

COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF FREE SOCIAL INTERACTION DURING THE ENGAGEMENT PERIOD

Tsalisul Huda¹, Ridho Riyanto²

Muhammadiyah Institute of Islamic Studies Pacitan

thuda8842@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Engagement (*khitbah*) is an important stage preceding marriage in Muslim community traditions. However, in practice, the engagement period is often misinterpreted as a time of freedom in interactions between prospective couples. This study aims to explore the perceptions of the Maling Mati Village community regarding the phenomenon of free social interaction during the engagement period, as well as the contributing factors and impacts. This research employs a qualitative approach with a case study method. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The findings indicate that most community members lack a proper understanding of the Islamic legal boundaries during *khitbah*, resulting in tolerance of unrestricted interaction between engaged couples, which in some cases leads to premarital pregnancy. The main factors behind this phenomenon include low religious literacy, weak roles of families and community leaders, and the influence of popular culture. This study recommends the necessity of value-based education and structured premarital guidance provided by religious and social institutions. Thus, moral values and Islamic teachings can be preserved throughout the marriage preparation process.

Keywords: *Community perception, free social interaction, engagement, khitbah, Islamic values*

INTRODUCTION

Engagement, or *khitbah*, is one of the important stages in the marriage process that has become a tradition in many Muslim communities, including in Indonesia. This period is essentially intended as a phase of *ta'aruf*, or mutual introduction, between the prospective couple and their families, so that the marriage can later be built on the foundation of mutual understanding and emotional readiness (Sya'ban, 2017). In Islam, *khitbah* does not automatically grant the same lawful status as that of a married couple, since a valid Islamic marriage contract (*nikah*) has not yet taken place (Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2020).

However, in reality, the engagement period is often misunderstood and misused by some members of the community. It is not uncommon to find engaged couples behaving as if they are already lawfully married, even engaging in physical relationships that exceed acceptable boundaries. This phenomenon frequently results in premarital pregnancy or the cancellation of marriage due to emerging disgrace (Nurhasanah & Fitriani, 2022). One of the main causes is the mistaken perception that engagement serves as a form of "legitimacy" for a freer relationship compared to the period before the proposal.

Previous studies have shown that public perceptions of the engagement period vary widely. Some individuals adopt a permissive attitude due to the influence of popular culture or low religious literacy, while others remain firmly committed to Islamic values and social norms (Wulandari & Hidayat, 2021). These differing perceptions are important to examine, especially in the context of rural communities such as Maling Mati Village, which has long been known for its strong social and religious ties.

This situation certainly raises concerns, especially in communities that uphold religious and

cultural values. Therefore, it is important to conduct research to understand the public's perception of free social interaction during the engagement period, particularly in Maling Mati Village, Pacitan District. The results of this study are expected to provide valuable input for educators, community leaders, and religious institutions in offering more accurate education regarding the boundaries of interaction during the engagement period from an Islamic perspective. Based on the background, the research problem in this study is: How do the people of Maling Mati Village perceive free social interaction during the engagement period, what factors influence the formation of these perceptions, and how do the community members respond to this phenomenon?

The objective of this study is to understand the public's perception of free social interaction during the engagement period, identify the factors that influence these perceptions, and describe the community's attitude in responding to this phenomenon. This research is expected to contribute to strengthening public literacy regarding the boundaries of premarital interaction, as well as serve as a reference for educational institutions and community leaders in providing appropriate religious education.

The Concept of Engagement (Khitbah) in Islam

Engagement, or *khitbah*, is a declaration of intention from a man to a woman or her family to proceed with marriage. In Islamic law, *khitbah* is not a marriage contract, but rather a promise towards marriage that is not yet binding in a legal (shar'i) sense (Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2020). Therefore, the boundaries of interaction between a man and a woman who are engaged remain the same as those between non-mahram individuals. According to Yusuf al-Qaradawi in *Halal and Haram in Islam*, the engagement period should be safeguarded from any form of *khalwat* (being alone together) and physical touch, as Islamic law places great emphasis on preserving the dignity and purity of the relationship before the marriage contract (al-Qaradawi, 2015). Thus, any form of physical closeness during the engagement period is not permissible, even if a social "bond" has been established.

