



Negotiating the Meaning of Marriage Registration in Indonesia's Digital Space: A Challenge for Legal Literacy Management in Education

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ABSTRACT

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The rise of online secret marriage services in Indonesia presents a new dynamic that challenges conventional understandings of unregistered marriage by turning it into a digitized and commodified service. This study analyzes public discourse on these services and develops strategies to raise awareness about the risks of secret marriages and the importance of registration, particularly from the perspectives of educational management and legal literacy. Using a qualitative approach, content and thematic analyses were applied to 205 netizen comments from three YouTube videos. Findings show public responses revolve around three interrelated dimensions: religious orientation, administrative considerations, and family protection concerns, reflecting tensions between religious legitimacy, perceptions of state service rationality, and the need for legal and social protection. COM-B framework analysis indicates that attitudes toward marriage registration are influenced by normative understanding, experiences with administrative procedures, and value-driven motivations. The study suggests that addressing unregistered marriages in the digital era requires multilevel interventions, including strengthening legal and digital literacy, integrating marriage law awareness into curricula, improving registration services, and governing digital spaces. This research contributes by linking digitized secret marriage phenomena with educational management strategies to shape public understanding, behavior, and social protection.

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INTRODUCTION

Marriage registration constitutes a fundamental instrument for ensuring legal certainty, social protection, and the fulfillment of citizens' rights within the framework of family law governance (Kusumawati, 2025; Najiburohman et al., 2025; Syafiih, 2025). In Indonesia, the issue of marriage registration is not merely

a private or religious concern, but a public matter closely linked to population administration, women's and children's rights, access to public services, and long-term social welfare. Evidence from national statistics indicates a consistent decline in registered marriages, from 1,780,346 in 2020 to approximately 1,577,255 in 2023, signaling a structural challenge rather than a temporary fluctuation. This trend raises serious concerns, as unregistered marriages weaken legal protection mechanisms and increase social vulnerability. From a broader societal perspective, this issue is also related to the effectiveness of education systems in fostering legal awareness and civic responsibility. When marriage registration is poorly understood or deliberately avoided, it reflects gaps in legal literacy, civic education, and public understanding—areas that fall within the strategic domain of educational management. Therefore, investigating marriage registration is crucial not only for legal reform but also for strengthening education-based social governance.

One of the most pressing problems underlying the decline in marriage registration is the persistence of unregistered marriages (*nikah sirri*), which continue to operate on a large scale in Indonesian society. The Ministry of Religious Affairs reports that approximately 34.6 million couples are married without a marriage certificate, based on Population and Civil Registration data from 2021 (Arifin, 2024; Hamdanah & Thohir, 2025; Hidayat et al., 2024; Susanti et al., 2025). This situation is further reflected in the high number of *itsbat nikah* cases processed annually by religious courts nationwide, indicating a backlog of legal recognition demands. These conditions demonstrate that marriage registration cannot be treated as a simple administrative matter; rather, it is embedded in complex social, cultural, economic, and educational factors (Aisyah & Trianingsih, 2023; Hasan, 2023; Listrianti et al., 2023; Najiyah, 2025; S et al., 2023). Limited access to services, procedural complexity, distrust in state institutions, and partial understanding of religious and legal norms contribute to the persistence of unregistered marriages. From an educational management perspective, this problem also highlights weaknesses in the planning and implementation of legal and civic education programs, which have not sufficiently equipped communities with comprehensive family law literacy.

