

RELIGION

Digital Secularisation: A Content Analysis of Marriage Discourse in Kenyan Christian Online Spaces

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Abstract

Secularisation increasingly operates through digital media rather than through formal institutional argument, yet its expression in African Christian online spaces remains under-examined. Prior survey evidence from the Friends Church in Trans Nzoia County identified media and social-network influence as the single most prominent mechanism challenging marriage principles, but that evidence measured members' perceptions rather than the online discourse itself. This study addresses that gap by examining how marriage is framed in publicly available online content relevant to the Kenyan Christian context, and by assessing the extent to which that framing reflects a secular, individualistic and contractual model as against a covenantal and communally regulated one. The study adopts a descriptive qualitative content analysis design and draws on a corpus of 22 publicly accessible items, comprising a core of Kenyan Christian sources (clergy commentary, denominational statements and Kenyan scholarship), a comparison set of international Christian teaching pages, and Kenyan legal and public commentary on cohabitation. A deductive coding framework captures the framing of marriage, the locus of decision-making authority, the grounds for permanence and dissolution, premarital norms, gender roles, and the sources of authority invoked. Fourteen items were coded as predominantly covenantal, one as mixed, and seven as predominantly secular, with orientation aligning strongly with source type: covenantal framing concentrated within Christian content, while individualistic and legal-contractual framing dominated Kenyan public commentary. The study contributes a working analytical framework and an empirical account of how marriage is communicated online, and offers the Friends Church a basis for engaging the digital channel through which much secular influence now travels.

Keywords: Christian marriage; content analysis; digital secularisation; Friends Church; mediatisation of religion

1 Introduction

Secularisation remains a robust feature of contemporary societies, operating through the differentiation of social spheres, the withdrawal of religious authority from everyday life, and the privatisation of belief [1, 2]. These processes bear with particular force on marriage, which has long stood at the intersection of religious authority and social regulation [3]. In the twenty-first century, however, the vehicle through which secular ideas reach believers has shifted. Religious life now unfolds in an environment wrapped in media and mediated by digital technologies, such that the study of religious change cannot be separated from the study of the platforms on which religion is now practised and contested [4, 5].

The mediatisation of religion describes this condition, in which media cease to be a neutral conduit and become an environment that shapes religious authority, participation and meaning [5, 6]. In

African settings, churches have adopted social networks and digital platforms rapidly, using Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp and similar services to preach, teach, mobilise and counsel [7]. Evidence from Kenya confirms that religious institutions turned decisively to platforms such as YouTube and Facebook in recent years, extending their reach while also exposing members to a wider and less controlled flow of relationship content [8, 9].

The Friends Church, or Religious Society of Friends, offers a revealing case for examining this shift. Within the Quaker tradition, marriage is understood not as a private contract between two individuals but as a covenant entered before God and witnessed by the gathered community, formed through communal discernment and sustained by mutual accountability [10, 11]. East Africa hosts one of the largest concentrations of Friends worldwide, and in western Kenya these covenantal understandings have been woven into local ecclesial life. A digital discourse that reframes marriage as a matter of individual choice, personal fulfilment and civil procedure therefore stands in direct tension with the tradition's core commitments.

Earlier survey research in Trans Nzoia County found that respondents ranked media and social-network influence as the leading mechanism through which secular ideologies challenge Friends Church marriage principles, ahead of education, economic pressure, legal change and declining participation. That finding rested on what members perceived rather than on an analysis of the online material itself. The present study takes the next step by turning from perception to content, asking what online spaces relevant to Kenyan Christians actually communicate about marriage, and how far that communication carries a secular rather than a covenantal frame.

2 Statement of the problem

The Friends Church in Trans Nzoia County upholds marriage as a sacred, lifelong covenant characterised by mutual fidelity, spiritual accountability and community oversight. A widening gap has nonetheless opened between this ideal and the conduct of contemporary members, expressed in rising cohabitation, increased marital dissolution, and declining reliance on Meeting processes for marital guidance. Where the drivers of this gap have been examined, media and social-network influence have emerged as the most prominent, yet the discourse carried by those channels has not itself been studied.