Free Social Interaction and Its Implications

Free social interaction refers to a form of social interaction, particularly between men and women, that is not restricted by religious or cultural norms. In the context of engagement, free social interaction can include activities such as dating, being alone together without a mahram, and even premarital sexual relations. Research by Nurhasanah and Fitriani (2022) mentions that the prevalence of free social interaction among teenagers and young adults is often driven by a misunderstanding of the status of their relationship, weak social control, and the influence of social media. The implications of free social interaction during the engagement period are very serious, both socially and religiously. It not only tarnishes the dignity of the individual and the family but also has the potential to disrupt the sacred process of marriage. Therefore, education about the boundaries of interaction between the sexes before marriage becomes crucial to prevent such deviations (Syafi'i, 2023).

Public Perception of Social Behavior

Public perception is the collective judgment of a group regarding certain phenomena or behaviors that develop within their social environment. This perception is influenced by factors such as culture, religion, education level, and the collective experiences of the community. According to Wulandari and Hidayat (2021), rural communities tend to uphold traditional moral values, although it is not impossible for their perceptions to change due to the influence of globalization and the media. In the context of the engagement period, public perception of free social interaction can serve as an important indicator to assess how well religious values and social norms are still being maintained. A study on this perception is also crucial as a foundation for formulating effective da'wah (preaching) approaches and social education strategies.

METHOD

Type and Approach of Research

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study type. The qualitative approach is employed to describe and analyze the public's perception of social phenomena, specifically free social interaction during the engagement period. A case study was chosen because the research is focused on a phenomenon occurring in a specific location, namely Maling Mati Village, Pacitan District, which is considered to represent a certain socio-cultural context (Yin, 2018). This approach is appropriate for exploring the understanding, beliefs, and values underlying public perceptions in daily life (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Location and Time

The research was conducted in Maling Mati Village, Pacitan District, Pacitan Regency, East Java. This location was purposively selected because it is an area with a strong socio-religious background, yet still experiences changes in social values due to the influence of foreign cultures and media. The research was carried out over a period of three months, from January to March 2025.

Subjects and Informants of the Research

The informants of the research consist of three groups: Religious and community leaders, who are considered to have influence and understanding of social and religious values; young men and women who have experienced the engagement period, both those who adhered to norms and those who violated them; and parents or guardians, who are often involved in the process of their children's engagement. The selection of informants was carried out using purposive sampling, which involves choosing subjects who are considered capable of providing in-depth information according to the needs of the research (Sugiyono, 2021). The total number of informants in this study is 12, consisting of: 2 religious leaders, 2 community leaders, 4 young men and women, and 4 parents or guardians.

Data Collection Techniques

Interviews, to explore the perceptions and experiences of informants regarding interactions during the engagement period. The interview guide was developed based on the research problems and objectives. Non-participatory observation, where the researcher observes the social activities of the community without direct involvement, such as interactions during the engagement, religious activities, or social activities of the village youth. Documentary study, used to support field data, in

the form of notes from religious leaders, village news, or customary documents related to engagement. Interviews were conducted in person and recorded in the form of transcripts. The validity of the data was maintained by performing source and method triangulation (Moleong, 2021), which involves comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documents.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), which consists of three stages, namely; Data reduction: the process of selecting, summarizing, and focusing raw data to align with the research themes. Data presentation: organizing data in the form of thematic narratives and summary tables for ease of analysis. Conclusion drawing and verification: interpreting the meaning of the data and testing the validity of the findings through discussions, member checking, and triangulation. The analysis process is carried out simultaneously from the first data collection until the research is completed. To maintain the validity of the data, this study uses four validity techniques according to Lincoln and Guba (1985); Credibility: through triangulation and member checking. Transferability: through detailed context description. Dependability: through audit trails and systematic documentation of the research process. Confirmability: through researcher reflection and field notes.