Recent developments indicate that unregistered marriage practices are undergoing a significant transformation, particularly through their migration into digital spaces. Online secret marriage services are increasingly promoted via social media and digital platforms using narratives of convenience, speed, affordability, and religious legitimacy. These narratives position unregistered marriage as a rational and acceptable alternative to formal registration, thereby normalizing and commodifying the practice (Wildan & Syamarina, 2024; Ananda et al., 2025). This phenomenon marks a critical shift: *nikah sirri* is no longer

confined to informal, localized social arrangements but has become a digitized service with economic incentives. More alarmingly, research has documented extreme risks associated with this practice, including its use as a cover for forced marriage and sex trafficking (Mutaqin & Sopyan, 2024). In this context, digital platforms function not only as channels of information but also as spaces of social learning, where public understanding is shaped. This underscores the urgent need for managed educational interventions that address digital literacy, legal awareness, and ethical reasoning in online environments (Badriyah, 2025; Fawaid et al., 2024; Holid, 2025; Naningsih et al., 2024).

Previous studies on unregistered marriages in Indonesia have extensively documented their legal and social consequences, particularly for women and children. Research consistently shows that *nikah sirri* leads to weak legal protection, uncertainty of family status, inheritance disputes, and barriers to accessing health care, education, and civil administration (Hafidzi et al., 2022; Idris et al., 2023; Arrosyid et al., 2023; Noviani, 2024). Policy-oriented literature also emphasizes marriage registration as a core instrument of family law governance and rights protection (Zainuddin et al., 2022; Warman et al., 2023). In parallel, studies on family law discourse in social media reveal that public understanding is shaped by digital narratives, authority claims, and the popularization of legal norms, often accompanied by gender bias and oversimplification (Amri et al., 2023; Handayani, 2022). However, these studies largely remain descriptive, focusing on impacts or discourse mapping, without translating findings into structured educational or managerial strategies.

Although recent research has begun to acknowledge the digitalization of unregistered marriage practices, scholarly attention remains fragmented. Studies tend to examine legal risks, cultural barriers, or service accessibility in isolation, while overlooking how public reasoning is formed and negotiated in digital spaces (Hadi & Masuwd, 2025; Hasani, 2025; Hidayati, 2024; Mukarromah, 2025; Wahyudi, 2025). Moreover, limited attention has been paid to how these findings could inform the design of systematic, evidence-based education strategies aimed at increasing family law literacy (Arifin, 2025; Purba et al., 2025). From a management education standpoint, this constitutes a critical research gap: the absence of models that integrate public discourse analysis with curriculum planning, educational messaging, and literacy module development. Without such integration, awareness campaigns risk being normative, top-down, and disconnected from how communities actually reason about marriage registration. Therefore, there is a pressing need for research that bridges sociological insights, digital discourse analysis, and educational management frameworks to produce operational interventions.

This study introduces a novel perspective by positioning online secret marriage services as a digitized, promoted, and commodified social practice, rather than merely an informal or cultural phenomenon. The state of the art lies in analyzing netizen discourse not as fragmented opinions but as structured patterns of reasoning that can inform educational management strategies. By employing the COM-B (Capability–Opportunity–Motivation–Behavior) framework, this research moves beyond description toward behavioral explanation, enabling the translation of discourse into actionable educational interventions. The novelty also lies in framing awareness-raising as a managed educational process—encompassing curriculum content, literacy modules, and digital messaging—rather than as isolated legal or moral appeals. Addressing this issue is crucial, as the normalization of unregistered marriage in digital spaces threatens long-term family protection and undermines the role of education as a vehicle for social regulation and civic competence.

Based on these considerations, this study addresses the following research problem: how do netizens negotiate the meaning of marriage registration in discussions of online secret marriage services, and how can these patterns be translated into effective education-based awareness strategies? The central argument of this study is that public attitudes toward marriage registration are shaped by the interaction of normative understanding, service-related experiences, and value-driven motivations, all of which can be systematically addressed through educational management. By analyzing YouTube comments, this research maps dominant arguments, justifications, rejections, and misconceptions surrounding family law literacy. The findings are then used to formulate an evidence-based awareness model in the form of educational messages and literacy modules aligned with public reasoning patterns. This study contributes theoretically by enriching family law and digital discourse studies, and practically by offering an educational management framework for strengthening legal literacy and family protection in the digital era.

