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Geographical Perspective on Digital Access, "Marriage Is Scary" Content Exposure, and Marriage Readiness among Generation Z in Binjai City

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the associations between digital access, exposure to "Marriage Is Scary" (MIS) content on TikTok, and marriage readiness among Generation Z in Binjai City, Indonesia. A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 287 never-married TikTok users aged 20–29 years, selected through purposive sampling with proportional quotas. Data were analyzed using multiple linear regression and bootstrapping mediation analysis with 5,000 resamples using the PROCESS Macro for SPSS. Digital access was positively associated with MIS exposure ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 22% of the variance. MIS exposure was negatively associated with marriage readiness ($\beta = -0.41$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 17% of the variance. A significant indirect effect of digital access on marriage readiness through MIS exposure was identified ($\beta = -0.19$, 95% CI [−0.27, −0.11]), while the direct effect was not significant ($\beta = -0.09$, $p = 0.129$). Spatial analysis revealed subdistrict-level variation, with Binjai Kota recording the highest levels of MIS exposure and marriage readiness, while Binjai Barat recorded the lowest. Financial readiness was the weakest dimension of marriage readiness (mean = 2.4). The sample was predominantly female (61.3%), while 48.8% had completed senior high school and 54.4% were employed. These findings indicate that digital access, algorithmically mediated content exposure, and geographical context are interconnected in shaping marriage-related perceptions among Generation Z. The study highlights the value of integrating media geography into research on digitally mediated social attitudes. Given the cross-sectional design, the findings should be interpreted as associative rather than causal.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, social media has transformed from a mere communication tool into a significant shaper of social reality, particularly for Generation Z (Kullolli & Trebicka, 2023). Among various platforms, TikTok holds a unique position due to its algorithm, which actively curates content based on user preferences, creating a feedback loop in which engaging content is continuously reproduced (Peña-Fernández et al., 2022). These algorithmic characteristics make TikTok not merely a communication channel but an agent capable of influencing young people's perspectives on social institutions, including marriage (Cherukut et al., 2025). As a globally standardised information infrastructure, TikTok structures visibility, formats narratives, individualises exposure, and participates in the production of social knowledge about marriage, gender roles, and relationship anxiety (Mahetaji & Nieborg, 2023; Zaborova & Markova, 2021). Yet this

algorithmic curation does not operate uniformly across space, as access to and engagement with such content remain shaped by uneven digital infrastructure across regions (Perl & Goetz, 2016), underscoring the need to examine perceptions of marriage through a geographical lens.

The viral "Marriage is Scary" (MIS) content trend on TikTok reflects a significant shift in marriage perceptions among Generation Z (Falimu et al., 2023; Rambe & Iwan, 2025). Content centred on fear of marriage, concerns about choosing the wrong partner, and financial instability has been widely consumed by millions of TikTok users in Indonesia (Mariska & Sumardjijati, 2025; Lutfi, 2025). However, research on this phenomenon has rarely been examined from a geographical perspective, as existing studies remain dominated by communication psychology approaches that overlook spatial and contextual dimensions (Rahmatillah et al., 2023; Satriyanto & Oktaviani, 2025). Studies integrating social media, perceptions of marriage, and spatial analysis at the subdistrict level remain very limited, particularly in emerging medium-sized cities such as Binjai (Apte & Upadhyay, 2022). Binjai City comprises five subdistricts with diverse characteristics and varying levels of digital infrastructure, from Binjai Kota, the urban centre, to Binjai Barat, a peripheral area. This geographical variation provides a valuable context for examining how spatial factors influence digital content exposure and its relationship with social perceptions. This research gap constitutes the primary point of departure for this study.

This study focuses on digital access, defined as the technical and infrastructural capacity to engage with digital media, including smartphone ownership, internet connectivity, signal quality, and frequency of use. This operational definition is grounded in media geography perspectives that emphasise the spatial distribution of digital infrastructure (Perl & Goetz, 2016; Egard & Hansson, 2023). It is important to distinguish between digital access as measured in this study and digital access in the broader normative sense. Digital access encompasses usability, human-centred design, interaction quality, and participatory capacity as defined in international standards such as ISO 9241-11 (usability definitions), ISO 9241-110 (interaction principles), ISO 9241-210 (human-centred design), and WCAG 2.2 (web access) (International Organization for Standardization, 2018; World Wide Web Consortium, 2023). While these international frameworks provide valuable analytical reference points for understanding broader access issues, including the ability to critically evaluate algorithmic content, navigate digital interfaces, and participate meaningfully in digital spaces, they are not directly applicable as measurement frameworks in this study. Instead, national frameworks such as Law No. 8 of 2016 on Persons with Disabilities and the SPBE (Electronic-Based Government System) policy offer more context-sensitive reference horizons for understanding digital participation in Indonesia.

To address the research challenges, this study proposes a conceptual framework that integrates digital access, exposure to MIS content, and marriage readiness from a media geography perspective. The theoretical foundation draws on three complementary frameworks. Castells's (2020) Network Society theory explains why digital access is central to social participation and how digital networks are embedded in physical geographies; Adams (2020) Media Geography theory views media as agents of spatial production, where digital and physical spaces are mutually entangled; and Cresswell (2021) the concept of Place and Mobility explains variations in vulnerability across regions. Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, 1969; Fu, 2025) provides an additional lens for understanding how cumulative media consumption shapes perceptions of social reality through repeated exposure. However, previous studies have not systematically integrated these geographical perspectives to understand how digital content exposure relates to perceptions of marriage in medium-sized Indonesian cities.

Several recent studies have approached these issues separately without connecting them geographically. Hidayah & Sessiani (2025) examined the "Marriage is Scary" trend through a qualitative lens, finding that repeated exposure to MIS content heightens anxiety and diminishes confidence toward marriage among Gen Z users, yet their analysis remained confined to psychological mechanisms without accounting for where such effects concentrate or vary across regions. From a different angle, Kartiasih et al. (2023) they applied spatial and multivariate analysis to map inequalities in Indonesia's regional digital development, demonstrating that digital infrastructure disparities are closely tied to socioeconomic conditions across provinces, but their study stopped at infrastructure and did not extend to how such spatial disparities translate into differentiated exposure to social media content or its downstream effects on social attitudes.

