

Under-13 social media ban faces hurdles: Experts

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PETALING JAYA: A proposed ban on social media accounts for children under 13 may look good on paper, but without digitally literate parents, stricter checks and industry cooperation, experts warn it risks being little more than wishful thinking.

Communications Minister Datuk Fahmi Fadzil told Parliament recently that the government is

➤ Lack of parental digital literacy, weak enforcement and platform loopholes could undermine proposal

studying stricter enforcement measures, including age restrictions, as part of broader efforts to protect young users from online harm.

Universiti Putra Malaysia child

development expert Dr Nellie Ismail said while the proposal was well intentioned, expecting Malaysian parents to enforce it effectively was "difficult but not impossible".

"Many parents are aware of the dangers of early social media use - from cyberbullying and inappropriate content to its toll on mental health - but the success of any ban hinges on parental digital literacy. It also depends on consistent family rules and access to proper monitoring tools," she said.

In many households, oversight is undermined by peer pressure and the widespread use of smartphones.

"Parental supervision often falters when parents themselves are unfamiliar with the platforms their children use," Nellie said, adding that without wider support from schools and communities, enforcement could fall short.

She noted that Malaysian families have varied levels of digital literacy based on socio-economic background.

"Urban households with better education may have moderate to high awareness, but many parents still don't understand how apps such as TikTok, Instagram or Snapchat actually work, particularly their risks and algorithms," she said.

She added that some parents believe that setting time limits is enough, while underestimating the psychological impact of the content children consume.

When asked why parents allow underage social media use despite age limits, Nellie cited a lack of awareness, assumptions that it is harmless if children avoid risky behaviour and the desire for children to fit in socially or stay entertained at home.

She recommended digital literacy workshops in schools and community centres, multilingual awareness campaigns, locally tailored online safety manuals and collaboration with tech companies to provide Malaysia-specific parental dashboards.

From a legal standpoint, International Islamic University Malaysia cyber law expert Dr Sonny Zuhuda said a blanket ban was unrealistic.

"We saw during the Covid-19 pandemic that platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok could be valuable tools for education and communication - even for children," he said.

Malaysia already has a licensing regime for major social media platforms, which Sonny said should be leveraged to promote safer online environments.

He called for stronger platform-level self-regulation, including content labelling for child-related risks and ethical age verification measures.

"The best option is parental confirmation, rather than collecting children's personal data directly," he said.

However, he cautioned that social media platforms were never designed to be child friendly.

"Intrusive algorithms and exploitative marketing tools make it risky for children to navigate alone," he said, adding that even with a ban, children might find workarounds such as fake accounts or shared devices.

"This is why safeguards must be multi-pronged, legal, industrial and, above all, educational, both at home and in schools."

Both experts agreed that any age-based restrictions must be paired with public education and practical enforcement.

"Without strong parental involvement, clear public awareness campaigns and cooperation from platforms, a policy like this will struggle to succeed," Nellie said.



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