RESEACH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design, as its primary focus is to gain an in-depth understanding of public reasoning, perceptions, and justifications regarding unregistered marriages and the urgency of marriage registration through analysis of comments on digital platforms. A case study design was chosen because it allows for intensive and contextual exploration of social phenomena, capturing public interactions and legal-cultural discourse, and linking empirical findings to established theoretical frameworks (Yin, 2014).

The research location comprises public comments on three YouTube videos discussing unregistered marriages and/or online secret marriage services: (1) Tribunnews: "Investigation of Unregistered Marriage Practices in Semarang, Costs Starting from IDR 1.4 million, including a Marriage Official and Witnesses"; (2) tvOneNews: "Viral!! Online Secret Marriage Services Cause a Stir in the Virtual World, HISSI Chair: Disrespectful to Women"; and (3) Kompas.com: "Viral Secret Marriage Services on TikTok, This is What the MUI Says!". These sites were selected because YouTube comments reflect a wide and diverse public discourse, allowing the study to access multiple perspectives, rationales, and evaluations regarding marriage legality and social practices.

Data collection involved documenting public comments (textual data) from the comment sections of the three videos (Niam et al., 2024; Nurfajriani et al., 2024). A total of 205 comments were purposively sampled, focusing on substantive responses related to secret marriages, marriage registration, legitimacy, socio-legal impacts, and online marriage services discussed in the videos. Comments that were purely promotional or irrelevant were treated as contextual data. Each comment was tagged with its video source to trace discourse context. Data cleaning removed irrelevant symbols and decorative characters while retaining the core argumentative content (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data analysis was conducted interactively following Miles and Huberman's model (Miles et al., 2014) through three stages: (1) data condensation (data reduction), which involved selecting, simplifying, and focusing the comments to highlight themes related to unregistered marriages and marriage registration; (2) data display, by mapping themes, creating coding matrices, and classifying patterns of public reasoning, including categories based on personal experience, references to authority, moral judgment, and consideration of benefits and risks; and (3) data verification (conclusion drawing/verification), conducted by reviewing category definitions, checking multi-category comments, and ensuring consistent assignment of comments to categories based on traceable reasons. The final outcome of the analysis includes a thematic map of public reasoning, a mapping of intervention points based on the COM-B framework (Capability, Opportunity, Motivation), and a draft model for awareness-raising strategies derived from empirical findings from the comment corpus.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Netizen Responses and Empirical Data Structure

This study analyzes 204 netizen comments collected from three mainstream Indonesian YouTube news channels Tribunnews, tvOneNews, and

Kompas.com that reported on the phenomenon of online secret marriage (nikah sirri) services. These platforms were selected because they function as central nodes of digital public discourse and attract heterogeneous audiences. The comments were treated as qualitative socio-legal data representing everyday reasoning rather than individual attitudes in isolation. As shown in Table 1, Tribunnews contributed the largest volume of comments, reflecting higher engagement and allowing for richer thematic saturation, while tvOneNews and Kompas.com provided comparative perspectives that reinforced the consistency of discourse patterns across media outlets.

Importantly, the comments do not simply express agreement or disagreement with nikah sirri. Instead, they reveal layered argumentative structures that combine religious reasoning, administrative experience, moral evaluation, and legal consequence assessment. This confirms that digital comment sections function as arenas of informal legal deliberation, where legality is interpreted, negotiated, and emotionally evaluated. Consequently, the findings should be understood not merely as opinions but as manifestations of legal consciousness embedded in digital culture (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). The data structure presented in Table 1 therefore serves as the empirical foundation for identifying dominant themes and for linking public discourse to broader theoretical frameworks.