RESULTS

This study aims to explore the community's perceptions of free interaction during the engagement period in Maling Mati Village, Pacitan District, Pacitan Regency. Based on interviews with 12 informants, the results of this study are grouped into several main themes that reflect the community's views on engagement, free interaction, and its impacts. Community's Understanding of the Meaning of Engagement (Khitbah). Most informants are aware that engagement is a period of introduction intended to acquaint the prospective couple with their families and the community. However, some young people consider engagement to be almost the same as marriage, which gives them the freedom to interact. According to the local religious leader, Ustadz F (55 years old): *"In Islam, engagement does not mean that their relationship is fully halal. They must still maintain boundaries and cannot be alone together without a mahram."* However, this perception is not fully understood by some young people. As expressed by R (23 years old), a young woman from the village: *"When you're engaged, it's like it's already official. So, we feel free to go out together, hold hands, even go to quiet places."* This finding indicates a gap in understanding between the older and younger generations regarding the meaning of engagement. This misconception often leads to deviations in the interactions between couples during the engagement period.

Forms of Free Association During the Engagement Period

Based on interviews with several community leaders, there are various forms of free association that occur during the engagement period. The most commonly observed forms include couples being alone without supervision, overly intense communication without boundaries, and in some cases, premarital sexual relations that lead to pregnancy. Mr. M (61 years old), a community leader, stated: *"I often hear cases where a young woman gets pregnant before the wedding ceremony, even though she has already been engaged. The parents feel ashamed and end up rushing the*

marriage." This statement aligns with the findings in the study by Wulandari and Hidayat (2021), which show that free mixing among couples in the engagement period often leads to pregnancy outside of marriage.

Factors Contributing to the Occurrence of Free Mixing During the Engagement Period

There are several factors that contribute to the occurrence of free mixing during the engagement period, including; Lack of Religious Understanding: Informants from the group of parents and religious leaders emphasized that weak religious understanding is the main reason why couples who are already engaged feel free to interact with each other. Ustadz F (55 years old) expressed; "The lack of teaching about the boundaries in religion makes them feel free, even though according to religion, they are not yet married." Lack of Parental Supervision: After the engagement, parents tend to feel at ease and no longer closely monitor the relationship of the young couple.

Mrs. N (48 years old), a guardian of a student, added; "After their child is engaged, many parents think it's all settled. However, they still need to be monitored to prevent anything unwanted from happening." The Influence of Social Media and Foreign Culture: Social media and popular culture, which often display free relationships before marriage, also influence the views of some young people on engagement and free interactions. This finding is supported by research by Nurhasanah and Fitriani (2022), which found that the strong influence of social media has changed teenagers' views on social interaction norms.

The Community's Perception of the Impact of Free Interaction During the Engagement Period

The community in Maling Mati Village is divided into two main groups in responding to free interaction during the engagement period; Conservative Group: This group believes that free interaction during the engagement period is highly detrimental. According to them, such actions are in conflict with local religious and cultural norms. Ustadz F (55 years old) firmly stated: "If this is not addressed, the next generation will consider premarital relationships as something normal. This is certainly very dangerous for morality and family honor." The Permissive Group: Some informants from the youth and more permissive parents consider premarital interaction during the engagement period as normal, as long as it eventually leads to marriage. As expressed by R (23 years old), a young woman from the village; "We feel that once we're engaged, it's almost like being married, so there's nothing wrong with holding hands or walking together." This view is in line with the research by Astuti & Dewi (2023), which states that a permissive understanding of premarital relationships can influence the behavior of the younger generation in society.

Efforts of the Community in Overcoming Premarital Relations

The community in Maling Mati Village has started to recognize the negative impacts of premarital relations during the engagement period. As a result, they have undertaken several efforts to address this issue, including; Regular Religious Lectures and Religious Outreach: Local religious leaders hold lectures about marriage and the boundaries of interaction between couples during the engagement period. Ustadz F (55 years old) stated; "We always remind in the lectures that engagement does not make them fully halal, and they must still maintain manners and religious norms." Youth Development: Activities such as mosque youth development, marriage seminars, and

special lectures for young couples are held to provide proper understanding regarding relationships before marriage. However, despite these efforts, there are still significant challenges in changing the perceptions and behaviors of the community as a whole.

