

MICRO-CHEATING AND BOUNDARIES IN OPPOSITE-SEX INTERACTIONS: A SADD AL-DHARI'AH STUDY IN BANGSAL, MOJOKERTO

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Abstract

This study aims to identify the perception of the Muslim community in Bangsal District, Mojokerto, regarding the phenomenon of micro cheating, and to formulate a proportional boundary for cross-gender interactions from the perspective of Islamic Family Law. This research is an empirical legal study employing a descriptive qualitative approach, utilizing in-depth interviews with key informants (individuals with a history of divorce or those working in heterogeneous environments) alongside academic informants for triangulation. The findings reveal that the community views micro cheating as a form of emotional betrayal and a precursor (*muqaddimatuz zina*) to physical infidelity, which manifests as symbolic activities on social media, secret communications, special attention or flirting, and confiding in members of the opposite sex. Through the framework of *sadd adz-dzari'ah* analysis, these behaviors are categorized as *dzari'ah* (means) that must be prevented to preserve marital harmony. As a case study focused on a single locus, these findings can serve as a conceptual reference for other cultural Muslim communities facing similar technological disruptions, while also contributing to the development of Islamic family law discourse in responding to the dynamics of digital interaction.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technologies has fundamentally transformed patterns of social interaction between men and women. The emergence of social media and instant messaging platforms, such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Telegram, has enabled communication to transcend spatial and temporal boundaries and to take place within highly private spheres (Pramudita et al., 2026). These digital dynamics have created opportunities for the development of secretive and concealed emotional relationships outside the marital bond (Azkiyah et al., 2025). This condition has contributed to the emergence of the phenomenon of micro-cheating, which refers to a series of seemingly minor behaviors indicating emotional or physical attraction toward someone outside the primary relationship and which perpetrators often fail to recognize as a form of betrayal (Oktavia, 2024).

The phenomenon of micro-cheating has serious implications for relationship stability because it may gradually erode the foundations of trust, commitment, and marital harmony (Zubir, 2025). In

Muslim communities, the use of digital technology without adequate moral control presents a significant challenge in determining appropriate boundaries for opposite-sex interactions in accordance with Islamic values (Ahmad, 2025). Methodologically, Bangsal District was selected because it represents a transitional community, namely a society experiencing intensive exposure to digital technology while continuing to maintain a strong structure of religious norms. These characteristics make Bangsal an appropriate unit of analysis for examining how Islamic norms directly negotiate with the realities of digital interaction. Thus, the selection of this research setting was not merely based on geographical convenience but on the relevance of the case to the analytical focus of *sadd al-dharī'ah*.

Recent studies have examined various dimensions of opposite-sex interaction and deviant behavior in digital environments. Muslimah and Marizal (2022) investigated interactions between male and female coworkers in office settings and found that frequent meetings outside professional activities could substantially increase the risk of infidelity. Regarding the ethical boundaries of interaction, Baihaqi et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of internalizing the principles of social media jurisprudence, particularly awareness of proper conduct and the need to limit private conversations in order to prevent the unnoticed shifting of relational boundaries or emotional drift. Oktavia (2024) described changes in behavioral patterns among digital communities in engaging in micro-cheating, which often originate from communication failures but have systemic consequences for declining levels of intimacy. More broadly, Anantya and Abdullah and Malik et al. (2024) documented how the misuse of digital platforms has become an increasingly significant factor contributing to the high divorce rate in Indonesia through the gradual erosion of marital foundations.

Although numerous studies have examined the effects of social media on marital stability, an important research gap remains to be addressed. Most previous studies have focused on the sociological dimensions of perpetrators' general behavior or on juridical analyses of physical infidelity, particularly *zinā*. However, limited attention has been given to the specific perceptions of Muslim communities regarding micro-cheating as a form of moral transgression. Furthermore, relatively few contemporary studies have comprehensively connected the phenomenon of micro-cheating with the concept of *sadd al-dharī'ah* as a preventive instrument within Islamic legal methodology. The novelty of this study lies in its attempt to synthesize community-based religious perceptions of the boundaries of digital interaction with the principle of *sadd al-dharī'ah* in order to formulate a more applicable preventive mechanism for strengthening Muslim family resilience.