This is a substantive omission. If secular influence on marriage now travels primarily through digital media, then understanding that influence requires analysing the content of the media, not only surveying those exposed to it. Without such analysis, the church cannot know whether the online environment reframes marriage in individualistic and contractual terms, whether it displaces communal discernment with personal preference, or whether it competes with covenantal teaching by supplying alternative sources of authority. The problem this study addresses is therefore the absence of a systematic account of how marriage is framed in online spaces relevant to Kenyan Christians, and of the extent to which that framing reflects the secular, disenchanting model that the survey evidence implies.

3 Objectives and research questions

The study is guided by three objectives: to characterise how marriage is framed in publicly available online content relevant to the Kenyan Christian context; to determine the extent to which that framing reflects a secular and individualistic model as against a covenantal and communally

regulated one; and to examine how the framing varies across source types. Correspondingly, the study asks: how is marriage framed in these online spaces; to what extent does that framing carry a secular rather than a covenantal orientation; and how does the framing differ by source type?

4 Theoretical framework

The study is anchored in two complementary lenses. The first is the theory of disenchantment, which holds that as societies embrace rationality and bureaucratic organisation, the sacred frameworks that once governed institutions such as marriage are progressively displaced by rational and individualistic ones [12]. Applied to the Friends Church, this lens illuminates how marriage practices rooted in the Inner Light and in communal discernment become marginalised as individualistic and contractual approaches gain prominence, so that marriage is reframed from a covenant requiring Meeting clearance into a personal arrangement sustained by individual satisfaction.

The second lens is the mediatisation of religion, which specifies the mechanism through which such reframing now occurs. Mediatisation describes a long-term process in which media become integrated into the everyday practice of religion to the point of reshaping religious authority, community and meaning [5, 6]. Under conditions of deep mediatisation, religious authority is redistributed away from institutional gatekeepers such as elders and clergy toward media producers, legal institutions and the logics of visibility that govern digital circulation [4, 7]. The mediatisation lens therefore explains how disenchantment reaches believers in practice, namely through a continuous and public flow of relationship content in which covenantal and secular framings compete.

Read together, the two lenses frame the study's central expectation. If secularisation operates as disenchantment, and if mediatisation is the channel through which it now travels, then online spaces relevant to Kenyan Christians should exhibit a measurable presence of secular framing, in which marriage is presented as individual choice rather than communal covenant, as terminable by personal preference rather than bound by covenantal permanence, and as authorised by legal procedure and personal experience rather than by Scripture and the discerning community. The coding framework operationalises exactly these contrasts.

5 Literature review

Contemporary scholarship affirms that secularisation persists in modern societies, even where belief endures, through the steady withdrawal of religious authority from public institutions [1, 2]. Applied to marriage, this connects closely to accounts of deinstitutionalisation, in which shared norms governing union formation and dissolution progressively weaken and marriage is reframed around individual fulfilment rather than communal obligation [3, 13]. Legal developments compound this shift, as the recognition of civil marriage as equivalent to religious marriage creates parallel frameworks that bypass religious preparation and accountability [14].

A distinct and rapidly growing body of work examines how these dynamics are expressed through digital media. The mediatisation thesis holds that media reshape rather than merely relay religion, altering the location of authority and the character of participation [5, 6, 15]. Studies of digital religion document how online platforms become primary sites for evangelism, teaching, testimony and pastoral counsel, and how they simultaneously open religious communities to competing voices and values [4, 16]. This literature repeatedly finds that the impact of digital media on religious authority

is neither uniform nor unidirectional, strengthening institutional voices in some cases while eroding them in others.

Research situated in Africa extends these findings to contexts closer to the present study. Scholars describe the full adoption of social networks by African churches for promotion, teaching and community formation, and the accompanying reconfiguration of religious experience and identity [7]. Kenyan evidence shows that religious institutions used platforms such as YouTube and Facebook intensively during and after the pandemic, consolidating a durable shift toward mediated religious life [8]. Related work on Pentecostal digital practice documents how technology shapes perception and religious impact across the region [9]. Taken together, this literature establishes that African Christian life is now substantially mediated, yet it has rarely examined what that mediated environment communicates specifically about marriage.

Within the Quaker tradition, marriage has received attention as both distinctively vulnerable to secular challenge, owing to its emphasis on individual conscience and the Inner Light, and distinctively resourced to resist it through communal discernment [10, 11]. Kenyan research on Friends communities has shown how traditional, Christian and secular frameworks intersect within the same congregations [17]. What remains missing, and what this study begins to supply, is a content-level analysis of the digital discourse in which these frameworks now compete, so that the leading mechanism identified in prior survey work can be examined in its own right rather than only through members' reports of it.