Neither line of inquiry has connected the geography of digital access with the geography of algorithmically mediated perceptions of marriage, leaving a gap in understanding of how subdistrict-level infrastructural variation shapes the way Gen Z encounters and internalises MIS content. This gap carries particular urgency in medium-sized Indonesian cities such as Binjai, where rapid but uneven digital penetration across five subdistricts, ranging from the urbanised Binjai Kota to the peripheral Binjai Barat, creates conditions ripe for localised disparities in both content exposure and marriage readiness, yet remains largely unexamined in existing literature dominated by national or metropolitan-scale studies. Addressing this gap, the present study departs from the dominant communication psychology approach by situating the digital divide within a geographical lens, integrating Network Society, Media Geography, Place and Mobility, and Cultivation Theory into a single analytical framework, and applying GIS to visualise spatial variation across subdistricts, while acknowledging that the descriptive nature of spatial analysis with only five spatial units preclude advanced spatial statistical testing.

This study develops a mediation model in which digital access is hypothesized to be associated with marriage readiness through MIS content exposure, pursuing this through mapping the spatial distribution of digital access across subdistricts, measuring MIS exposure and marriage readiness among Gen Z aged 20–29, analyzing the association between digital access and MIS exposure, examining the association between MIS exposure and marriage readiness, and describing how these patterns vary geographically across Binjai's subdistricts. H1 states digital access is positively associated with MIS exposure; H2 states MIS exposure is negatively associated with marriage readiness; and H3 states MIS exposure mediates the association between digital access and marriage readiness. This study contributes theoretically to media geography, practically to spatially based digital literacy policies, and methodologically by providing a replicable model that integrates surveys, statistical analysis, and GIS.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

The study employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, in which the quantitative phase was conducted first, followed by a qualitative phase to provide a deeper explanation of the quantitative findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023). This design was guided by a conceptual framework that assumes that marriage readiness among Generation Z is shaped by their digital access and exposure to marriage-related content online, particularly the "Marriage is Scary" (MIS) discourse, which frames marriage through narratives of risk, inequality, and negative experiences. The framework positions digital access as the contextual factor that opens opportunities for exposure to MIS content, which in turn functions as the intervening mechanism shaping perceptions of marriage and ultimately marriage readiness as the outcome. Because Generation Z across Binjai City's five subdistricts differ in digital

infrastructure, social media use patterns, and socioeconomic characteristics, this chain of relationships was expected to vary geographically, and spatial variation across subdistricts was therefore built into the interpretation of the quantitative findings from the outset.

The quantitative phase employed a cross-sectional survey using self-administered questionnaires to measure digital access, MIS exposure, perceptions of marriage, and marriage readiness among Generation Z in Binjai City, thereby identifying patterns of association among variables and differences across geographical areas. The subsequent qualitative phase used Focus Group Discussions to explain and contextualise the statistical results, particularly findings that required deeper interpretation or showed notable spatial variation, and to explore how participants interpreted MIS content, how it shaped their perceptions of marriage, and why marriage readiness differed across groups or locations (Azhar, 2020). The term "treatment" in this study does not denote an experimental intervention but refers to naturally occurring levels of digital access and MIS exposure, a distinction that matters because the cross-sectional design does not permit causal claims; the integrated mixed-methods approach instead allows the study to first identify statistical patterns and then explain the meanings, experiences, and contextual factors underlying them.

Research Location

This study was conducted in Binjai City, North Sumatra Province, Indonesia, which consists of five subdistricts: Binjai Utara, Binjai Selatan, Binjai Timur, Binjai Barat, and Binjai Kota. Location as shown in **Figure 1** below.