Based on these identified issues, this study aims to formulate an ethical and juridical foundation for safeguarding the integrity of Muslim households in the contemporary era. First, it seeks to identify Muslim community perceptions of the phenomenon of micro-cheating in order to understand the extent to which such behavior is regarded as a violation of commitment or a form of infidelity. Second, it aims to identify specific forms of behavior, both in workplace environments and on social media, that are perceived to have exceeded the legitimate boundaries of opposite-sex interaction. Finally, this study analyzes these behaviors through the perspective of *sadd al-dharī'ah* in order to formulate proportionate boundaries for interaction and to close potential pathways leading to harm in family life.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed an empirical legal research design using a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze the implementation of legal norms within the social realities of the community. The research site was purposively selected in Bangsal District, Mojokerto, with the primary focus of examining Muslim community perceptions of the phenomenon of micro-cheating in contemporary marital relationships. A conceptual approach was used to understand the principle of *sadd al-dharī'ah* as a preventive foundation in Islamic law, while a sociology-of-law approach was applied to analyze community interactions and responses when the normative system operates in practice. Through these perspectives, the study sought to explore the meanings underlying social behavior in order to formulate proportionate boundaries of interaction.

The primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with informants in Bangsal, who were classified into primary and supporting informants. Primary informants from the general community were selected using purposive sampling (Sugiyono, 2015), based on specific criteria: individuals with a history of divorce or those actively employed in heterogeneous workplaces where men and women work together. These criteria were deliberately established to facilitate an in-depth exploration of changing values, interaction dynamics, and relational problems experienced by

individuals within such workplace environments. Meanwhile, academics were selected as supporting informants based on their scholarly backgrounds and expertise, with the aim of facilitating data triangulation (Moleong & Surjaman, 2024) and strengthening the theoretical analysis. Secondary data were also collected through a documentary review of academic literature on Islamic family law to reinforce the normative analysis.

The data-collection procedures included participant observation to capture observable social phenomena in the field, semi-structured interviews to allow flexibility in exploring relevant information (Creswell, 2014), and document analysis as a complementary method. The principal research instrument was the researcher as a human instrument, responsible for determining the research focus, selecting informants, collecting data, assessing data quality, and interpreting the findings (Sugiyono, 2019b). In practice, the primary instrument was supported by supplementary instruments in the form of an interview guide and field notes used to document observational findings.

This study involved eight informants, comprising five primary informants from the general community aged between 27 and 66 years who had either experienced divorce or worked in heterogeneous workplace environments, and three supporting informants from academic backgrounds in Islamic studies. Field data were collected over a one-month period in May. Given that the research addressed sensitive issues involving divorce, marital relationships, and personal experiences, the researcher applied the principle of confidentiality by using the designation “informant” for participants who requested anonymity, while their actual identities were known only to and securely retained by the researcher. This measure was adopted to protect the psychological comfort of the informants and to comply with ethical principles governing social research involving human participants.

Data processing and analysis followed the interactive analytical framework developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which integrates three concurrent activities: data condensation, systematic data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Through this framework, the analysis connected empirical findings concerning micro-cheating behaviors with the normative framework of *sadd al-dharīʿah* to evaluate the preventive function of Islamic law in mitigating the risk of harm to marital relationships.

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Muslim Community Perceptions of Micro-Cheating in Bangsal

The level of public awareness in Bangsal regarding the term micro-cheating varied among informants. Some were unfamiliar with the technical term, yet intuitively regarded the behavior as inappropriate for married individuals. As one informant stated, indiscriminately responding to private messages while already married was perceived as an unnecessary form of interference in another person's household affairs. In general, the community's moral assessment of such behavior was predominantly negative, and it was considered to approach the boundaries of *zinā*.

