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Reframing Islamic Ethical Boundaries from Physical Khalwat to Digital Khalwat through Wahbah al-Zuhayli's Tafsir al-Munir

**Muhammad Hasif Mohamad^{1*}, Abdul Hafiz Abdullah¹, Muhammad Dhiauddin Ahmad Termizi¹,
Mohd Ismail Sulaiman¹, Siti Aisyah Johan¹, Zahin Mohamad Tahir²**

*Corresponding Author

¹ Academy of Islamic Civilization, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor, Malaysia

² Kolej Universiti Islam Johor Sultan Ibrahim (KUIJSI), Johor, Malaysia

hasif96@graduate.utm.my, abhafiz@utm.my, dhiauddin3@gmail.com, Ismail80@graduate.utm.my, g-08032880@moe-dl.edu.my, zahintahir@kuijsi.edu.my
Tel: +60137556654

Abstract

Digital communication has transformed interpersonal behaviour within Muslim societies. In this era, the growth of digital technologies now enables private interactions that mirror the ethical risks associated with *khalwat*, even without being physically close. This study aims to examine the prohibition of *khalwat* for application in digital dakwah as outlined in the Qur'an according to Wahbah al-Zuhayli's *Tafsir al-Munir*. This study employs a qualitative methodology through analysis of Qur'anic verses and *Tafsir al-Munir*. The findings demonstrate that digital *khalwat* is ethically equivalent to physical *khalwat* and contributes to the development of Islamic digital ethics by providing practical guidance for digital interactions.

Keywords: Digital; *Tafsir*; *Khalwat*; Ethical

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1.0 Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has reshaped the ways Muslims interact, seek knowledge, and form emotional connections. Applications such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram Direct Messages, TikTok and online counselling platforms (Zoom and Google Meet) have enabled personalised, constant and often private channels of interaction. While these innovations create new opportunities for learning and community engagement, they also introduce ethical concerns related to privacy and gender interaction. The term "digital *khalwat*", which refers one to one interaction between a man and a woman in digital spaces, is not yet widely established as a formal term. However, this study adopts this term to describe one to one interaction between a man and a woman in digital spaces to address emerging ethical concerns that drawn from classical fiqh.

In Islamic jurisprudence, *khalwat* is prohibited due to the risk of desire and inability to control lust when a man and woman are in seclusion. The objective behind this prohibition is to prevent, safeguard dignity and block pathways to harm. Although digital communication lacks physical interaction, it reproduces the essential ethical features of *khalwat* such as secrecy, absence of social

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oversight and psychological openness. This suggests that the condition of *khalwat* extends beyond physical space. Although there are ethical similarities between classical *khalwat* and digital interaction, the guidelines are limited and creating a gap between Islamic fiqh and digital behaviour.

Within this context, existing studies on digital in syariah perspective have given limited attention to Qur'anic interpretation. This focus particularly in Wahbah al-Zuhayli's *Tafsir al-Munir* as a primary reference for analysing and adaptation in contemporary digital behaviour. Al-Zuhayli's work is characterised by its integration of fiqh principles, ethical reasoning and contextual interpretation making it a suitable lens for reframing Islamic boundaries in the digital era. Accordingly, this study pursues three specific objectives. First, to extract the ethical foundations of *khalwat* from Wahbah al-Zuhayli's interpretation in *Tafsir al-Munir*. Second, to conceptually compare classical physical *khalwat* with contemporary forms of digital intimacy. Third, to apply the prohibition of *khalwat* guidelines based on Qur'anic interpretations to contemporary digital practices.

2.0 Literature Review

Wahbah al-Zuhayli is regarded as one of the ten most impactful Muslim scholars of the 20th and 21st centuries (Ghazali, 2011). According to Ghazali (2019), Wahbah al-Zuhayli was awarded the Malaysian National Ma'al Hijrah figure in 2008 due to his significant contribution to contemporary Islamic scholarship. Among his most notable scholarly works that earned him this recognition is his interpretation of *Tafsir al-Munir*. As for the contemporary perspective, *Tafsir al-Munir* and Wahbah al-Zuhayli's standpoint are the most suitable references aligned with the objectives of this study.