6 Research methodology

6.1 Research design

The study adopts a descriptive qualitative content analysis design, combining systematic classification of manifest content with interpretive analysis of latent meaning [18, 19]. Content analysis is appropriate because the research questions concern the framing of marriage as communicated in an existing body of online text, rather than attitudes elicited from respondents. The design is applied here to establish the coding framework and to characterise how marriage is framed across the material examined.

6.2 Corpus and sampling

The unit of analysis is the individual item of publicly available online content in which marriage is a substantive theme. A corpus of 22 items was assembled through structured searches of publicly available online content, using terms relating to Christian marriage, covenant, cohabitation, and informal cohabitation in the Kenyan context. Items were retained where they were publicly accessible without membership of a closed group, were in English, and treated marriage substantively. The corpus foregrounds Kenyan Christian voices and comprises three source types: Kenyan Christian sources, including clergy commentary, denominational and episcopal statements, and Kenyan scholarship on Christian marriage (nine items); international Christian teaching pages retained for comparison (six items); and Kenyan legal and public commentary on cohabitation and marriage (seven items). The full corpus is listed in Appendix A.

Because the corpus was assembled through searching rather than probability sampling, and because it is confined to publicly accessible text, the analysis characterises the material examined rather than the wider online population. Video content on platforms such as YouTube and content on closed or

login-based platforms fall outside its scope. These boundaries are considered further in the limitations.

6.3 Coding framework

A deductive coding framework was derived from the theoretical lenses and from the framing contrasts identified in prior survey work. Each item is coded on the dimensions set out in Table 1. Each dimension is read as predominantly covenantal, predominantly secular, or mixed, and each item is then assigned an overall orientation on the basis of its dominant framing.

Table 1. Coding framework for marriage framing.

Coding dimension	Covenantal pole	Secular pole
Framing of marriage	Sacred covenant before God	Contractual or individual arrangement
Locus of decision authority	Communal and church discernment	Individual autonomy and personal choice
Permanence and dissolution	Lifelong permanence, dissolution resisted	Terminable by personal preference
Premarital norms	Restraint, formal preparation valued	Acceptance of cohabitation and informality
Gender and roles	Defined complementary roles	Individualist or negotiated roles
Source of authority invoked	Scripture, elders, tradition	Courts, statute, experts, self

6.4 Reliability and trustworthiness

Coding was undertaken by the author as a single coder, using the framework above to assign each item an overall orientation. Inter-coder reliability was not assessed in this study; establishing it through independent coding of the same items by a second coder and computation of Cohen's kappa [20] is a requirement for the larger study. Trustworthiness is supported by the full listing of the corpus in Appendix A, which allows each coding decision to be examined and replicated, and by the explicit statement of inclusion criteria.

6.5 Ethical considerations

The study analyses only publicly available content and does not access private groups or solicit data from individuals. No individuals were contacted, and individual users other than official organisational or authored sources are not identified. These measures follow accepted practice for the ethical analysis of public digital material.

7 Results and discussion

This section reports the distribution of framing across the corpus by source type and overall, followed by the sources of authority invoked, and closes with a discussion of the pattern and its limitations.

7.1 Corpus profile and orientation by source type

Table 2 profiles the corpus by source type and reports the overall orientation of the items in each type. The pattern is striking in its regularity: orientation tracks source type almost completely, with

covenantal framing confined to explicitly Christian content and secular framing confined to Kenyan legal and public commentary.

Table 2. Corpus profile and orientation by source type.

Source type	Items (n)	Covenantal	Mixed	Secular
Kenyan Christian sources (clergy and scholarly)	9	8	1	0
International Christian teaching pages	6	6	0	0
Kenyan legal and public commentary	7	0	0	7
Total	22	14	1	7

Note: Source: content analysis of the study corpus (see Appendix A).

7.2 Overall framing orientation

Table 3 reports the overall orientation across the corpus. Fourteen of the 22 items were coded as predominantly covenantal, one as mixed, and seven as predominantly secular. Because the corpus was assembled through searching rather than probability sampling, this distribution characterises the material examined rather than the wider online population, a point returned to in the limitations.

Table 3. Overall orientation of marriage framing in the corpus.