Table 1. Data Sources and Distribution of Netizen Comments

Media Source	Platform	Number of Comments
Tribunnews	YouTube	140
tvOneNews	YouTube	53
Kompas.com	YouTube	11
Total		204

Table 1 presents the distribution of netizen comments analyzed in this study, showing how public responses were collected across three major Indonesian news media YouTube channels. Tribunnews contributed the largest portion with 140 comments, followed by tvOneNews with 53 comments, and Kompas.com with 11 comments, totaling 204 comments. This distribution highlights that the majority of the discourse was concentrated on Tribunnews, providing a richer dataset for capturing diverse public reasoning on the phenomenon of online secret marriage services.

Religious Legitimacy and the Contestation of Marriage Validity

One of the most salient findings is the dominance of religious legitimacy as a primary frame through which netizens assess online secret marriage services.

As summarized in Table 2, comments frequently employ Islamic normative vocabulary such as *halal*, *sah*, *rukun*, *wali*, *saksi*, and *zina*. These references indicate that many netizens evaluate *nikah sirri* primarily through religious criteria rather than statutory requirements. Some comments affirm that secret marriages are acceptable as long as religious conditions are fulfilled, while others strongly criticize the instrumentalization of religion to legitimize practices perceived as morally opportunistic.

From the perspective of legal culture, this pattern reflects a plural normative environment in which religious law and state law coexist but are not always perceived as equally authoritative (Friedman, 1969, 1975). Marriage registration is often framed as an external administrative layer that does not affect the “real” validity of marriage. However, other commenters challenge this separation by emphasizing that marriage is not merely about ritual compliance but also about responsibility, social recognition, and long-term obligations. Thus, religious discourse does not operate uniformly as a justification for *nikah sirri*; rather, it becomes a contested field where competing interpretations of marriage morality and legality intersect. This finding is crucial because it explains why legal arguments alone often fail to resonate without engagement with religious reasoning.

Table 2. Religious-Oriented Arguments in Netizen Responses

Type of Argument	Illustrative Comment Excerpt	Source
Affirmation of validity	“As long as it is halal and fulfills the pillars, it is valid.”	Tribunnews
Moral criticism	“Don’t hide behind religion just to justify lust.”	Tribunnews
Responsibility emphasis	“Marriage is not only about halal sex, but responsibility.”	tvOneNews
Normative questioning	“If it’s valid in Islam, why is it called illegal?”	Kompas.com

Table 2 illustrates netizens’ religious-oriented arguments regarding online secret marriage services. The affirmation of validity shows that some users accept secret marriages if they meet religious criteria such as being halal and fulfilling essential pillars. Moral criticism highlights concern that religion is sometimes misused to justify personal desires, particularly lust. Responsibility emphasis reflects the broader understanding that marriage entails duties beyond sexual permissibility, including family and social obligations. Lastly, normative questioning indicates public negotiation between religious validity and legal recognition, showing tension between Sharia compliance and state registration. Overall, these responses reveal that religious interpretation strongly shapes public perceptions of the legitimacy and consequences of unregistered marriages.

Administrative Reasoning and Marriage Registration as a Public Service

Beyond religious arguments, a significant portion of comments frame the issue of *nikah sirri* in administrative and procedural terms, as shown in Table 3. Netizens frequently compare official marriage registration at the KUA which is widely perceived as free or low-cost with secret marriage services that charge substantial fees despite producing no legal documentation. Other comments highlight bureaucratic obstacles, such as cross-regional domicile requirements, document transfer procedures, time delays, and informal costs associated with administrative processing.

These responses reflect a legal culture in which law is often experienced as a service system rather than as a normative framework of rights and obligations (Friedman, 1975). When registration is perceived as complicated or inefficient, compliance becomes conditional and negotiable. In this context, *nikah sirri* appears not as an act of defiance but as a pragmatic shortcut. This finding is important because it demonstrates that acceptance of unregistered marriage is frequently shaped by institutional friction rather than ideological rejection of the law. Therefore, policies that aim to increase marriage registration must address administrative accessibility and procedural transparency, not merely legal enforcement or moral persuasion.