The term *khalwat* according to Ismail (2016) carries both a spiritual aspect and a social interaction. It may show separation done for the purpose of increasing devotion as shown by the Prophet Muhammad's isolation in the Cave of Hira' or it may relate to the lawful *khalwat* between a husband and wife. However, in this study, the term *khalwat* specifically refers to a situation in which a man and a woman who are not *mahram* and not legally married meet or remain together in a secluded place, thereby creating reasonable suspicion of immoral behaviour. The act of *khalwat* is prohibited based on prophetic traditions that expressly forbid it. One such hadith narrated by Ibn Abbas reports that the Prophet SAW said: "A man must not be alone with a woman except in the presence of her *mahram*..." (Al-Bukhari, 2015: 5233). Accordingly, al-Nawawi (1392) affirm that all scholars agree that seclusion between a man and a non-*mahram* woman without a third party is prohibited (*haram*).

Petrosyan (2024) reports from a worldwide study up to April 2024, it was found that 62.6 percent of the global population are social media users. This statistic shows that the majority of individuals worldwide are active on social media, thereby exposing them to various forms of communication, including videos, images and writings. Therefore, this proves that interaction can also occur in digital spaces. The same applies to online learning environments, where one to one communication between men and women may take place. These statistics demonstrate that social media has become a primary platform for daily communication and interaction. If not regulated by Islamic principles, this situation will create opportunities for virtual *khalwat* where it will lead to unmonitored communication, unrestricted social interaction and the sharing of videos and images that do not comply with the requirements of the *Shari'ah*. According to Jabali et., al (2024) that social media or digital communication also can serve as a tool that facilitates the exchange of feeling, attention, communication, and emotional support. These findings reinforced the view that digital platforms create interaction equivalent to those formed through physical interaction.

Social media and digital technology are no longer merely communication tools in this era. But they have become central spaces for identity formation, religious expression and modern Muslim community building. According to Wahid (2024), studies by scholars such as Abokhodair, Vieweg, Inhorn, Nisa, Evolvi, Clarke, Eisenlohr and Baulch signify that digital platforms generate new forms of social interaction, influence religious community and rebuilt how Muslims understand and practice their faith in daily life. Besides that, based on Shodiqoh (2024) statement, social media should be used to spread beneficial knowledge, uphold good manners, protect privacy and promote tolerance and social harmony in online interaction. In addition, Prayogi et., al (2025) states that scholars also acknowledge that significant challenges remain in integrating fiqh with the rapidly evolving digital environment as existing fiqh guidelines have not fully adapted to contemporary digital developments and their ethical implications. In response, contemporary Islamic perspectives increasingly employ ethical principles and *maqasid al-shari'ah* to guide responsible digital engagement, positioning fiqh not only as a means of preserving the sanctity of *shari'ah* but also as a guidelines for development ethical awareness and moral responsibility in digital practices (Ahmad et al., 2025). These discussions collectively indicate growing scholarly engagement with Islamic responses to digital interaction while also underscoring the need for analysis based Qur'anic in addressing digitally behaviour.

3.0 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design as this approach is most appropriate for examining ethical concepts within thematic Qur'anic interpretation. Jasmi (2021) states that one of the most suitable methods for analysing content within Islamic studies is qualitative research. The primary data were obtained from Wahbah al-Zuhayli's *Tafsir al-Munir* due to its systematic integration of Qur'anic interpretation, fiqh reasoning, and ethical analysis. The research procedure was conducted in three stages. First, data identification was carried out through a keyword based textual search focusing on the terms *khalwat* as well as ethical themes such as gender interaction, modesty, privacy and preventive moral safeguards. Relevant Qur'anic verses and interpretation discussions were then identified and examined within *Tafsir al-Munir*. Second, the analysis employed both deductive and inductive approach. The deductive approach focused on extracting established Islamic ethical principles particularly the prohibition of *khalwat* as articulated by al-Zuhayli. The inductive approach was used to identify ethical characteristics within contemporary digital practices such as private

messaging, late-night communication, voice-note exchanges and private video calls. Third, the extracted ethical principles of prohibition of *khalwat* were systematically organised to develop an applicable ethical based on Qur'anic interpretation from Wahbah al-Zuhayli's interpretations in order to apply them within the context of digital practices.

