enables open dialogue on sensitive religious issues, including anxieties and fears surrounding marriage.

The findings indicate that TikTok serves not only as a medium for articulating the concerns of younger generations, but also as a strategic opportunity for Islamic da'wah to engage audiences in a more dialogical and contextual manner. The most effective da'wah responses to the "Marriage Is Scary" discourse are characterized by persuasive, empathetic, and narrative-based communication approaches that emphasize prophetic values such as compassion, justice, responsibility, and wisdom. This approach has been shown to foster higher levels of audience acceptance and engagement compared to normative da'wah models that tend to be monological and prescriptive. Furthermore, this study underscores that digital da'wah on social media no longer operates within a one-way transmission model, but has evolved into a process of meaning negotiation that actively involves audience participation. Accordingly, TikTok can be understood as a legitimate and strategic space for da'wah dialogue, where Islamic teachings may be communicated in ways that resonate with the lived realities of digital generations without compromising their core religious values.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings enrich scholarship on communication and da'wah by positioning social media as a crucial arena for the practice of prophetic communication in the digital era. Practically, this study

recommends that preachers, Islamic content creators, and da'wah institutions develop adaptive digital da'wah strategies that are empathy-oriented and sensitive to the social dynamics of their audiences. Through such approaches, Islamic da'wah can not only respond constructively to the anxieties of younger generations but also contribute to the formation of a moderate, reflective, and transformative religious understanding within digital spaces.

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