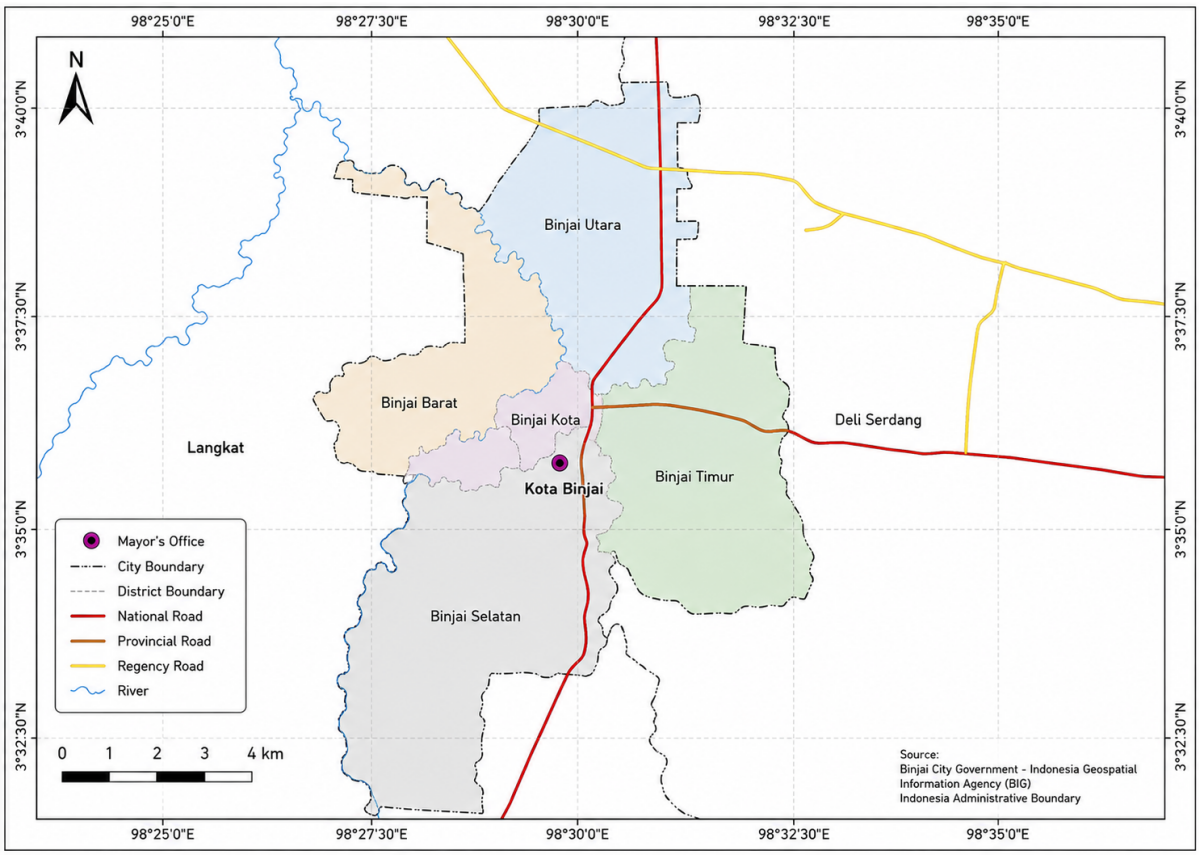

Figure 1. Research Location (Source: Data Processing, 2026)

Population and Sample

The population of this study comprised 51,290 Generation Z individuals aged 20 to 29 years who had never married and resided in Binjai City during 2024, based on data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) of Binjai City (BPS, 2024a). This population was selected because the age range of 20 to 29 years represents the critical period for marriage decision-making, and the mapping material is relevant to understanding spatial variations in digital access and marriage perceptions. The sample was selected using purposive sampling with proportional quotas, taking into account the population proportions of each subdistrict.

This assumption was considered representative as it covered the entire population in the study area, allowing the sample selection to be conducted in a measurable and accountable manner. Accordingly, proportional allocation was applied across five subdistricts to ensure geographical representation. The researcher used 287 respondents as the research sample, distributed across subdistricts with Binjai Utara (63 respondents), Binjai Selatan (52 respondents), Binjai Timur (60 respondents), Binjai Barat (55 respondents), and Binjai Kota (57 respondents). After data screening and verification, a total of 287 valid responses were included in the final analysis.

Research Procedure

This study was conducted in three stages: preparation, implementation, and evaluation.

1) In the preparation stage, the researcher conducted preliminary observations across Binjai City's five subdistricts to identify variations in digital infrastructure and settlement characteristics, developed research instruments and tools, prepared questionnaire materials, and validated the research instruments. The validation results showed that the questionnaire achieved a feasibility percentage of 89.5% among expert lecturers, placing it in the "very feasible to use" category and consistent with the research objectives, indicators, and the characteristics of media geography-oriented research. At this stage, base maps of Binjai City's administrative boundaries were also prepared to support the subsequent spatial analysis.
2) The implementation stage was carried out over four weeks, from June to July 2026, using a survey method involving questionnaire administration and Focus Group Discussions. At this stage, respondents were given questionnaires to measure their digital access, MIS exposure, and marriage readiness, with each response georeferenced to its subdistrict of residence to allow spatial disaggregation of the data. FGDs were conducted to deepen the interpretation of quantitative findings, with participants selected in proportion from subdistricts with the highest and lowest levels of digital access and MIS exposure to capture contrasting geographical experiences. The FGDs followed standard focus group discussion procedures, beginning with formulating guiding questions, followed by selecting participants, conducting the FGD sessions, transcribing and coding the data, and finally interpreting the findings.
3) In the evaluation stage, an analysis was conducted on the questionnaire results, FGD transcripts, and spatial data, the latter processed using GIS to visualise subdistrict-level variations in digital access, MIS exposure, and marriage readiness across Binjai City. The results of this analysis were used to assess the associations among digital access, MIS exposure, and marriage readiness in Generation Z, and to identify the geographical patterns underlying these associations.

Data Collection Techniques

The data collection techniques used in this study included tests (questionnaires), observation, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and documentation studies. The questionnaire was used to measure respondents' digital access, MIS exposure,

and marriage readiness through multiple-choice and Likert scale questions covering the indicators proposed by Van Dijk (2020) for digital access, content analysis for MIS exposure (Mariska & Sumardjijati, 2025); Shemila and Manikandan, 2018) for marriage readiness, as presented in **Table 1**. An observation was conducted to examine the characteristics of the research location and the spatial variation in digital infrastructure conditions across subdistricts, providing contextual grounding for the geographical interpretation of the survey data. The FGD was used to explore respondents' perceptions and experiences related to exposure to MIS content and marriage readiness, with attention to how these experiences differed across subdistricts, while documentation served as supporting data, including administrative and geographical records of Binjai City.

Table 1. Research Indicators

Variable	Indicator	Description
Digital Access	Smartphone ownership	Ownership and type of smartphone used
	Internet connectivity	Availability and type of internet connection
	Signal quality	Self-rated quality of mobile signal
	Frequency of access	Number of days per week accessing TikTok
	Duration of access	Minutes per session spent on TikTok
	Wi-Fi availability	Availability of Wi-Fi at home/work/study
MIS Exposure	Frequency of encountering MIS content	How often MIS content appears on FYP
	Duration of engagement	Time spent watching, liking, commenting
	Variety of MIS themes	Range of negative marriage narratives encountered
	Perceived intensity	Perceived intensity of negative marriage content
Marriage Readiness	Psychological readiness	Emotional stability and mental preparedness
	Social readiness	Social skills and relationship expectations
	Financial readiness	Financial stability and income adequacy
	Religious readiness	Spiritual preparation and religious values
	Maturity readiness	Self-awareness and personal growth

(Source: Adapted from Mariska & Sumardjijati, 2025; Shemila & Manikandan, 2018).