This finding indicates the existence of an embedded collective moral awareness, despite the informants' limited familiarity with the academic or popular terminology. This pattern supports the view that community perceptions of moral deviations in digital interactions do not necessarily depend on terminological literacy, but rather on the internalization of long-established religious values. Accordingly, the moral standards of the Bangsal community position emotional honesty as a fundamental pillar of marital resilience, regardless of whether community members are familiar with the term micro-cheating.

The field data also revealed a gradation of assessments regarding the concealment of chat histories. Some informants viewed the act of hiding messages as a strong indication of betrayal, with one informant asserting that such behavior “already constitutes infidelity.” Other informants offered a more cautious assessment, regarding it as a form of situational dishonesty whose context should first be examined before it is categorized as full-scale infidelity.

This variation reflects the extent to which the community tolerates personal privacy within marriage in the digital era (Odi, 2025). The researchers interpret this difference as evidence that the boundary between reasonable privacy and suspicious secrecy has not yet been uniformly defined among the Bangsal community. Consequently, the deliberate concealment of information emerges as the principal indicator distinguishing legitimate privacy from potentially deceptive secrecy.

Based on the interviews, community perceptions of micro-cheating were shaped by the internalization of religious values, local culture, and social experience. The informants emphasized the importance of maintaining proper interactional ethics, including *ghadd al-baṣar*, limiting private

communication through direct messages, and closing potential pathways to harm in accordance with the principle of *sadd al-dhārīʿah*.

This phenomenon may be interpreted as a form of local moral resistance. Rather than uncritically adopting the global culture of digital freedom, the Bangsal community filters such influences through religious norms and workplace ethics. Excessively intimate interactions with opposite-sex coworkers are therefore regarded as potentially harmful to marital harmony (Andu, 2020). This finding is consistent with previous studies indicating that the misuse of digital spaces has become a significant factor contributing to the high rate of divorce at the national level (Anantya & Abdullah, 2024; Malik et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the Bangsal community demonstrates a comparatively more protective pattern of adaptation than urban communities, which tend to regard privacy over personal digital devices as an absolute individual right.

The field data further indicate that the community perceives micro-cheating as an early stage that may develop into more serious forms of infidelity. Seemingly ambiguous and minor actions on social media are considered capable of fostering emotional comfort that may become increasingly difficult to control. As one informant explained, confiding personal problems to a member of the opposite sex may “trigger a different kind of emotional comfort.”

The researchers interpret this finding as confirming the concept of cyber infidelity, namely digitally mediated emotional unfaithfulness that constitutes a substantial factor in marital breakdown (Mammenasa et al., 2026). Accordingly, the Bangsal community’s collective vigilance toward micro-cheating functions as a self-protective mechanism for preserving the sanctity of the family institution. It also distinguishes this community from urban societies that tend to be more permissive toward cross-gender digital interaction.

Forms of Micro-Cheating and Boundaries of Opposite-Sex Interaction

The field data reveal various forms of micro-cheating arising from digital activities on social media. Giving likes, heart symbols, or vulgar comments to members of the opposite sex was perceived by informants as behavior capable of triggering conflict and even marital breakdown. Liking or repeatedly viewing content featuring the physical attractiveness of the opposite sex without a clear reason was likewise categorized as “inappropriate behavior” for married individuals.

The researchers interpret these symbolic activities as forms of *dhārīʿah* or means that may generate illegitimate emotional comfort, even though they initially appear trivial. This interpretation is consistent with findings that the ease of connection provided by social media has considerable potential to facilitate romantic relationships outside marriage (Azzahra et al., 2023). Consequently, seemingly minor actions may function as entry points to more serious forms of relational misconduct.

Based on the interviews, private communication deliberately concealed from one’s spouse was regarded as a betrayal of marital integrity. Deleting or archiving messages to prevent a spouse from seeing them was perceived by informants as an intentional form of dishonesty carried out “so that the spouse would not find out and become angry.”

This phenomenon may be understood as a failure of communication ethics in which the individual employs ambiguous messages and distorted meanings to conceal their conduct (Pratiwi, 2025). Theoretically, such concealment undermines the foundation of trust and creates defensive communication patterns that further intensify interpersonal conflict and relational deterioration (Pratiwi, 2025b).

