

Reconciling trends, representations, and attitudes towards divorce in post-*Reformasi* Indonesia¹

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Background

Divorce trends in Indonesia once stood as an anomaly in the global landscape of marriage and social change. Divorce had been traditionally common in the Muslim-majority archipelago (Heaton & Cammack, 2011; Heaton, Cammack, & Young, 2001; Jones, 1997; Jones, Asari, & Djuartika, 1994). In the past, high rates of divorce were driven by early marriage, arranged marriage, and relative ease for couples to get a divorce (Dommaraju & Jones, 2011; Heaton et al., 2001; Jones, 1997). Following Indonesia's Independence in 1945 and through the authoritarian New Order regime (1966-1998) which brought about economic development and foreign investment in the country, the increase in age at first marriage and the decline in arranged marriage were associated with a declining rate of divorce (Heaton & Cammack, 2011). Typically, divorce tends to decline with socio-economic development, and rising divorce rates are used as a proxy of modernisation. As such, the declining divorce rate in this period was considered an anomaly (Jones, 1997).

Previous research had identified trends indicating a rise in divorce after the end of the New Order regime in 1998. The subsequent onset of *Reformasi* – a period where political reforms were supposed to drive democratisation and decentralisation - coincided with what Heaton and Cammack (2011) labelled as the upturn of divorce in Indonesia. They attributed this rise in divorce to factors such as greater autonomy for people (e.g. women) to “escape” from the constraints of marriage. In this manner, while greater “freedom” to choose when and who to marry was a key factor behind the declining divorce rate after Independence, greater “freedom” to opt-out from a marriage facilitated the uptick in divorce after Reformasi (Qibthiyah & Utomo, 2016). While most people still either end up or aspire to be married, in post-Reformasi Indonesia, marriage – and divorce – are increasingly becoming a matter of personal choice (Utomo, Ananta, Setyonaluri, & Aryaputra, 2022).

With a reported increase in divorce numbers, alternative family structures, such as single-parent families, remarriage, and stepfamilies, are gaining visibility on the internet and social media. Not only do we witness frequent coverage of celebrity divorce cases on social media, but detailed court proceedings of all divorce cases have also become publicly accessible through the religious court website. Such upturn in divorce, in both sense of cases and representation, challenges the New Order-esque narrative of '*Norma Keluarga Kecil Bahagia*' (small happy family norm). It also questions the argument that the dominant change in marriage patterns after *Reformasi* is a return to early/earlier marriage linked to a 'conservative turn' (see Dommaraju & Tan, 2024). While divorce is arguably a private matter, *Reformasi* (and social media) has brought its public dimensions to the fore.

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Although divorce and alternative family forms appear to be increasingly viable householding options for ordinary Indonesians, data on public attitudes towards divorce remain limited. Furthermore, we know little about how the uptick in and attitudes towards divorce can be understood and reconciled with broader trends in marriage and family change following *Reformasi*. For social demographers, declining fertility (below replacement level in some provinces), rising age at first marriage, increasing rate of divorce, and growing diversity in household/family forms are among notable indicators signalling that the *second demographic transition* is indeed unfolding (Lesthaeghe, 2010) in some parts of Indonesia (Utomo et al., 2022). Still, despite the rising numbers of divorces, there is evidence that divorce, and especially divorced women (Ind: *Janda*), continue to be stigmatised (Mahy, Winarnita, & Herriman, 2016; O'shaughnessy, 2009; Parker, 2016; Parker & Creese, 2016; Parker, Riyani, & Nolan, 2016; Platt, 2017).

Research question and aims

Given the upturn of divorce and its increasing public dimensions in post-*Reformasi* Indonesia, what has happened to the representations and attitudes to divorce? Guided by this broad question, this paper seeks to:

1. Identify concurrent trends in divorce cases, and in its public representation in social media in post-*Reformasi* Indonesia
2. Explore prevailing trends and correlates in the attitudes to divorce and examine how social media use is associated with attitudes to divorce.

Data and methods

As a backdrop to our analysis of attitudes toward divorce, we first identify trends in divorce cases; we use publicly available data on divorce statistics from the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Muslim Divorce) and Statistik Indonesia Year Books 2018 – 2023. Second, to gain insights into popular representations of divorce in social media, we turn to Instagram and adopt a digital patchwork ethnography approach to analyse the divorce, remarriage, and family representations of 5 high-profile celebrities and their families.

We then draw on the 2001 and 2018 World Value Surveys (WVS) to examine the trends and correlates of attitudes to divorce in Indonesia. In WVS, attitude to divorce is included among a list of attitudinal questions seeking to probe into an individual's (and eventually country's) ethical values. WVS proposed a broad mapping of societies, applying a crude binary categorisation of "traditional versus secular-rational values", where the rejection of divorce is seen as one of the proxies of relatively traditional societies. According to the WVS construct, societies at the traditional end of this spectrum oppose divorce and uphold a pro-life position on abortion, euthanasia, and suicide. Respondents were asked to nominate their response to the series of "actions" (Ind: *tindakan-tindakan*), including divorce, homosexuality, pre-marital sex, suicide, euthanasia and so on, from a scale of 1 (never justifiable) to 10 (always justifiable).

