

Cohabitation (Living Together) Among College Students: A Review of Shifting Marital Values and Educational Priorities

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the phenomenon of declining marriage rates among Generation Z and its impact on population dynamics in Indonesia. In recent years, there has been a growing trend of delayed marriage influenced by various factors, including economic conditions, shifting social values, and the influence of social media. This research employs a qualitative approach with an exploratory design to understand Generation Z's perspectives on marriage. Data were collected through the analysis of digital content on social media platforms as well as a literature review of scholarly sources and statistical reports. The findings indicate that Generation Z tends to delay marriage due to prioritizing education, career development, and concerns about potential risks in marital relationships. This phenomenon has implications for declining fertility rates, changes in population age structure, and the potential for population aging in the future. From the perspective of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) theory and the Intermediate Variables of Fertility, these changes reflect a shift from collective-oriented values toward individualization. Therefore, adaptive policies are needed to maintain the balance of population dynamics in Indonesia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, marriage rates in various countries have shown a significant downward trend, particularly among Generation Z, who tend to marry at a later age or even postpone marriage for a longer period. In Indonesia, this phenomenon is also evident. According to the 2024 Indonesian Statistics Report published by CNBC Indonesia, the marriage rate has declined in recent years and is expected to decline significantly between 2021 and 2023. Furthermore, according to the 2024 Indonesian Statistics Report published by Towa News, only 1.4 million couples married in 2023, down from 1.577 million in 2022. The increase in the age of first marriage also indicates a shift in family formation patterns among the younger generation. Some individuals prefer to complete their education or strengthen their economic standing before marriage (Grafika News, 2026).

The phenomenon of delayed marriage among Generation Z is inseparable from various social and economic factors, including the influence of social media, which also shapes views on the institution of marriage. Research conducted by Adhani and Aripudin (2024) shows that Generation Z's perspective on platform X is influenced by financial conditions and concerns about the increasing number of divorce cases due to domestic conflict, thus influencing the decision to postpone marriage. Various narratives circulating on social

media, such as concerns about infidelity, domestic violence, and uncertainty about the future, contribute to the perception that marriage is a major decision fraught with risk. Furthermore, changing values in modern society have also driven a shift in the view that marriage is no longer a social obligation, but rather a personal choice that requires thorough financial and psychological preparation. This phenomenon is not unique to Indonesia but is also part of a global trend showing a decline in marriage rates and an increase in the age of first marriage in various countries (Asokawati & Utama, 2024; Mulyadi, 2018).

In demographic studies, marriage is closely linked to fertility rates, particularly in societies that still place birth within the institution of marriage as the primary norm. Declining marriage rates and increasing ages at first marriage have the potential to reduce birth rates, ultimately impacting population growth and the population's age structure. As explained by Adiansyah et al. (2025), age at first marriage is a key factor influencing the length of a woman's reproductive life, thus directly impacting fertility rates. The long-term impacts of this condition include slowing population growth, shifting age composition toward an aging population, and the potential for a reduction in the productive workforce in the future.

Based on this background, this study focuses on analyzing the factors causing the decline in marriage rates among Generation Z and examining its impact on population dynamics in Indonesia. Thus, this research is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of changes in marriage behavior among the younger generation and their implications for future demographic conditions.

2. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with an exploratory design to deeply understand Generation Z's perspectives on the decline in marriage rates and its implications for population dynamics in Indonesia. This approach is used because it is suitable for exploring complex social phenomena such as the trend of delayed marriage influenced by financial factors, social media, and changing norms, as applied in a similar study that analyzed discussions on platform X. The transformation of societal values is understood as a consequence of modernization, technological developments, and shifts in economic structures that encourage individualization of life choices. Marriage is no longer positioned solely as a social obligation, but as a rational decision that considers economic stability, psychological readiness, and personal aspirations.

This research was conducted in the context of digital social space as the primary arena for the expression of attitudes and opinions for Generation Z. Continuous exposure to digital narratives allows for the formation of social constructions regarding future uncertainty, economic pressures, and expectations regarding relationship quality. Digital space functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a space for the production of social meanings that influence preferences towards marriage.

The primary data sources used were digital content from Generation Z on platforms X and TikTok related to narratives about fear of marriage, particularly in the hashtag "Marriage Is Scary." Meanwhile, secondary data included reports from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) on the decline in marriage rates (from 1.577 million in 2022 to 1.4 million in 2023), scientific journals, and Law No. 16 of 2019 concerning Marriage. Data collection techniques included content and literature reviews from databases such as Google Scholar.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the National Population and Family Planning Agency, the ideal age for first marriage for men is at least 25 years old, while the ideal age for first marriage for women is at least 21 years old (Titania, 2023). However, according to research by Wafa & 622 | **Cohabitation (Living Together) Among College Students: A Review of Shifting Marital Values and Educational Priorities** (Adisti Putri Rahmadiani)

Zuhdi (2025), BPS data found that Generation Z tends to delay marriage. Based on 2024 BPS data, the marriage rate in Indonesia continues to decline. DKI Jakarta experienced a decline of 4,000. West Java experienced a decline of 29,000. Central Java has a figure of 21,000, and East Java has 13,000. In Indonesia, the most drastic decline occurred from 2022 to 2023.