The field data also show that giving special attention and engaging in flirtatious behavior toward a member of the opposite sex were perceived as violations of loyalty that exceed legitimate social or professional needs. Interaction was considered inappropriate when forms of care or service that should remain exclusive to one’s spouse were instead given “too dominantly” to another person. This category also included arranging private meals with a non-mahram member of the opposite sex.

The researchers interpret this pattern as indicating a shift in the boundaries of intimacy that should remain exclusive to the lawful marital partner. The findings suggest that interactions extending beyond professional necessities carry a substantial risk of creating emotional dependency that systematically undermines family stability. Maintaining professional boundaries therefore becomes a crucial element of early prevention.

In addition, confiding personal and marital problems to a member of the opposite sex was identified by informants as a principal gateway to emotional infidelity because it may create a distinctive sense of comfort and eventually lead to a workplace romance or *cinta lokasi*. Attention provided by the

opposite sex in such situations was also frequently perceived as merely a “tactic” or manipulative strategy.

This finding is consistent with the view that individuals who are dissatisfied with their primary relationship tend to seek emotional refuge in a third party who is perceived as more understanding, thereby creating an unfair comparison with the lawful spouse (Asyraf, 2025). The researchers interpret this pattern of rationalization, in which betrayal is regarded as acceptable because of a newly formed emotional bond, as a form of disregard for social ethics. Such conduct must therefore be anticipated from the initial stage of emotional disclosure rather than only after it develops into physical infidelity.

As a preventive measure, the Bangsal community has established several boundaries for cross-gender interaction. These include mutual agreements concerning transparency in the use of digital devices between spouses, regulation of screen time, avoidance of accounts that disseminate vulgar content, and prohibitions against inviting a member of the opposite sex to secluded places or spending time alone together.

These boundaries reflect the practical application of the preventive principle of *sadd al-dharīʿah* in everyday life. Nevertheless, agreements concerning device transparency must be understood proportionately as a mutually accepted form of trust or *amānah*, rather than as unilateral surveillance that may conflict with the prohibition of *tajassus*. The preventive approach considered essential by the Bangsal community is fundamentally intended to protect the sanctity of marriage and prevent *fitnah* in the digital era, while maintaining an appropriate balance between transparency and respect for healthy marital privacy.

The following table summarizes the field findings concerning the reconstruction of micro-cheating and its mitigation strategies:

Form of Micro-Cheating	Perceptions of the Bangsal Community	Sadd al-Dharīʿah Analysis	Preventive Recommendations
Symbolic Activities on Social Media (likes, love reactions, vulgar comments, and romantic stickers)	Considered inappropriate behavior for married individuals and potentially capable of triggering marital conflict and breakdown.	Constitutes a <i>dharīʿah</i> or means that may generate illegitimate emotional comfort and gradually open the way to more serious relational misconduct.	Limit symbolic interactions with members of the opposite sex and avoid following accounts that disseminate vulgar or sexually suggestive content.
Secret Communication (intensively deleting or archiving messages)	Perceived as a form of emotional betrayal and a strong indication of possible infidelity.	Represents a strong <i>dharīʿah</i> because it involves deliberate concealment, manipulation, and the potential emergence of <i>tajassus</i> within the marital relationship.	Establish proportionate transparency based on mutual agreement and trust rather than excessive or unilateral surveillance.
Special Attention or Flirting (excessive acts of service and private meals together)	Regarded as a violation of marital loyalty that exceeds legitimate professional and social boundaries.	May be categorized as <i>muqaddimāt al-zinā</i> , namely preliminary conduct leading toward <i>zinā</i> , because it undermines the exclusivity of intimacy established through the marital contract.	Maintain professional boundaries in the workplace and avoid being alone with a non- <i>mahram</i> member of the opposite sex in cafés, secluded places, or other private settings.
Sharing Domestic Problems (confiding personal or marital problems to a member of the opposite sex)	Viewed as a primary gateway to emotional infidelity or workplace romance.	Constitutes a serious <i>dharīʿah</i> because it transfers emotional intimacy and relational rights from the lawful spouse to an unrelated third party.	Avoid oversharing domestic conflicts in public spaces or with members of the opposite sex and prioritize communication with one's spouse or an appropriate professional counselor.