4.0 Findings

Tafsir al-Munir contains several discussions addressing this issue. The analysis of Tafsir al-Munir reveals that two surah serve as key references which are Surah al-Ahzab verse 53 and the discussion in the introduction to Surah Yusuf. The summary of findings in this study is presented in Table 1:

Table 1. Findings Prohibits of *Khalwat* in Tafsir al-Munir

Findings	Surah Al-Ahzab	Surah Yusuf
Prohibits of <i>Khalwat</i>	"A person should not place too much trust in himself when being in seclusion with someone who is not lawful for him." (Interpretation of Surah al-Ahzab: 53).	"It is affirmed in a hadith narrated by al-Tirmidhi from Ibn 'Umar, which states: 'A man is never alone with a woman except that the third between them is <i>Satan</i> ...'. (Hadith cited in the interpretation in introduction Surah Yusuf, al-Tirmizi: 1996; 2165)

Table 1 shows that Wahbah al-Zuhayli cites a hadith of the Prophet SAW which explains the prohibition of a man being alone with a non-mahram woman, as *Satan* will attempt to entice them towards committing zina. He further reinforces this thematic construction by elaborating on the obligation to avoid *khalwat*. This narration establishes the normative rationale of *khalwat* as a condition that facilitates temptation through isolation rather than through physical contact alone. Al-Zuhayli further strengthens this ethical construction by emphasising the obligation to avoid situations that may lead to moral transgression even if no explicit act of immorality has yet occurred.

This preventive logic is further illustrated through Qur'anic narratives that implicitly convey the dangers of seclusion. One prominent example is the story of the wife of the Egyptian official who attempted to seduce Prophet Yusuf, as recorded in Surah Yusuf verse 23: "And she, in whose house he was, wanted to seduce him. She closed the doors and said, "Come, you". This verse describes how she "closed the doors" and invited him towards intimacy, highlighting how physical privacy can create an ethically hazardous situation and can lead to situations that violate the boundaries of Islamic law.

In addition, the findings also indicate that Wahbah al-Zuhayli consistently emphasises the observance of ethical guidelines of interactions between men and women. In Tafsir al-Munir, al-Zuhayli (2018) highlights the importance of maintaining proper attire ('awrah), observing appropriate boundaries of interaction, lowering the gaze, safeguarding chastity and preserving personal dignity as interconnected ethical principles regulating gender interaction. These findings suggest that the prohibition of *khalwat* is not treated in isolation, but functions as part of a broader Qur'anic ethical male and female interaction. Such as through this interpretation of Surah al-Nur verse 30 and 31, which commands believing men and women to lower their gaze and guard their chastity because the gaze represents the first gateway to zina. The command in Surah al-Ahzab verse 32 also show that women must not to soften their speech. Ethical principle in Islamic law is prevented at its earliest psychological and sensory stages because the eyes, ears and mouth may lead individuals towards actions that result in zina. Muslim narrates from Abu Hurairah that the Prophet SWT said: "The son of Adam has been allotted his share of zina, and this is something certainly decreed for him. The zina of the eyes is to look; the zina of the tongue is to speak; the zina of the ears is to listen; the zina of the hands is to touch; the zina of the feet is to walk towards it; and the soul desires and longs for it. But it is the private parts that ultimately confirm or deny it" (Muslim: 1955; 2657).