Overall orientation	n	% of corpus
Predominantly covenantal	14	63.6
Mixed	1	4.5
Predominantly secular	7	31.8
Total	22	100.0

Note: Source: content analysis of the study corpus. Percentages are rounded.

7.3 Sources of authority invoked

The sources of authority invoked separated cleanly along the same line. The Christian teaching and scholarly items grounded marriage in Scripture, most often the Genesis account of one flesh and the Ephesians analogy of Christ and the church, and in the counsel of elders, mentors and the gathered community. The Kenyan legal and public commentary grounded unions instead in statute and case law, notably the Marriage Act and appellate rulings on the presumption of marriage, and in pragmatic and economic reasoning, presenting cohabitation as a voluntary and individually chosen arrangement. This contrast is the clearest expression of the redistribution of authority that the mediatisation thesis anticipates, from Scripture and the discerning community toward legal procedure and individual preference [4, 5].

7.4 Discussion

Two findings emerge, both to be tested at scale. First, both framings are clearly present and reliably codeable in publicly available online content, which establishes that the digital environment relevant to Kenyan Christians carries a live competition between a covenantal and a disenchanted account of marriage rather than a single settled view. Second, orientation aligns strongly with source type, so that the covenantal model is sustained within explicitly Christian spaces while the surrounding Kenyan public and legal discourse frames unions in individual, pragmatic and contractual terms. Read

through the disenchantment lens, this is exactly the pattern the theory predicts: the sacred framework is preserved inside dedicated religious content but is displaced by rational and individualistic framing in the wider public sphere that believers also inhabit [12].

These observations give concrete, content-level support to the earlier survey finding that ranked media and social-network influence as the leading mechanism challenging Friends Church marriage principles. The survey established that members perceive the digital channel as decisive; the present analysis begins to specify what that channel communicates, and indicates that the challenge to covenantal marriage online comes less from within Christian content than from the individualist and legal-contractual framing that dominates the surrounding public discourse. The variation by source type is consistent with the wider finding that the effect of digital media on religious authority is variable rather than uniform [7, 16].

7.5 Limitations

Several limitations bound the claims made here. The corpus, at 22 items, was assembled through structured searching rather than probability sampling, so the balance of covenantal and secular framing characterises the material examined and should not be read as the prevalence of either framing across online discourse as a whole. The corpus is confined to English-language, publicly accessible text, and so excludes video content on platforms such as YouTube and content on closed platforms, which earlier evidence suggests are important channels. Coding was carried out by a single coder and inter-coder reliability was not assessed, so the classifications, although documented in full in Appendix A, await independent confirmation. The corpus also retains a set of international Christian sources alongside its Kenyan Christian core. The findings are therefore best read as an account of the material analysed and as a basis for a larger study, one that would draw on a wider and systematically sampled corpus, incorporate video and social-media content, undertake an inter-coder reliability check, and, where the research question demands it, restrict attention to Kenyan sources.

8 Conclusion

This study set out to examine how marriage is framed in online spaces relevant to Kenyan Christians, and to assess the extent to which that framing reflects a secular rather than a covenantal orientation. By moving from the survey measurement of perceived media influence toward the content analysis of the media themselves, it treats the leading mechanism of secular challenge in its own right. The analysis shows that both covenantal and secular framings are present and codeable in this material, with orientation aligning strongly with source type. Covenantal framing is sustained within explicitly Christian content, while individualist and legal-contractual framing dominates the surrounding Kenyan public discourse. These findings motivate a larger, systematically sampled study that would allow the prevalence and platform distribution of secular framing to be estimated with confidence.

9 Recommendations

1. The Friends Church should treat the digital channel as a primary site of marriage formation, producing covenantal marriage content in the same platforms and genres through which secular and legal-contractual framing now circulates, rather than ceding that space.
2. Church leaders and youth mentors should be equipped with basic media literacy for marriage ministry, so that members can critically evaluate the relationship content they encounter online, including legal and pragmatic framings of cohabitation.

3. Marriage preparation and communal discernment processes, including Meeting clearance, should be strengthened and given a visible digital presence that reasserts the community's role in the sources of authority members consult.
4. The study should be extended with a larger systematic corpus, video and social-media content, and full inter-coder reliability, so that the prevalence and platform distribution of secular framing can be estimated reliably.

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