Sadd al-Dharīʿah Analysis of Micro-Cheating

The principle of *sadd al-dharīʿah* constitutes a fundamental preventive instrument in Islamic law that functions to block all pathways or means that may lead to harm (*mafsadah*). Terminologically, this method refers to preventing an act that is outwardly permissible when it may serve as a means (*wasilah*) to commit a prohibited act (Syafiq & Fitri, 2025). The primary normative foundation of this

concept is rooted in the Qur'anic prohibition against approaching zinā (lā taqrabū al-zinā), as affirmed in Q.S. al-Isrā' [17]: 32:

وَلَا تَقْرُبُوا الزَّوْجَىٰ إِنَّهُ كَانَ فَاحِشَةً وَسَاءَ سَبِيلًا

Meaning: *"Do not approach unlawful sexual intercourse. Indeed, it is a shameful deed and an evil way."*

Muslim scholars have interpreted this verse as requiring the closure of access to all forms of interaction capable of creating unlawful emotional attachment between members of the opposite sex.

In the contemporary cyber era, the application of sadd al-dharī'ah faces a new challenge arising from the disappearance of physical boundaries in communication. Therefore, this principle can no longer be operationalized solely through physical restrictions but must also be contextualized through the strengthening of digital ethics and Islamic digital literacy. Islamic digital literacy refers not merely to the technical ability to operate digital devices, but also to the cognitive and moral capacity to filter information, lower one's gaze in digital spaces (ghadd al-baṣar), and recognize that every activity in cyberspace carries legal and spiritual consequences. Without the internalization of such literacy, emotional closeness through social media may undergo an unnoticed shift in relational boundaries or emotional drift. Islamic digital ethics requires internet users to make consciousness of divine supervision (murāqabah) the principal filter in their interactions, thereby enabling the preventive function of Islamic law to operate internally through individual self-restraint.

Accordingly, within contemporary digital interactions, the urgency of sadd al-dharī'ah has increased as a mechanism for closing normative gaps that may become pathways to the deterioration of the institution of marriage amid technological disruption (Usada & Firmansyah, 2026). This position is consistent with the preventive principle of avoiding greater harmful consequences, as reflected in Q.S. al-An'ām [6]: 108:

وَلَا تَسُبُّوا الَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ فَيَسُبُّوا اللَّهَ عَدْوًا بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ

Meaning: *"Do not insult those whom they invoke besides Allah, lest they insult Allah in hostility without knowledge."*

This verse illustrates that an act that initially appears ordinary may be prohibited when it is likely to produce extensive negative consequences. Emotional misconduct through digital media is also addressed in the Prophet's teaching concerning the zinā of bodily organs, as narrated by Muslim:

الْعَيْنَانِ زَنَاهُمَا النَّظَرُ

Meaning: *"The adultery of the two eyes is looking at what is unlawful."*

This hadith is relevant to preventing cyber-flirting and excessive attention to opposite-sex content in digital spaces, both of which may erode the commitment embodied in the solemn marital covenant (mīthāqan ghalīẓan). Based on the interviews, informants emphasized the importance of maintaining proper interactional ethics by avoiding the formation of any type of intimacy in digital spaces. Similarly, other informants recommended that spouses establish practical agreements concerning social media use before suspicion arises. The researchers interpret such practical agreements as an operational form of sadd al-dharī'ah at the household level. Nevertheless, transparency must be understood proportionately as a willingness to disclose matters that may reasonably create suspicion and to establish screen-free periods to preserve the quality of face-to-face communication, rather than as an absolute obligation to disclose device passwords.