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics to describe respondent characteristics and variable distributions, Pearson correlation to examine bivariate relationships between variables, and multiple linear regression to test the direct hypotheses while controlling for age, gender, education, and employment. Mediation analysis using PROCESS Macro Model 4 with 5,000 bootstrap resamples was employed to test the indirect path of digital access on marriage readiness through MIS exposure, while thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke (2006) a six-step framework was used to analyse FGD transcripts. Spatial analysis was conducted using ArcGIS 10.8 to produce thematic maps of digital access, MIS exposure, and marriage readiness across Binjai City's subdistricts, allowing the statistical patterns to be interpreted alongside their geographical distribution. Prior to administration, the questionnaire was reviewed by supervising lecturers and expert validators to ensure the items' suitability for the research indicators adapted from Mariska & Sumardjijati, (2025) and Shemila & Manikandan (2018), as presented in Table 1, and then tested for validity and reliability using SPSS version 26.0 on a pilot sample of 30 respondents outside the main sample.

Item validity was assessed using Pearson Product Moment correlation, with

an item considered valid if its calculated r value exceeded the r table value of 0.361 at α equals 0.05 and df equals 28. Of the 33 items tested, 30 (90.9 per cent) were found valid, while the remaining 3 were invalid due to unclear formulation that made them difficult for respondents to understand, compounded by some respondents answering carelessly without fully reading the questions. These invalid items were excluded from the final instrument. Reliability testing using Cronbach's Alpha yielded values of 0.85 for digital access, 0.84 for MIS exposure, and 0.87 for marriage readiness, all falling into the high category and indicating that the instrument was reliable for use in this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Spatial Variation in Digital Access and Marriage Readiness among Generation Z

The characteristics of the 287 respondents show that the sample was distributed across the five subdistricts of Binjai City. As presented in Table 2, the respondents were predominantly female (61.3%), while male respondents accounted for 38.7%. In terms of age, respondents aged 20–22 years constituted the largest group (39.0%), followed by those aged 23–25 years (35.9%) and 26–29 years (25.1%). Regarding educational background, 48.8% had completed senior high school, 29.6% were college students, 17.1% were bachelor's graduates, and 4.5% had completed junior high school. More than half of the respondents were employed (54.4%), while 34.1% were students and 11.5% were unemployed.

Table 2. Respondent Characteristics (N = 287)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age Group	20–22 years	112	39.0
	23–25 years	103	35.9
	26–29 years	72	25.1
Gender	Male	111	38.7
	Female	176	61.3
Education	Junior high school	13	4.5
	Senior high school	140	48.8
	College student	85	29.6
	Bachelor's graduate	49	17.1
Employment	Employed	156	54.4
	Student	98	34.1
	Unemployed	33	11.5
Subdistrict	Binjai Utara	63	22.0
	Binjai Selatan	52	18.1
	Binjai Timur	60	20.9
	Binjai Barat	55	19.2
	Binjai Kota	57	19.9

(Source: Primary data analysis, 2026).

The proportional distribution of respondents across the five subdistricts is important because the study does not treat Binjai City as a homogeneous geographical space. Instead, each subdistrict represents a different spatial context in which digital access and exposure to social media content occur. The descriptive results presented in Table 2 demonstrate clear differences among subdistricts in the three variables examined.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics by Subdistrict

Subdistrict	Digital Access (Mean)	MIS Exposure (Mean)	Marriage Readiness (Mean)	n
Binjai Utara	3.9	3.8	3.1	63
Binjai Selatan	3.7	3.6	2.9	52
Binjai Timur	3.5	3.3	2.7	60
Binjai Barat	3.1	2.9	2.5	55
Binjai Kota	4.2	4.1	3.4	57
Overall	3.7	3.4	2.9	287

Note: Scores range from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high)
(Source: Primary data analysis, 2026).

The overall mean score for digital access was 3.7, indicating a relatively high level of digital access among respondents. MIS exposure had an overall mean of 3.4, while marriage readiness recorded a lower overall mean of 2.9. However, the overall averages conceal considerable spatial differences. Binjai Kota recorded the highest mean across all three variables: digital access (4.2), MIS exposure (4.1), and marriage readiness (3.4). In contrast, Binjai Barat recorded the lowest values, with digital access at 3.1, MIS exposure at 2.9, and marriage readiness at 2.5. Binjai Utara also showed relatively high scores, with digital access at 3.9, MIS exposure at 3.8, and marriage readiness at 3.1. Meanwhile, Binjai Selatan and Binjai Timur occupied intermediate positions across the three indicators.

The pattern indicates that digital access and MIS exposure tend to vary together across the subdistricts. Binjai Kota, which recorded the highest digital access, also recorded the highest MIS exposure, whereas Binjai Barat, with the lowest digital access, recorded the lowest MIS exposure. This spatial correspondence suggests that differences in the capacity to access and use digital media may be reflected in differences in exposure to algorithmically mediated content. The pattern is particularly relevant from a media geography perspective because digital media consumption is not detached from physical space. Access to devices, connectivity, signal quality, and opportunities to use digital services remain embedded in specific geographic and socioeconomic contexts.

The geographical pattern observed in Binjai is consistent with the findings that Kartiasih et al. (2023), who examined regional digital development across 460 districts and cities in Indonesia using spatial and multivariate analysis. Their study identified a significant spatial digital divide, with digital development generally declining from core cities toward more peripheral areas. They also found that education, GRDP per capita, population, and the number of formal workers were positively associated with regional digital development. In the context of Binjai City, the higher digital access observed in Binjai Kota and the lower level found in Binjai Barat similarly indicate that digital access may follow differences in the characteristics and position of places within the urban system. Although the present study operates at a much smaller spatial scale and does not measure the same regional digital development index, the observed pattern provides a local illustration of the broader core–peripheral tendency identified by Kartiasih et al. (2023).

A similar spatial pattern was reported by Jaya et al. (2024) in their study of the spatiotemporal distribution and clustering of Indonesia's Digital Society Index. Using district-level spatial analysis, the study found that digital transformation was unevenly distributed across Indonesia, with digital development hotspots concentrated primarily in Java, while lower levels persisted in eastern Indonesia. The study further demonstrated that digital development increased nationally between 2022 and 2023, but that substantial spatial disparities remained in 2024. These findings

reinforce the interpretation that digital development should be understood not only in terms of individual access but also in relation to the geographical context in which individuals live.