DISCUSSION

The discussion in this study aims to further elaborate on the field findings related to the community's perception of free association practices during the engagement period, as well as to review the contributing factors and impacts from a socio-religious perspective. All findings are analyzed using the approach of religious sociology and an Islamic normative perspective. Distortion of the Meaning of Engagement in the Collective Consciousness of Society Normatively, engagement (khitbah) is a declaration of intent to marry, which does not carry the legal consequences of a marriage contract. This means that the two parties involved during the engagement period are not yet allowed to interact freely as husband and wife. This is emphasized by Munawir (2018), who states that the engagement period is a time for getting to know each other, not a permission for physical or intimate relationships. However, social reality shows a new interpretation of engagement as an 'unwritten permission' to establish a deeper relationship. The researchers found that the majority of young couples who are engaged feel as though they have received 'social legitimacy' to be alone together, travel together, and even, in some cases, engage in sexual relations before the marriage contract. This phenomenon reflects a distortion of meaning and blurring of boundaries between religious law and culture in the collective consciousness of the community in Desa Maling Mati.

This aligns with the study by Astuti & Dewi (2023), which mentions that rural communities are experiencing a shift in values due to the penetration of digital media, which is changing the way young generations view relationships between men and women. Thus, khitbah, which should be a time for acquaintance (ta'aruf), is instead interpreted as a 'pre-marriage without a contract. Normalization of Deviant Behavior Among the Youth. The shift in moral values is also evident in how the community tolerates physical closeness between engaged couples. Several informants even stated, "What matters is that they are engaged—better than dating without any certainty." This statement indicates a form of social justification for deviant behavior, as long as it is framed within the status of engagement. This normalization can be understood through the labeling theory in sociology, which suggests that behavior previously considered taboo becomes "normal" once a certain social label is attached—in this case, "already engaged." However, from the perspective of Islamic law and traditional social norms, engagement does not change the prohibition of free physical interaction between men and women (Sya'roni, 2021).

Another study by Wulandari and Hidayat (2021) also revealed that many Muslim youths perceive engagement as a form of legitimacy for a more intimate relationship than casual dating, leading them to disregard moral boundaries. Lack of Value-Based Education and Absence of Supervision The researcher found that many cases of misconduct during the engagement period were triggered by weak supervision from families and a lack of value-based education that addresses practical life aspects. Parents often feel they have fulfilled their responsibility merely by "proposing to someone's child" without providing proper guidance or mentoring to their children during the khitbah (engagement) period. However, according to Syafi'i (2023), the role of the family is crucial in internalizing applicable religious values. The family is not only a giver of permission but also a moral

supervisor and guide. When this role is neglected, the resulting vacuum is often filled by the influence of media, peers, and popular culture—which tend to be permissive.

Furthermore, the lack of premarital education based on Islamic sharia values worsens the situation. Knowledge about the boundaries of interaction in Islam tends to be textual only, failing to address the practical realities faced by young couples. Social Impact: Premarital Pregnancy and the Legitimization of Forced Marriage One of the tangible impacts of free relationships during the engagement period is premarital pregnancy. In Maling Mati Village, at least three cases of pregnancy before the marriage contract have been reported in the past two years, all involving couples who were already engaged. These cases resulted in marriages that were forced to be hastily arranged, often without adequate mental and financial readiness. The resulting psychosocial impacts affect not only the individuals involved but also tarnish the family's reputation and the community's image. As noted by Nurhasanah and Fitriani (2022), premarital pregnancy in conservative societies often leads to long-term social stigma, particularly toward women—even after marriage has taken place.

Moreover, marriages that are built on the basis of such a "social accident" are at high risk of domestic violence, early divorce, and unhealthy parenting patterns. As a result, an engagement that is supposed to be a path toward *sakinah* (tranquility and harmony) instead becomes an entry point into complex social problems. Preventive Efforts: Cultural Da'wah and Integrated Premarital Education. Although the challenges are significant, the community of Maling Mati Village is not entirely indifferent. Some religious leaders have begun initiating mosque-based premarital education programs, such as youth study sessions and open discussions between religious figures and engaged couples. However, these efforts are not yet widespread or systematic.