Table 3. Administrative and Procedural Arguments in Netizen Comments

Administrative Focus	Illustrative Reasoning
Cost comparison	"Official marriage is free at the KUA, why pay millions?"
Bureaucratic barriers	"Documents across regions are complicated and slow."
Service rationality	"No documents, but very expensive—just a business."

Table 3 presents netizens' arguments related to the administrative and procedural aspects of marriage registration compared to online secret marriage services. The cost comparison highlights public awareness that official marriages at the KUA are free, making paid secret services appear unnecessary or exploitative. Bureaucratic barriers reflect frustrations with complex, time-consuming processes, especially for cross-regional document handling, which sometimes motivates individuals to seek alternative solutions. Service rationality captures skepticism toward the logic of secret services, framing them as profit-driven rather than fulfilling a genuine legal or social need. Together, these responses indicate that administrative accessibility and transparency significantly shape public attitudes toward marriage registration and the perceived legitimacy of unregistered practices.

Protection of Women and Children as a Consequential Frame

Another dominant pattern in netizen responses concerns the protection of women and children, which is consistently framed as a key consequence of marriage registration (Kholifatunnisak, 2024; Rusdiah, 2024; Setiawan & Rizal, 2024). As presented in Table 4, many comments explicitly associate unregistered marriages with abandonment, lack of legal remedies, vulnerability during pregnancy, and uncertainty regarding children’s legal status. In these narratives, registration is not merely an administrative obligation but a critical safeguard that enables access to rights and state protection.

This reasoning aligns closely with the “before the law” orientation of legal consciousness identified by Ewick and Silbey (1998), where law is perceived as a source of order, certainty, and protection. Importantly, these comments often coexist with religious reasoning rather than replacing it, suggesting that legal consciousness operates through overlapping narratives. The prominence of this frame helps explain why discussions of *nikah sirri* evoke strong emotional responses: the issue is not abstract legality but tangible harm. From a policy standpoint, this finding underscores the need to frame marriage registration as a mechanism of family protection rather than as bureaucratic compliance alone.

Table 4. Protection-Oriented Arguments in Netizen Responses

Focus Area	Illustrative Comment
Abandonment risk	“If he leaves, who can she complain to?”
Pregnancy vulnerability	“Women suffer most when they get pregnant.”
Child protection	“Children will have no legal certainty.”
Legal recourse	“They can’t demand their rights.”

Table 4 highlights the protection-oriented concerns raised by netizens in response to online secret marriage services. Comments in this table emphasize the social and legal vulnerabilities that unregistered marriages create, particularly for women and children. The abandonment risk captures worries about spouses leaving without consequences, while pregnancy vulnerability points to the heightened risks faced by women in unprotected situations. Child protection concerns show that unregistered marriages may leave children without legal recognition or rights, and legal recourse underscores the inability of affected parties to claim or enforce their rights. Collectively, these comments illustrate that public reasoning often prioritizes the protection of family members, reflecting both moral and pragmatic considerations in evaluating unregistered marriage practices.

Moral Judgment, Commodification, and Calls for Regulation

In addition to religious, administrative, and protective frames, netizen comments also display strong moral judgments and criticism of the commodification of marriage. Many commenters describe online nikah sirri services as businesses that exploit religious legitimacy for profit, reducing marriage to a transactional exchange. These critiques are often accompanied by moral language associating secret marriages with lust, infidelity, or avoidance of responsibility. Such narratives frame nikah sirri not only as legally risky but as socially and morally corrosive.

Although fewer in number, some comments explicitly call for state regulation, prohibition, or enforcement action. These demands indicate a shift from private moral condemnation to public governance expectations, suggesting that the digital visibility of nikah sirri services has transformed them into a matter of public concern. This finding is significant because it shows how digital platforms can accelerate the institutionalization and contestation of informal practices, thereby increasing pressure on regulatory authorities.

