

Trend Piece: Micro-cheating

A girl in a relationship finds herself reminiscing about an ex, running to her guy best friend after arguments and repeatedly failing to mention her boyfriend after meeting an attractive guy at work. A guy in a relationship gives another girl his hoodie, pays for her food and likes another girl's bikini posts on Instagram.

According to psychologist and dating coach Melanie Schilling, individuals in such scenarios are micro-cheating on their partners. Schilling, who first defined the term, stated that micro-cheating includes “seemingly small actions that indicate a person is emotionally or physically focused on someone outside their relationship.”

The term is frequently used on TikTok. In fact, a quick search on the platform reveals hundreds of videos explaining what qualifies as micro-cheating and how to deal with it. Mama Jeng, a TikToker with 814,000 followers, created a video about the topic. She gave examples of micro-cheating, such as excessive social media interactions, flirty behavior or emotional intimacy with another person. Another TikToker, Deborah Krevalin, called these behaviors “a blatant betrayal.” But are micro-cheating behaviors indeed something to worry about?

There are just as many, if not more, search results on TikTok for “TikTok ruins relationships” as there are for “micro-cheating.” Alexia Perri shared her thoughts on the effect of TikTok on relationships in her viral video. Perri, who has been with her boyfriend for three and a half years, described feeling anxious or angry when seeing a TikTok that suggests guys are always secretly cheating or that people should check their partner's Instagram following. To prevent an overreaction to these videos, Perri said she has to remind herself to “chill.”

However, she realized that others take these videos to heart.

“They probably go to their boyfriend or girlfriend or whomever and start a fight for no reason because of TikTok,” she said. “There’s such a toxic side of TikTok.”

Perri turned to viewers for their opinions.

One commenter, Kaliestrella, said, “One thousand percent. It makes you overthink everything. Even looking at a comment section, people judge other people’s relationships based on a 1-minute video.”

So are TikTokers wrong about the need to be on the lookout for micro-cheating? Students on Southern’s campus have strong opinions.

Hayden Kobza, junior journalism major, said, “I’m not just going to go up to my girlfriend and be like, ‘Oh, you liked this dude’s shirtless [picture]. What, do you just want to, like, kiss him?’”

On a more serious note, Kobza continued, “If I’m liking other girls’ bikini posts or talking to other girls, then why am I even in a relationship? If I’m in a relationship with somebody, I want that person more than anybody.”

He quoted the Bible verse Matthew 5:28, which says, “But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

Gabriella Grundy, senior business public relations major, has been with her now-fiancé for four and a half years. She and her partner discussed boundaries early in the relationship. When asked if micro-cheating behavior is wrong, she said, “It boils down to just respect for the other person, and also especially conveying to the public and to other people that we’re a united front.”

Michelle “Cata” Nino, sophomore health for life major, has been with her boyfriend for two and a half years. She emphasized that intention is the main factor in determining whether

micro-cheating behaviors are wrong. If the behaviors are intentional, Nino said they will most likely lead to “full-on” cheating, but even if they are not intentional, open communication should still take place about potentially problematic behaviors.

But is micro-cheating the correct term for shady behavior in a relationship? Kobza takes a black-and-white approach. He said, “[Micro-cheating] doesn’t exist. There’s only cheating. You’re either cheating on your partner, or you’re not.”

Grundy’s view is more nuanced. She believes “emotional cheating” might be a better term. Still, “it’s all a gateway [to physical cheating],” she said.

Nino believes “micro-cheating” is the best term “because it’s something that is building up, then it becomes macro.”

In the end, the debate around micro-cheating is really about trust and transparency in relationships. Whether people think a like on Instagram is harmless or a red flag, it is clear that they want to talk about where to draw the line since small actions can have big impacts. As social media connects more people, boundaries and honesty become more important than ever. Rather than focusing on labels, people should turn their focus on building trust that keeps relationships strong.