Overall, the findings indicate that Wahbah al-Zuhayli's interpretation of *khalwat* provides a ethical guidlines that transcends physical space because the ethical risk emerges through emotional closeness, privacy and the absence of social oversight. When applied to digital environments, these principles reveal that online communication reproduces the same ethical conditions that Islamic law seeks to prevent. An understanding interpretation of Qur'anic ethics to be meaningfully extended to contemporary digital practices addressing the gap between fiqh principles and modern forms of online interaction.

5.0 Discussion

This section analyses the Qur'anic interpretation of the prohibition of *khalwat* in relation to digital interaction.

5.1 Comparison between Physical *Khalwat* and Digital *Khalwat*

The analysis reveals strong conceptual equivalence between physical *khalwat* and digital *khalwat*. Physical *khalwat* involves physical seclusion, absence of witnesses and emotional openness. Digital *khalwat* replicates these features through private virtual interaction between individuals, including private voice notes, disappearing media, and exclusive video calls. In both contexts, the primary ethical concern is to prevent and avoid acts of zina. The comparative summary is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparison between Physical *Khalwat* and Digital *Khalwat*

No	Element	Physical <i>Khalwat</i>	Digital <i>Khalwat</i>
1	Location	Physical	Digital / online

2	Visibility	A location secluded from public view	A secluded and private setting, away from public observation
3	Risk	Physical temptation	Emotional vulnerability
4	Oversight	None	None
5	Ethical concern	Illicit sexual relations (zina)	An initial step that may lead to illicit sexual relations (zina)

Based on Table 2, both physical and virtual forms of *khalwat* can lead to *fitnah* or potentially result in acts of *zina*. Allah SWT prohibits both actions not only committing *zina* but also prohibits from approaching anything that leads towards it based on Surah al-Isra' verse 32 "And do not approach unlawful sexual intercourse".

5.2 Digital communication which *khalwat* may occur

This section discusses how various forms of online communication that may give rise to situations of *khalwat*. The analysis demonstrates that digital interaction can reproduce the same ethical risks in physical *khalwat*.

Table 3. Digital Communication

No	Communication	Explanation
1	Private Messaging	Private messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram and Instagram Direct Messages create a level of confidentiality that closely resembles the conditions of physical <i>khalwat</i> . When communication becomes sustained, frequent or emotionally expressive, it can produce mutual comfort with one another whereby psychological closeness is developed despite physical distance.
2	One to One Video Consultation	Video calls between men and women further increase the risk of emotional that can be an initial step that may lead to illicit sexual relations exposure because they can simulate face to face interaction. Although no physical exists, the visual and auditory can develop emotional openness and personal connection.
3	Personalised Dakwah	Digital dakwah has increased rapidly through platforms such as TikTok, YouTube and Instagram where preachers are involved with large audiences. However, public teaching often changes into private communication when followers seek personalised guidance through platforms such as zoom or Google Meet. This individualizes interaction may evolve into exclusive exchanges that blur boundaries between religious instruction and emotional companionship.

Table 3 indicates that digital interaction may open pathways leading to *zina*, beginning with emotional disclosure in digital spaces and potentially progressing to physical encounters. From an Islamic perspective, an action that is originally permissible may become prohibited when it serves as a means leading to what is unlawful. This principle is grounded in *sadd al-dharai'*, which aims to prevent potential pathways to moral harm. In the context of digital interaction when communication between men and women exceeds ethical boundaries such as through prolonged private exchanges or emotional disclosure, it may facilitate moral misbehaviour even in the absence of physical interaction. Accordingly, one to one digital communication that generates privacy, emotional openness and the absence of external oversight can be understood as a form of digital *khalwat* as it reproduces the same ethical conditions addressed by the classical prohibition of *khalwat*.