These findings indicate that, from the perspective of Islamic family law, micro-cheating occupies the position of a dharī'ah, or a pathway leading to more serious infidelity or physical zinā. It is regarded as a form of emotional betrayal that develops gradually through seemingly minor actions that perpetrators often fail to recognize as misconduct. Academic informants considered apparently harmless digital interactions, such as intensive communication through private messages or excessive attention on social media, to be early indications that may generate profound emotional attraction outside the marital bond (Andani & Sunarto, 2026). Accordingly, micro-cheating may be categorized as muqaddimāt al-zinā, or preliminary conduct leading toward zinā, because each stage of intimate interaction systematically erodes the sacred commitment of marriage.

An analysis of the various forms of micro-cheating demonstrates differing levels of potential mafsadah for marital harmony and spousal trust. Ambiguous activities on social media, such as giving

likes, heart reactions, or intimate comments on photographs of members of the opposite sex, have the potential to provoke serious marital conflict and suspicion. The risk of harm increases significantly when the behavior becomes more intensive, such as sharing personal problems or confiding in an opposite-sex coworker through private messages, which may create a dangerous sense of emotional comfort. The systemic effects of such behavior extend beyond the erosion of relational exclusivity and may threaten essential objectives of *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*, particularly the protection of honor (*ḥifẓ al-ʿird*) and family stability (*usrah*).

Preventive measures consistent with the spirit of *sadd al-dharīʿah* therefore require appropriate boundaries in opposite-sex interactions to prevent marital breakdown in the digital era (Usada & Firmansyah, 2026b). Although some informants recommended complete transparency in the use of digital devices as an expression of spousal commitment, this recommendation should be interpreted proportionately rather than as unrestricted access to personal privacy. From an Islamic perspective, transparency between spouses should ideally be founded on trust (*amānah*), rather than surveillance that may conflict with the prohibition of *tajassus* or spying. A more appropriate recommendation is therefore reasonable transparency based on mutual agreement, including openness regarding matters that may reasonably generate suspicion and the establishment of screen-free periods to maintain the quality of face-to-face communication, rather than the total elimination of individual privacy. This approach balances the need for emotional honesty with the protection of honor (*ḥifẓ al-ʿird*) and healthy privacy within marriage. It also maintains proper interactional ethics without creating coercive relationships or persistent mutual suspicion.

These findings have strategic implications for strengthening Muslim family resilience through premarital education and Islamic value-based digital literacy. Muslim families require critical competencies to evaluate digital content and manage interpersonal relationships proportionately in accordance with the principles of *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*. Academically, this study contributes to the reconceptualization of *nushūz* and infidelity in Islamic family law so that both concepts become more responsive to nonphysical forms of infidelity in cyberspace. By positioning micro-cheating as a serious object of legal analysis, this study is expected to contribute to a framework that offers stronger protection of women's dignity and greater legal certainty in responding to the dynamics of digital modernity.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Muslim community in Bangsal District perceives micro-cheating as a form of emotional betrayal and a gateway (*muqaddimāt al-zinā*) to physical infidelity. This phenomenon manifests in four principal forms: symbolic activities on social media, secret communication concealed from one's spouse, special attention or flirting, and confiding personal or domestic problems to members of the opposite sex. Through the analytical framework of *sadd al-dharīʿah*, these four behaviors are categorized as forms of *dharīʿah* that must be prevented because of their potential to erode marital commitment and threaten the protection of honor (*ḥifẓ al-ʿird*) and family stability (*usrah*).

Academically, this study contributes to the development of Islamic family law in the digital era by offering a more adaptive reconceptualization of *nushūz* and infidelity in response to nonphysical forms of misconduct in cyberspace. It also formulates a proportionate framework for digital interaction that maintains a balance between emotional honesty between spouses and the right to healthy privacy. This study is limited by its local geographical scope in Bangsal and by the perspectives of informants with histories of divorce or experience in mixed-gender workplaces. Future research is therefore recommended to adopt a comparative design across broader geographical settings and employ a mixed-methods approach. Practically, the findings recommend that relevant institutions, such as the Office of Religious Affairs (Kantor Urusan Agama—KUA) and the Advisory Board for the Development and Preservation of Marriage (Badan Penasihat, Pembinaan, dan Pelestarian Perkawinan—BP4), integrate Islamic digital literacy modules into premarital counseling programs as a preventive legal measure.

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