The present findings extend this spatial discussion by connecting digital access with a social-attitudinal outcome. While previous spatial studies have primarily focused on digital infrastructure, digital development, or digital society indicators, the current study shows that spatial differences in digital access coincide with differences in exposure to a particular form of algorithmically mediated social content and in marriage readiness. The lowest marriage readiness was observed in Binjai Barat (2.5), while the highest was found in Binjai Kota (3.4). Thus, the geographical pattern does not simply describe where digital access is higher or lower; it provides a basis for examining how different digital environments are associated with differences in young people's social perceptions and readiness for marriage.

The dimension-level results also provide an important explanation of the relatively low overall marriage readiness. Financial readiness was the weakest dimension, with a mean score of 2.4, whereas social readiness was the strongest dimension, with a mean of 3.3. This suggests that respondents' readiness for marriage was determined not solely by psychological or social considerations but also by perceptions of economic preparedness. The spatial distribution of respondents therefore needs to be considered alongside the socioeconomic characteristics of the places in which they live.

The findings reveal an urban–peripheral pattern in Binjai City, with Binjai Kota occupying the highest position and Binjai Barat the lowest across digital access, MIS exposure, and marriage readiness. This pattern should not be interpreted as evidence that geographical location directly determines marriage readiness. Rather, it indicates that place provides a contextual setting in which digital connectivity, exposure to social media narratives, and socioeconomic resources intersect. The results therefore support a geographical interpretation in which digital and physical spaces are interconnected, differences between places shape the conditions under which Generation Z encounters digital content and forms perceptions concerning marriage.

Digital Access, "Marriage Is Scary" Exposure, and Marriage Readiness: A Geographical Perspective

The relationship between digital access, exposure to "Marriage Is Scary" (MIS) content, and marriage readiness was examined using Pearson correlation, hierarchical regression, and mediation analysis. The results indicate that the three variables do not have an equivalent relationship. Digital access was positively associated with MIS exposure, whereas MIS exposure was negatively associated with marriage readiness. In contrast, the direct relationship between digital access and marriage readiness was not statistically significant.

Table 4. Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variable	Digital Access	MIS Exposure	Marriage Readiness
Digital Access	1.00		
MIS Exposure	0.47*	1.00	
Marriage Readiness	-0.09^{ns}	-0.41*	1.00

Note: *p < 0.001; ns = not significant (p = 0.129).
(Source: Primary data analysis, 2026).

The correlation analysis shows a moderate positive association between digital access and MIS exposure (r = 0.47, p < 0.001). Respondents with higher digital access tended to report greater exposure to MIS content. This relationship corresponds with the spatial pattern presented in the previous section, where Binjai Kota recorded

the highest digital access (mean = 4.2) and the highest MIS exposure (mean = 4.1), whereas Binjai Barat recorded the lowest scores for both variables (3.1 and 2.9, respectively). The consistency between the individual-level statistical association and the subdistrict-level distribution suggests that digital connectivity and content exposure are spatially connected within the study area.

From a geographical perspective, digital access represents more than an individual's ability to connect to the internet. It also reflects the conditions under which individuals enter and participate in digital spaces. Differences in connectivity, signal quality, device ownership, and frequency of use may affect the intensity of individuals' exposure to particular forms of algorithmically curated content. Consequently, the positive association between digital access and MIS exposure indicates that the geography of connectivity can also become a geography of content exposure.

This interpretation can be compared with Keldal & Kılıç (2021), who examined the relationship between social media addiction, marital beliefs, and attitudes toward cohabitation among emerging adults. Their study demonstrates that social media use is relevant to how young adults construct beliefs concerning marriage and intimate relationships. However, their analysis primarily focused on individual-level associations and did not examine how these relationships vary across geographical spaces. The present study extends this line of inquiry by situating digital exposure within a specific geographical context and demonstrating that the relationship between digital access and exposure to marriage-related content also corresponds to spatial differences among Binjai's subdistricts.

The second finding concerns the negative relationship between MIS exposure and marriage readiness. The correlation coefficient was -0.41 ($p < 0.001$), indicating that higher exposure to MIS content was associated with lower marriage readiness. This relationship was considerably stronger than the direct association between digital access and marriage readiness, which was weak and statistically non-significant ($r = -0.09$, $p = 0.129$).

The result suggests that digital access itself should not be interpreted as a direct factor reducing marriage readiness. Instead, the content encountered through digital access appears to be more closely associated with respondents' perceptions of marriage. This distinction is important because individuals with similar levels of digital connectivity may encounter different content environments depending on their patterns of use, interaction, and algorithmic recommendations. In the context of media geography, digital space is therefore not simply a neutral channel through which information passes, but a socially produced environment in which particular narratives become more visible to particular users.

The finding is supported by Wang et al. (2025), who examined 1,390 Generation Z respondents across 31 provincial administrative regions in China. Their study distinguished among different forms of online marriage information and found that exposure to marriage-cost information was negatively associated with marriage intention, whereas exposure to marriage-utility information was positively associated with it. They further found that marriage values mediated the relationship between online marriage information and marriage intentions and expected marriage age.

The comparison is particularly relevant to the present study because it shows that online exposure does not have a uniform relationship with marriage-related attitudes. The nature of the information encountered matters. In the present study, MIS exposure represents predominantly negative narratives concerning marriage, including fears of choosing the wrong partner, relationship failure, financial instability, and other risks associated with marriage. Therefore, the negative association between MIS exposure and marriage readiness is consistent with the broader finding Wang et al. (2025) that exposure to marriage-cost information can be associated with less favourable marriage expectations. At the same time, the present

study differs in that it focuses specifically on MIS content on TikTok and incorporates spatial differences within a single Indonesian city. The regression analysis further demonstrates that these relationships remain significant after controlling for age, gender, education, and employment.