5.3 Adapting the Prohibition of *Khalwat* in Digital Communication

Findings from *Tafsir al-Munir* can be meaningfully applied to digital contexts on ethical principles. Therefore, the prohibition of *khalwat* in Islam is not limited solely to physical meetings, but it also applies to any interaction between a man and a non mahram woman in the absence of a trustworthy third party. Thus, being alone together whether physically present or without the presence of a third person constitutes a prohibited situation in Islamic law, as affirmed by the hadith referenced in the study's findings. This condition also can be applied to digital interactions.

A fatwa issued by the Office of the Mufti of the Federal Territories in Malaysia, as author by Bakharuddin (2020), permits Qur'an learning sessions involving only two individuals of the opposite sex, provided that the established *Shari'ah* guidelines are strictly observed. Nevertheless, it is still preferable to avoid such situations in order to prevent potential harm, in line with the principle of blocking the means (*sadd al-dharai'*). The principle of *sadd al-dharai'* strengthens the justification for preventive digital ethics. Digital platforms possess unique characteristic such as encryption and privacy that can facilitate private relationships without social oversight. These characteristic represent pathways to potential to may lead to *zina*. Therefore, Islamic ethics demands proactive protection and regulation of the digital space in accordance with Islamic law. Even when a person wishes to learn the Qur'an with a teacher who is not a mahram, he or she should be accompanied by a spouse, a mahram or a trustworthy woman. As frequent private sessions lead to increased emotional closeness, the sharing of personal matters or the development of feelings between the teacher and student of the opposite sex may give rise to *fitnah*. Hence, it is recommended to avoid private conversations with the opposite sex unless there is a authentic requirement. This ethical guideline not only preserves the dignity of both parties but also protects the reputation of the Muslim community from negative accusations.

From the perspective of *maqasid al-shari'ah*, protecting dignity and emotional wellbeing applies directly to digital interaction. Conversations that involve private sharing or personal communication require ethical safeguards to avoid emotional manipulation or dependency. Although digital communication is permissible in principle, unnecessary private messaging that raises emotional closeness and intimacy between men and women are ethically restricted. The prohibition of *khalwat* serves as an essential preventive measure within Islamic law. When *khalwat* is avoided, the opportunity to commit *zina* is likewise eliminated. However, there are certain exceptional circumstances in which seclusion between a man and a non *mahram* woman is permitted. Such as situations of necessity or emergency for example emergency calls or work related communication provided that the interaction is limited strictly to what is required.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

In conclusion, the analysis of *Tafsir al-Munir* shows that there is a prohibition of *khalwat* that needs to be applied in the current era of digital. Its purpose is to prevent zina, safeguard honour, avoid temptation and lust, and cultivate a strong Islamic character. Two essential conditions must be observed, which is avoiding seclusion whether physical or virtual and ensuring the presence of a trustworthy third-party during interaction between men and women. Consequently, *khalwat* is prohibited both in physical and digital forms, as both circumstances fall under the divine prohibition which is the command not to approach *zina* and not to commit *zina* itself. These findings have implications for online dakwah, digital counselling, and gender interaction in contemporary Muslim societies.

This study is subject to certain limitations. As a text *tafsir* based analysis, it does not incorporate empirical data on actual digital interaction practices among Muslim users. The findings are therefore normative and interpretive in nature, relying on Qur'anic interpretation textual analysis rather than behavioural observation. Future research may empirically examine how digital intimacy is experienced and negotiated among Muslim users across different digital platforms. Surveys, interviews or case studies involving digital preachers, counsellors and Muslim youth could be conducted to test the applicability of the proposed framework and to explore cultural variations in digital ethical practices.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

Contributes to Islamic digital ethics and provides practical guidance for digital interactions based on *Tafsir al-Munir* interpretation. This study also contributes new insights to the development of Islamic religious policies and the advancement of the ummah, particularly in matters related to digital interaction towards greater compliance with Islamic principles especially in Malaysia. For example, Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) based on these findings may strengthen its jurisdiction by including additional guidelines besides it can serve as a reference for individuals in navigating their daily lives through digital interaction.

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