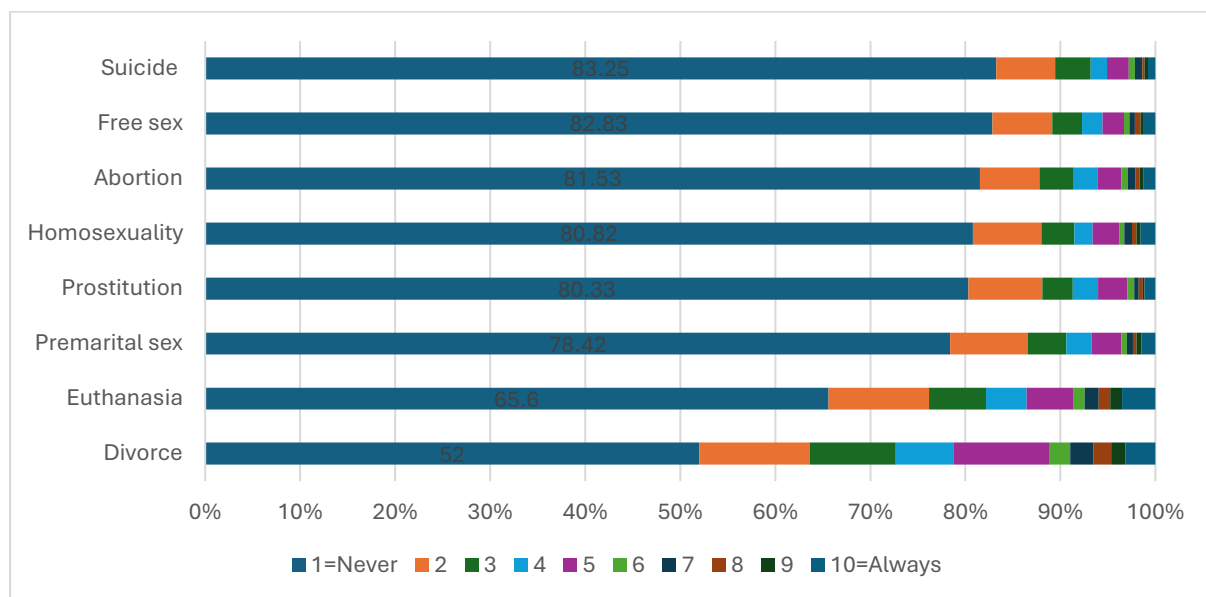
We use descriptive statistics to outline attitudes to divorce in Indonesia relative to other countries in the region and relative to other measures of "ethical values" in the country. Controlling for urban/rural residence, education, sex, importance of religion, and age group, we use a logistic and ordered logistic regression to explore how the frequency of social media use is associated with the likelihood of an individual leaning to nominate that "divorce is always justifiable". We hypothesize that the likelihood of being open to divorce is positively associated with social media consumption.

Expected findings

There has been a rise in annual divorce numbers, from 114,252 reported cases in 1996/1997 to 516,344 in 2022. Analysis of the curated portrayal of divorce, remarriage, and step-families in celebrity Instagram accounts indicates prevalent representations (and seemingly acceptance) towards alternative family forms. In recent years, words like *ibu/bapak/anak sambung* (re-attached/re-united/re-connected mother/father/child) have gradually replaced *ibu/bapak/anak tiri* (step or non-biological mother/father/child) in the social media lexicon. Displays of harmonious relationships between exes and their adjoining families are adorned by Instagram followers and commenters (Ind: *netijen*). To an extent, celebrity divorces (and remarriages) help mainstream and/or normalize diverse family forms.

In 2018, nearly half of the respondents believed that divorce is "never justifiable," indicating that Indonesian attitudes towards divorce remain comparatively conservative within East and Southeast Asia (corresponding figures: Japan 3.4%, Philippines, 32.7%, Malaysia 16.8%, Thailand, 24.7%, Vietnam 12.4%, Korea 4%). Still, the percentage of Indonesian respondents nominating that *divorce is never justifiable* had slightly decreased between 2001 to 2018 (the mean score had risen from 2.49 to 2.77). Indonesians were seemingly more permissive towards divorce relative to other typical proxies for "liberal-secular values" (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Percentage distribution to the prompt: Please tell me for each of the following statements whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between?



Source: Indonesia World Values Survey 2018

Multivariate analysis suggests individuals in rural areas were more likely to be more tolerant of divorce than those living in urban areas. This supports earlier studies suggesting that the so-called development and the construction of gender and modern family ideology during the New Order era had lowered divorce rates. Conversely, respondents with more frequent access to social media are more likely to be receptive to divorce. *Post-reformasi* data on attitudes to divorce indicates echoes of past trends, but the increasing visibility of diverse family forms – mainstreamed through social media – may erode stigmas surrounding divorce.

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