Table 5. Hierarchical Regression Analysis with Control Variables

Model	Predictor	β	SE	t	p	VIF	R^2
Model 1	Digital Access → MIS Exposure	0.47	0.06	7.83	<0.001	1.42	0.22
Model 2	MIS Exposure → Marriage Readiness	-0.41	0.05	-8.20	<0.001	1.42	0.17
Model 3	Digital Access → Marriage Readiness	-0.09	0.06	-1.52	0.129	1.42	0.01

Note: Control variables (age, gender, education, and employment) were included in all models. Model 1: $F(5,281) = 15.84$, $p < 0.001$; Model 2: $F(5,281) = 11.52$, $p < 0.001$; Model 3: $F(5,281) = 0.58$, $p = 0.714$.
(Source: Primary data analysis, 2026).

Digital access was a significant predictor of MIS exposure ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 22% of the variance. MIS exposure significantly predicted marriage readiness in a negative direction ($\beta = -0.41$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 17% of its variance. However, digital access did not significantly predict marriage readiness directly ($\beta = -0.09$, $p = 0.129$), with the model explaining only 1% of the variance. All VIF values were 1.42.

These results provide an important geographical interpretation. The absence of a significant direct relationship between digital access and marriage readiness suggests that places with higher digital connectivity should not be automatically assumed to have lower marriage readiness. Rather, digital connectivity creates opportunities for exposure to diverse forms of content, while the relationship between such exposure and marriage readiness may depend on the narratives that emerge in the user's digital environment.

This interpretation is also reflected in the spatial results. Binjai Kota had the highest levels of digital access and MIS exposure, yet recorded the highest marriage readiness. Binjai Barat had the lowest levels of digital access and MIS exposure and recorded the lowest marriage readiness. Thus, the spatial pattern does not support the simple assumption that greater digital access necessarily leads to lower marriage readiness. The mediation analysis provides further evidence for this interpretation.

Table 6. Mediation Analysis Results (PROCESS Macro Model 4)

Association	β	SE	t	p	95% CI
Digital Access → MIS Exposure	0.47	0.06	7.83	<0.001	[0.35, 0.59]
MIS Exposure → Marriage Readiness	-0.41	0.05	-8.20	<0.001	[-0.51, -0.31]
Digital Access → Marriage Readiness (Direct)	-0.09	0.06	-1.52	0.129	[-0.21, 0.03]
In Direct Path (via MIS)	-0.19	0.04		<0.001	[-0.27, -0.11]
Total Association	-0.28	0.05	-5.60	<0.001	[-0.38, -0.18]

Note: Bootstrap resamples = 5,000; CI = bias-corrected confidence interval.
(Source: Primary data analysis, 2026).

The indirect association between digital access and marriage readiness through MIS exposure was significant ($\beta = -0.19$, 95% CI [-0.27, -0.11]), while the direct association remained non-significant ($\beta = -0.09$, 95% CI [-0.21, 0.03]). Because the

confidence interval for the indirect effect does not include zero, the results support a statistically significant indirect association through MIS exposure. Age and education were positively associated with marriage readiness, whereas female gender was negatively associated with marriage readiness.

The mediation result suggests that digital access is relevant to marriage readiness primarily through the content environment users encounter. From the perspective of media geography, this means that the spatial distribution of connectivity can shape the conditions under which particular narratives become accessible and repeatedly encountered. However, this does not mean that geographical location directly determines exposure or marriage readiness. Instead, geographical space provides the context in which digital practices, social networks, socioeconomic conditions, and algorithmic content distribution interact.

The spatial pattern in Binjai Kota is particularly important for interpreting the mediation result. Although Binjai Kota recorded the highest MIS exposure, it also recorded the highest marriage readiness. This apparent contradiction indicates that high exposure to negative marriage narratives does not necessarily translate uniformly into low readiness. The finding suggests the presence of contextual factors that may shape how individuals interpret and respond to MIS content. In other words, exposure is an opportunity to encounter a narrative, whereas its meaning and consequences may depend on the user's social and spatial environment.

The findings therefore complement the results of Wang et al. (2025), who demonstrated that the relationship between online marriage information and marriage expectations depends in part on the type of information encountered and the values through which individuals interpret it. Their study was conducted across 31 provinces, whereas the present research focuses on five subdistricts within Binjai City. This difference in spatial scale is important: Wang et al. demonstrate variation across a large national territory, whereas the present study shows that meaningful spatial variation can also be observed within a single medium-sized city.

The results statistically support all three hypotheses. H1 is supported because digital access was positively associated with MIS exposure. H2 is supported because MIS exposure was negatively associated with marriage readiness. H3 is supported because MIS exposure significantly mediated the association between digital access and marriage readiness. Nevertheless, these findings should be interpreted as statistical associations rather than causal effects. The cross-sectional design does not establish the temporal sequence required to conclude that digital access causes MIS exposure and that MIS exposure subsequently causes lower marriage readiness. Longitudinal research would be necessary to establish causal ordering.

Urban–Peripheral Differences in MIS Exposure and Marriage Readiness: Integrating Spatial and Qualitative Evidence

The spatial distribution of digital access, exposure to "Marriage Is Scary" (MIS) content, and marriage readiness reveals a clear urban–peripheral gradient across Binjai City. As shown in Figure 2, Binjai Kota, representing the urban centre, recorded the highest mean scores for digital access (4.2), MIS exposure (4.1), and marriage readiness (3.4). In contrast, Binjai Barat, representing a more peripheral area, recorded the lowest scores across all three variables, with digital access at 3.1, MIS exposure at 2.9, and marriage readiness at 2.5.