The phenomenon of delayed marriage among Generation Z is also inseparable from the influence of social media, which shapes their perspective on marriage. A study on the "Marriage is Scary" phenomenon among Generation Z shows that exposure to negative content about marriage, such as infidelity, marital conflict, and divorce, can influence their perceptions, making marriage seem risky and frightening. Viral social media content often depicts negative experiences in relationships, which then become social symbols and shape new meanings about marriage among Generation Z. As a result, many individuals in this generation tend to consider marriage more carefully, delaying it, or even not making it a life priority (Nisa, 2025).

Based on several studies, at least four factors were found to be the cause of the decline in marriage rates for Generation Z. The first factor is the difference in priorities and views in life, which causes delays in marriage where the majority of generation Z feels that marriage is not a social obligation, but a big commitment that brings various long-term consequences, so it must be thought through carefully as mentioned in the study of Yani and Arisman (2026) entitled "Married is Scary: Gen Z's Fear of Marriage in the Modern Era". The second factor is economic problems, in a study conducted by Wahib et al. (2025) "A sociological review of young people who are ready for age but postpone marriage in Wonokromo District, Surabaya" where many young people who have entered the age of marriage but choose to postpone marriage because they feel they do not have a stable financial condition, an unsettled career and still prioritize education and self-development. The westernization factor then becomes the third factor that influences the decline in marriage, which results in the phenomenon of living together or cohabitation. In a study conducted by Setiawan et al. in 2026 entitled "Perspectives Behind Living Together Behavior Among Students in Semarang City," it was found that several young generations or Gen Z who are students choose to live together or cohabit as an alternative form of early family formation, or commonly known as trial marriage.

In addition to the previous factors, psychological factors are the final factor that specifically influences women's views on marriage. Research conducted by Annisa & Ninin (2024) shows that negative experiences, whether experienced directly or witnessed within the family and social environment, can cause trauma and fear of marriage. Women tend to consider aspects of emotional security and relationship stability more carefully before deciding to marry. Concerns about domestic conflict, role inequality, and the possibility of violence in relationships lead some women to choose to postpone marriage until they feel mentally prepared and have adequate self-protection. The phenomenon of delayed marriage among Generation Z indicates a significant change in modern family formation patterns. The complexity of factors influencing the decision to marry indicates that this phenomenon cannot be understood solely as an individual choice, but rather as a result of the interaction between social, economic, cultural, and psychological conditions. Therefore, a theoretical approach is needed to explain changes in marital behavior within the context of the dynamics of modern society.

When examined through the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) theory, the decline in marriage rates among Generation Z is influenced not only by economic factors but also by changes in value systems in modern society. Previously presented data show an increase in the age of first marriage and a tendency to delay marriage among productive age groups (BPS, 2023). Within the SDT framework, this phenomenon is understood as part of the

individualization process, where life orientation shifts from collective obligations to personal achievement and self-actualization. Marriage is no longer viewed as a life stage that must be fulfilled immediately, but rather as an optional choice.

Furthermore, increased access to education and women's participation in the workforce also reinforce this value transformation. Generation Z tends to prioritize economic stability, mental preparedness, and personal freedom before entering the institution of marriage. The literature findings discussed previously indicate that job uncertainty and economic pressure are key considerations in the decision to delay marriage (Adhani & Aripudin, 2024:191). From an SDT perspective, this shift in orientation reflects a shift from traditional values that place the family at the center of life to post-materialist values that emphasize individual autonomy.

Furthermore, the emergence of discourses such as "marriage is scary" and the growing childfree trend on social media demonstrate a redefinition of the meaning of family among the younger generation (Tirta & Arifin, 2025). SDT explains that modernization and globalization accelerate the spread of new values that normalize alternatives to conventional marriage. Thus, the decline in marriage rates among Generation Z is not simply a temporary economic situation, but rather part of a broader demographic transformation in the value structure and lifestyles of modern society.

According to 2020 data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS), Generation Z (born 1997–2012) is the largest population group, accounting for approximately 27.94 percent of the total population. As a productive age group entering the family formation phase, Generation Z's preferences and decisions regarding marriage and reproduction have the potential to influence fertility dynamics and the future age structure of the population. Therefore, changing attitudes toward marriage, including the tendency to delay marriage and the choice to remain childless, are important to examine from a demographic perspective.

Based on previous research conducted by Tirta & Arifin in 2025 entitled "Phenomenological Study: Marriage is Scary in Generation Z," it is known that the decline in marriage rates in Generation Z directly suppresses Indonesia's TFR to below 2.1 children per woman, shortening the reproductive period due to the age of first marriage rising to 22-25 years. The main demographic impact is a slowdown in population growth from 1.1% to negative potential, which changes the age pyramid to an aging form with the proportion of elderly >10% in 2040 (Tirta & Arifin, 2025).