COM-B Analysis and Behavioral Implications

To translate these findings into strategic insight, this study applies the COM-B (Capability–Opportunity–Motivation) framework, summarized in Table 5. In the capability dimension, the data reveal not a lack of awareness, but persistent misconceptions particularly the sharp separation between religious validity and legal protection. In the opportunity dimension, administrative barriers and mobility constraints make unregistered pathways appear feasible and rational. Meanwhile, the motivation dimension is driven by strong moral emotions, including fear of adultery, concern for family responsibility, and anger toward perceived exploitation.

This mapping explains why nikah sirri remains attractive for some individuals despite widespread criticism. It also demonstrates that effective intervention must be multi-layered: legal literacy alone is insufficient without service reform, and administrative simplification will fail without moral resonance (Michie et al., 2011). By integrating legal culture, legal consciousness, and COM-B, this study provides a coherent analytical chain that links public discourse to evidence-based educational and policy strategies.

Table 5. COM-B Mapping of Netizen Reasoning

COM-B Component	Key Issue Identified
Capability	Misunderstanding of registration's legal function
Opportunity	Administrative complexity and service access
Motivation	Moral values, emotions, and family protection concerns

Table 5 presents the COM-B mapping of netizen reasoning regarding online secret marriage services, highlighting how public attitudes are shaped by three interrelated factors. In the Capability dimension, many comments reveal misunderstandings about the legal function of marriage registration, showing that some netizens separate religious validity from state recognition and question the necessity of formal documentation. In the Opportunity dimension, responses point to practical barriers such as administrative complexity, cross-regional procedures, and difficulties accessing official services, which make unregistered marriages appear as a pragmatic solution. Finally, in the Motivation dimension, moral values, emotional considerations, and concerns for family protection especially for women and children play a central role in shaping opinions, influencing whether people justify, reject, or call for regulation of secret marriages. Together, these three dimensions explain why online secret marriages persist despite legal frameworks, and they provide key leverage points for designing targeted educational and intervention strategies.

CONCLUSION

The most important finding of this study is that marriage registration in the digital public sphere is not perceived as a fixed legal obligation, but as a negotiated field of meaning structured around three interrelated axes: religious legitimacy, the rationality of state services, and the need for legal protection. The key lesson (*hikmah penelitian*) derived from this finding is that compliance with marriage registration cannot be explained solely by normative awareness or moral persuasion. Instead, public reasoning shows that religious validity provides a powerful moral foundation for decision-making, while the perceived effectiveness and accessibility of administrative services determine whether registration is experienced as feasible and meaningful. When registration is associated with procedural friction, uncertainty, or limited institutional support, unregistered marriage especially when mediated through digital services—emerges as a “practical” alternative rather than an act of deliberate legal resistance. This insight demonstrates that legality in family law operates not only through formal rules but through everyday encounters with institutions, narratives of legitimacy, and assessments of protection. Therefore, strengthening marriage registration requires addressing not only legal norms but also service experience and value resonance within digital public discourse.

The strength of this article lies in its conceptual and methodological contribution to socio-legal scholarship. Substantively, it advances the literature by reframing *nikah sirri* from an informal, marginal social practice into a digitally mediated service phenomenon, where legitimacy is produced, negotiated, and

commodified through platform logics. Methodologically, it demonstrates the analytical value of netizen comments as socio-legal data that capture lived legality in digital space. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its reliance on comment-based data from specific media channels, which restricts its ability to generalize findings across platforms or to capture the lived experiences of service users directly. Future research should therefore complement this discourse-based approach with qualitative fieldwork, such as in-depth interviews or focus group discussions involving couples who have entered unregistered marriages, KUA officials, religious authorities, and women's and children's rights advocates. Such studies would allow for deeper verification of service friction, decision-making processes, and the real-life consequences of digitally facilitated unregistered marriages, thereby strengthening both empirical grounding and policy relevance.

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