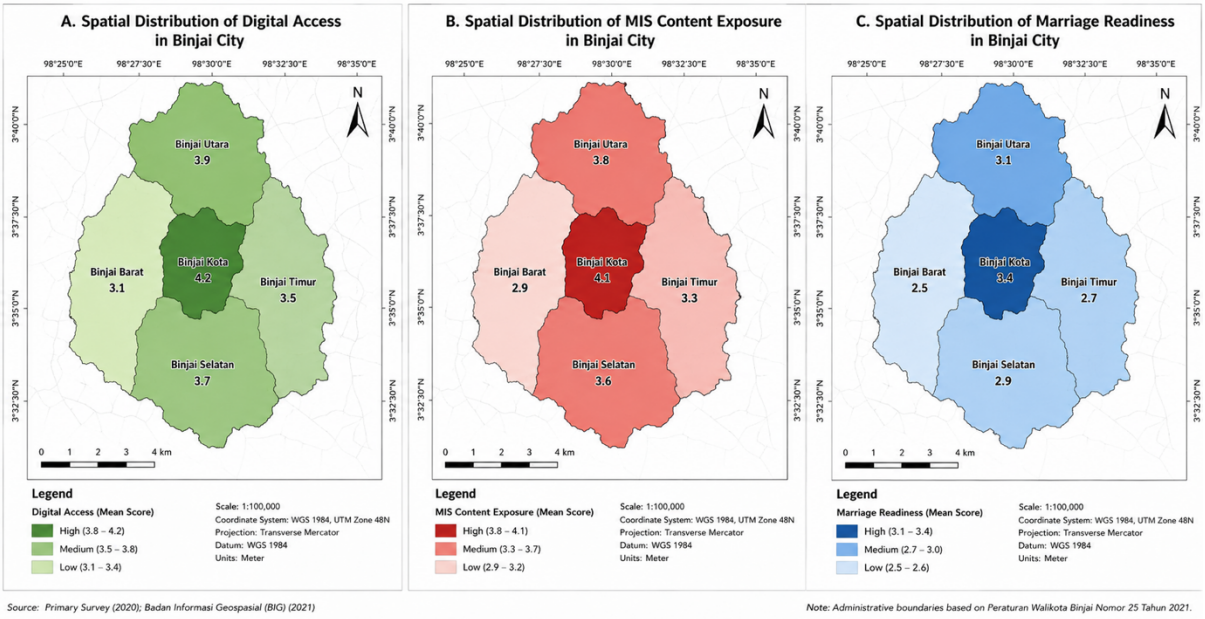

Figure 2. Spatial Distribution of Digital Access in Binjai City, Spatial Distribution of MIS Content Exposure in Binjai City, Spatial Distribution of Marriage Readiness in Binjai City (Source: Primary survey data, 2026; administrative boundary from BIG, 2023).

The spatial pattern becomes particularly interesting when MIS exposure and marriage readiness are considered simultaneously. Binjai Kota recorded the highest MIS exposure but also the highest marriage readiness. At first glance, this appears inconsistent with the negative relationship between MIS exposure and marriage readiness identified in the individual-level correlation and regression analyses. However, this apparent contradiction should not be interpreted as an inconsistency in the findings. Instead, it demonstrates that relationships observed at the individual level cannot automatically be transferred to the aggregate geographical level. The pattern, therefore, illustrates the importance of avoiding the ecological fallacy when interpreting spatial data.

The coexistence of high MIS exposure and high marriage readiness in Binjai Kota suggests that geographical context may shape how digital content is encountered and interpreted. Higher digital access may increase opportunities to encounter negative marriage narratives, but it does not necessarily result in lower marriage readiness at the aggregate level. Other contextual resources, such as socioeconomic conditions, family networks, peer relationships, and access to information, may provide alternative interpretations and support. In this sense, place functions not as a direct determinant of marriage readiness but as a context within which digital exposure and social resources intersect.

This interpretation is consistent with the qualitative findings. The Focus Group Discussion (FGD) identified three major themes: fear of choosing the wrong partner, financial instability, and spatial variation in social support. Participants described fear of choosing the wrong partner as one of the most frequently encountered narratives on TikTok. These narratives were perceived as being amplified through algorithmic curation, creating repeated exposure to stories concerning relationship failure and negative marital experiences.

The second theme was financial instability. Informants consistently identified economic considerations as an important barrier to marriage. This qualitative finding corresponds with the quantitative results, in which financial readiness represented the weakest dimension of overall marriage readiness, with a mean score of 2.4. Thus, concerns about marriage were not solely generated by social media narratives but were also tied to

respondents' material perceptions of their economic preparedness to establish a household.

The third theme concerned spatial variation in social support. Informants from suburban areas reported fewer opportunities to discuss marriage-related concerns with family members and peers compared with participants living in urban areas. Conversely, urban participants reported greater access to family and peer support. This difference provides an important contextual explanation for the spatial pattern observed in the quantitative results. Higher digital exposure in urban areas may coexist with greater marriage readiness when residents also have stronger social support networks that offer alternative interpretations of marriage-related content.

The relationship between digital content and spatial context can also be understood through the concept of geomedia. Lindell et al. (2022) demonstrated that social media practices involving places are not merely representations of geographical space. They can also contribute to the classification of places and the reproduction of social positions. Using survey data from Sweden, the study showed that users' place-related social media practices were associated with differences in social and cultural capital. Although Lindell's study does not examine marriage-related content, its findings are relevant to the present research because they demonstrate that social media environments remain connected to physical places and social structures. The present study extends this perspective by showing that Geographical differences in digital access and social support can coexist with differences in the exposure to and interpretation of marriage-related narratives.

A similar relationship between physical and virtual space was identified by Zhang et al. (2022), who analysed massive TikTok records in Beijing to compare virtual and physical visiting patterns. Their findings showed that social media creates a distinct form of virtual spatiality, while characteristics of the built environment remain relevant to activity patterns in virtual space. This finding supports the argument that digital space should not be treated as completely detached from physical geography. In the context of Binjai City, the differences between Binjai Kota and Binjai Barat similarly suggest that digital experiences are situated within particular geographical environments.

The spatial and qualitative findings therefore explain the apparent paradox observed in Binjai Kota. Although respondents in the urban centre had greater access to digital media and reported greater exposure to MIS content, they also reported higher levels of social support and marriage readiness. This suggests that exposure to negative narratives may be accompanied by contextual resources that enable individuals to critically interpret such content. Conversely, lower digital exposure in peripheral areas does not necessarily indicate greater marriage readiness, as limited access to digital content may coexist with weaker economic resources and social support.