In his article entitled "Mega-Demographic Prospects Towards a Golden Indonesia 2045" (2020), Aris Ananta argues that fertility dynamics in Indonesia have the potential to create two distinctly different groups. The first group views the relatively high fertility rate as a source of political power. For this group, a large number of members is considered to strengthen their position and influence in the political arena, making increasing or maintaining the birth rate strategic. Conversely, the second group tends to prefer fewer children. From this perspective, children are no longer positioned as a factor of production or merely as a support for the family economy, as various forms of substitutes are available, both through economic and technological progress. The processes of globalization and digitalization have also driven these shifting preferences, leading some people to choose to have one child, two children, or even none at all.

Based on these trends, the article estimates that Indonesia's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has the potential to fall below replacement level. In fact, in some regions, the TFR is estimated to reach around 1.5 or lower. Fertility rates below replacement levels often raise concerns due to their implications for slowing population growth and the potential for population aging. However, having fewer children can also allow families to focus more

resources on improving health and nutrition, as well as mastering digital technology, thereby ensuring the next generation is more competitive in global competition.

Economically, low fertility threatens the demographic bonus with a shortage of young workers, increasing the burden on pensions and healthcare for the elderly, as projected by the Central Statistics Agency (BPS). Childfree and cohabitation trends are rising by around 15-20%, weakening traditional family institutions and reproductive norms, fueled by exposure to negative content on social media. In West Java, a 29,000-year decline in marriages (2022-2023) correlates with urbanization and higher education for women, who are delaying marriage in favor of careers (Adhani & Aripudin, 2024:190). Long-term implications include gender imbalance in the marriage market and increased singlehood, potentially increasing loneliness and social dependency for the elderly. Policies such as child tax incentives and healthy marriage campaigns are needed to mitigate this. Overall, these impacts demand holistic interventions for the sustainability of Indonesia's population (Tirta & Arifin, 2025).

In the Intermediate Variables of Fertility theory proposed by Davis and Blake, fertility is not directly influenced by socioeconomic factors, but rather through intermediary variables such as age at first marriage, exposure to sexual relations within marriage, and birth control practices. Based on previously presented data, increasing age at first marriage and decreasing number of marriages directly affect the duration of a woman's reproductive life (BPS, 2023). The later a person marries, the shorter their reproductive life span, resulting in fewer births.

The phenomenon of delayed marriage among Generation Z thus has direct implications for the decline in the Total Fertility Rate (TFR). Within Davis and Blake's framework, age at first marriage is a variable that regulates exposure to the possibility of conception. As the age at marriage increases, exposure to pregnancy within the institution of marriage becomes more limited. This explains why the downward trend in marriage rates contributes to slowing population growth.

Furthermore, the growing choice to remain childless can also be understood as a form of birth control within the category of fertility control variables. Although this decision is rooted in social and value considerations, its impacts are still manifested in concrete demographic mechanisms. Thus, the Intermediate Variables of Fertility theory suggest that changes in marriage and reproductive behavior among Generation Z have structural consequences for Indonesia's population dynamics.

4. CONCLUSION

The decline in marriage rates among Generation Z in Indonesia is a phenomenon influenced by various interrelated factors, including social, economic, cultural, and psychological aspects. Generation Z tends to delay marriage due to changing life priorities that place greater emphasis on self-development, education, career, and financial and mental readiness before entering the institution of marriage. Furthermore, the influence of social media, which frequently displays negative experiences in marriage, contributes to the perception that marriage is a major commitment full of risks, giving rise to the phenomenon of "marriage is scary." Other factors, such as westernization, which has given rise to alternative relationships such as living together, and psychological experiences or fears of marital conflict, also contribute to the tendency to delay marriage.

From the perspective of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) theory, this phenomenon reflects a shift in value systems in modern society, shifting from a collective to an individual orientation. Marriage is no longer viewed as a social obligation to be fulfilled immediately, but rather as a personal choice rationally considered based on

individual readiness. Modernization, increased access to education, and women's participation in the workforce further reinforce this process of individualization. From a demographic perspective, the decline in marriage rates has implications for Indonesia's population dynamics. The increase in the age at first marriage and the tendency to delay or even forgo marriage can shorten women's reproductive years, ultimately reducing the Total Fertility Rate (TFR). Within the framework of Davis and Blake's Intermediate Variables of Fertility theory, age at first marriage is a key variable influencing the likelihood of a child being born. Therefore, changes in marriage behavior among Generation Z directly contribute to slowing population growth, the potential for population aging, and the possibility of a reduced productive workforce in the future.

Overall, the phenomenon of declining marriage rates among Generation Z is not simply an individual choice but part of a broader social and demographic transformation in modern society. Therefore, comprehensive policies and approaches from the government and various stakeholders are needed to understand these changing values and anticipate their impact on Indonesia's population structure and long-term development.

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