According to Lubis (2019), community-based da'wah is more effective in fostering moral awareness because it emphasizes local wisdom and two-way communication. A dialogical and culturally grounded form of da'wah that relates to the daily experiences of youth will have a greater impact than one-way, sermon-style preaching. Another step that could be taken is the development of a premarital education module by the village in collaboration with the Office of Religious Affairs (KUA) and religious leaders. This module should include Islamic legal boundaries during engagement, healthy communication, and the social consequences of relationship misconduct.

Critical Analysis

This study shows that the community's perception of the engagement period is heavily influenced by: the level of religious education and family culture, social pressure to marry when pregnancy occurs, and the lack of applicable pre-marriage education based on religious principles. From a sociology of religion perspective, this phenomenon reveals a tension between religious norms and evolving social practices. What is normatively not acceptable in religion is, in practice, tolerated by some members of the community under the guise of love, modernization, or "there is already a commitment." The researcher also found that teenagers are more responsive to communicative and applicable approaches than dogmatic ones. Therefore, pre-marriage training and counseling in the village need to be redesigned to better address the realities and concerns of young people.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the research conducted, it can be concluded that; Engagement (khitbah) has experienced a distortion in meaning within the perception of society, particularly among the younger generation. They believe that after an engagement, couples are allowed to interact freely, even engaging in relationships that are not permissible according to Islamic law. This is a form of misperception that impacts social behavior. There is a normalization of free interaction in the form of physical and psychological closeness between engaged couples during the engagement period. This is driven by weak religious understanding, lack of parental supervision, and the influence of permissive popular culture. In some cases, this leads to premarital pregnancies and forced marriages due to social pressure. The role of parents, religious leaders, and community institutions has not been optimal in providing guidance and value education during the engagement period. Although there are mosque-based and community-driven da'wah initiatives, these approaches are not systematic and do not directly address the realities of young people's lives. The social impact of deviations during the engagement period is very complex, ranging from psychological disturbances, social stigma, to post-marriage domestic issues. Therefore, a preventive and educational approach that is integrated is required.

REFERENCES

- Abdullah, M. A. (2021). *Khitbah in the Perspective of Islamic Law: A Fiqh and Social Analysis*. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar.
- Ali, M. (2020). *Teenage Interaction Ethics in the Perspective of Islam*. Bandung: Alfabeta.
- Anwar, S. (2019). *Adolescent Psychology: Development and Issues*. Jakarta: Kencana.
- Fitriani, L. & Hidayat, T. (2023). The Role of Parents in Preventing Free Interaction Among Adolescents. *Journal of Character Education*, 13(2), 145–155.
<https://doi.org/10.21831/jpk.v13i2.56789>
- Hafidz, M. (2022). The Impact of Free Interaction on Adolescent Mental Health. *Islamic Psychology Journal*, 9(1), 33–45. <https://doi.org/10.31000/jpi.v9i1.12345>
- Hasanah, U. (2020). *A Fiqh Review of the Engagement Period: Sharia Limits and Its Implications*. Malang: UIN Press.
- Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia. (2021). *Guidelines for Premarital Marriage Counseling*. Jakarta: Directorate of Bina KUA and Family Sakinah.
- Rahmah, N. (2021). The Influence of Social Media on Muslim Adolescent Interaction Patterns. *Journal of Communication and Da'wah*, 6(2), 112–123.
<https://doi.org/10.24042/jkd.v6i2.23456>
- Suryani, E. (2022). The Phenomenon of Khitbah and Moral Challenges for Generation Z. *Journal of Social and Religion*, 4(1), 25–36. <https://doi.org/10.36456/jsa.v4i1.18901>
- Zahra, K. & Ramadhan, R. (2023). The Limits of Interaction for Prospective Couples in Islam: Perspectives of Contemporary Scholars. *Nusantara Islamic Law Journal*, 8(3), 210–225.
<https://doi.org/10.21093/jhin.v8i3.45678>