Table 7. Spatial and Qualitative Integration of Findings

Dimension	Quantitative Finding	FGD Finding	Geographical Interpretation
Digital access	Highest in Binjai Kota (4.2); lowest in Binjai Barat (3.1)	Differences in opportunities to access and use digital media	Unequal digital conditions across urban and peripheral areas
MIS exposure	Highest in Binjai Kota (4.1); lowest in Binjai Barat (2.9)	Relationship-failure narratives frequently encountered through TikTok	Greater connectivity provides greater opportunities for

			algorithmic content exposure
Marriage readiness	Highest in Binjai Kota (3.4); lowest in Binjai Barat (2.5)	Financial concerns and social support influence readiness	Marriage readiness is embedded within local socioeconomic and social contexts
Social support	Higher support reported in urban areas	Urban participants reported greater access to family and peer discussion	Social support may function as a contextual resource that moderates digital exposure
Financial readiness	Lowest readiness dimension (mean 2.4)	Financial instability identified as a major barrier	Economic conditions contribute to spatial differences in marriage readiness

(Source: FGD Data, 2026)

Consequently, the integration of the quantitative and qualitative findings suggests that the relationship between digital exposure and marriage readiness is context-dependent. At the individual level, greater exposure to MIS was associated with lower marriage readiness. At the geographical level, however, the relationship did not appear to be uniform across subdistricts. The case of Binjai Kota demonstrates that high digital exposure can coexist with high marriage readiness when other contextual resources are present. This distinction highlights the importance of combining individual-level statistical analysis with spatial and qualitative interpretation.

The findings can further be interpreted through the Network Society perspective. Digital connectivity enables individuals to participate in networks that extend beyond their immediate geographical surroundings. However, participation in these networks is not spatially neutral. Differences in access and connectivity influence the extent to which individuals participate in digital networks and encounter particular forms of information. The present findings therefore demonstrate that physical and digital spaces are mutually connected. Spatial inequalities in digital access can translate into unequal opportunities for exposure to algorithmically curated content.

The findings also contribute to Cultivation Theory by indicating that repeated exposure to MIS narratives is associated with lower marriage readiness. The FGD findings provide additional support for this interpretation, as participants described repeated encounters with stories involving infidelity, relationship failure, fear of choosing the wrong partner, and other negative representations of marriage. However, the spatial variation demonstrates that the consequences of exposure should not be assumed to be identical across places. The social environment surrounding users may influence whether repeated exposure is internalised, critically evaluated, or balanced by alternative narratives.

From the perspective of Place and Mobility, the findings demonstrate that individuals simultaneously inhabit physical and digital environments. Generation Z respondents may encounter marriage-related narratives through TikTok regardless of where the content originates, while their interpretation of those narratives remains connected to local family relationships, peer networks, economic circumstances, and expectations concerning marriage. Place, therefore, remains relevant even as social interaction increasingly occurs through digital platforms.

The findings have several implications for media geography and digital literacy. The spatial differences in digital access indicate that digital inequality should be addressed through interventions that

account for geographical context, rather than relying solely on individual-level digital literacy programs. Because MIS exposure represents an important pathway linking digital access with marriage readiness, digital literacy programs should include algorithmic awareness. Young users need to understand that repeated exposure to particular narratives may partly reflect platform recommendation systems rather than an objective representation of the prevalence of negative marital experiences. In other words, differences in social support indicate that interventions should also be community-based, particularly in areas where young people have fewer opportunities to discuss marriage-related concerns with family members and peers.

The spatial and qualitative evidence demonstrates that the relationship between digital access, MIS exposure, and marriage readiness cannot be adequately understood by examining digital exposure independently from place. The findings reveal a more complex urban–peripheral pattern in which digital connectivity, algorithmic exposure, economic readiness, and social support intersect. The contribution of this study, therefore, lies in demonstrating that media geography provides a useful framework for understanding how digital narratives about marriage are experienced differently across geographical contexts. Rather than viewing social media as a placeless environment, the findings demonstrate that digital experiences remain embedded in the social, economic, and spatial characteristics of the places in which Generation Z lives.

Based on these findings, interventions addressing digital media exposure and marriage readiness among Generation Z should consider the geographical and social contexts of different areas. Digital literacy programs should strengthen young people's awareness of algorithmic curation, encourage critical evaluation of repeated negative marriage narratives, and promote more diverse sources of information. Community-based interventions involving families, peers, educational institutions, and local organisations are also recommended to provide spaces for discussing marriage expectations, financial preparedness, and relationship concerns. For future research, longitudinal and multilevel approaches are recommended to examine how individual characteristics, digital exposure, social support, and geographical contexts interact over time. Comparative studies across cities or regions with different levels of urbanisation and digital development could also provide further evidence on whether the urban–peripheral patterns identified in Binjai City are consistent across different geographical contexts.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

SZ. Contributes to the conceptualisation of the study, research design, data collection and analysis, monitoring and evaluation of the research process, and the drafting of the original manuscript in its entirety. **HS**. Serves as the supervisor, providing guidance on the development of the theoretical framework, the refinement of the methodology, and supervision throughout the research process. As examiner 1, **MPDS**. Contributes to the comprehensive evaluation of the research substance, the critical assessment of the theoretical framework, and the overall assessment of the manuscript's feasibility. **NIA**. Contributes to the evaluation of the methodology and interpretation of the research findings as examiner 2. **QM**. Contributes to the final review of the manuscript, including refining the discussion and conclusion sections. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that digital access, exposure to “Marriage Is Scary” (MIS) content, and marriage readiness among Generation Z in Binjai City are interconnected within specific geographical contexts. Digital access was positively associated with MIS exposure, which was

negatively associated with marriage readiness, and MIS exposure significantly mediated the relationship between digital access and marriage readiness. However, the spatial distribution revealed that these relationships were not uniform across the city. Binjai Kota recorded the highest levels of digital access, MIS exposure, and marriage readiness, whereas Binjai Barat recorded the lowest levels across all three indicators. The coexistence of high MIS exposure and high marriage readiness in Binjai Kota indicates that digital exposure alone does not determine marriage readiness, as social support, economic conditions, and local contexts may shape how young people interpret and respond to digital narratives. These findings highlight the importance of viewing digital media not as a placeless environment but as a space that remains interconnected with physical geography, socioeconomic conditions, and social relationships.

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