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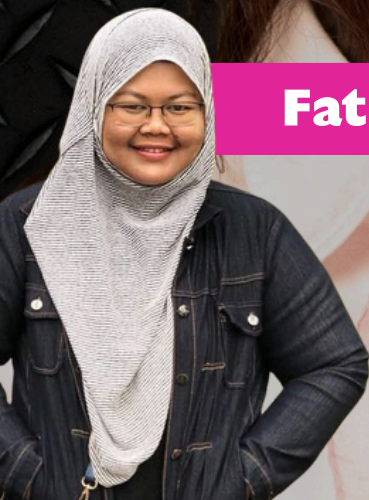
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TIKTOK

SHADOWS :

UNVEILING THE ABANG BAS SEKOLAH GROOMING SCANDAL



By: **Norashikin Shariffuddin & Norsyazrah Zulkifli**
(norashikin586@uitm.edu.my) & (syazrah@uitm.edu.my)

Social media platform interaction introduced new avenues for inappropriate and harmful behaviour. In September 2024, on TikTok as "Abang Bas," showed a significant child grooming and sexual harassment incident. The driver shared videos on social media showcasing pupils, especially young girls, and referred to one girl as his "crush" and "darling," prompting concerns around inappropriate conduct and possible sexual grooming.



He was arrested and charged under Section 15(a)(iii) of Sexual Offences Against Children Act 2017 for various offences, including physical sexual assault (kissing his four-year-old niece) and repeated sexualized observation of a nine-year-old girl and Section 15(2) of Child Act 2001 for publishing images of children without consent. Additional charges under Section 233(1)(a) of the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 were instituted for derogatory remarks made in TikTok videos featuring minors. The defendant entered a plea of not guilty and was granted bail.



The incident heightened the dangers of online grooming and prompting demands for enhanced child protection legislation. The public response was outraged, with numerous individuals asking how such conduct could transpire without oversight and condemning the accused's family for their efforts to solicit bail monies through crowdfunding. This controversy highlighted the conflict between safeguarding equitable judicial procedures and shielding children from harm.



TIKTOK SHADOWS OF CHILD GROOMING



Child grooming is a process of establishing a relationship between offender and child in terms of trust and emotion to manipulate or abuse them. There is a hidden danger of using the TikTok platform, especially for child grooming issues. TikTok enables grooming risks by exposure and facilitating direct engagement between offender and minor. The algorithm of social media allows :

- i) FYP (For You Page) to recommend content based on users' video preferences
- ii) Direct messaging to build trust with minors and escalating interactions
- iii) Live streaming and virtual gifts that may exploit minor to inappropriate action or activities in exchange for gifts.

The incident of Abang Bas Sekolah highlights serious concerns about the misuse of social media, endangering child safety in digital spaces and the normalisation of inappropriate behaviour online. The content virality for instance, allows groomers to use manipulative narratives that normalise inappropriate behaviour. Groomers may also role as influencers and use popular hashtags related to children's interests to step into their digital spaces.



Child activist Roland Edward, stating that grooming does not only about physical contact but about building trust, manipulating, or even blackmailing children online. However, the understanding of showing affection towards children is viewed as normal based on cultural or religious biases. The Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, under the leadership of Minister Nancy Shukri, asserted a zero-tolerance policy against such conduct and advocated for vigorous awareness efforts to inform parents and children about the dangers of grooming and exploitation. Legal authorities recognized that although Malaysia's legislation is adequate for prosecuting such offences, the enforcement and community awareness demand improvement.

WIDESPREAD OUTRAGE AND BACKLASH: PUBLIC REACTION

Child grooming on TikTok appears normalized due factors of FYP that curates based on user interactions which groomers may repeatedly engage with minors and reinforcing harmful behavior. The trendy challenges of viral content also blur the line between the playful content and inappropriate behaviour as groomers are influencers who use social validation to manipulate minors.

The "Abang Bas" case has emerged as a turning point in Malaysia's persistent struggle against child grooming and internet sexual exploitation. It reveals weaknesses in the monitoring of adults who engage with children, particularly those in positions of trust, such as school bus drivers. The incident highlights the essential requirement for thorough child safety policies that address both offline and online environments. Experts and activists demand for more public education regarding digital threats, increased parental vigilance, and stricter implementation of current child safety legislation. The case acts as a catalyst for Malaysian society to address uncomfortable realities regarding child exploitation and to allocate resources and implement legislation to protect children's rights and welfare.

Several laws in Malaysia may address child grooming issues and related offences, as shown by the table below:



Act	Provision	Offence	Penalty
Sexual Offences Against Children Act 2017 (SOACA)	Section 12	Child grooming	Imprisonment up to 5 years and/or a fine.
	Section 11	Sexually communicating with a child Meeting a child following grooming	Imprisonment up to 3 years and/or a fine.
	Section 13	Meeting a child following grooming	Imprisonment up to 10 years and/or a fine.
	Section 14	Physical Sexual Assault on Child	Imprisonment for a term not exceeding twenty years and whipping.
	Section 15	Non-Physical Sexual assault on Child	Imprisonment for a term not exceeding 10 years or to a fine not exceeding twenty thousand ringgit or to both.
	Section 15A	Criminalizes sexual performance by a child.	Imprisonment up to 30 years and minimum 6 strokes of whipping .
	Section 15B	Introduces penalties for sexual extortion of a child.	Imprisonment up to 15 years and/or fine.
	Section 16	Establishes liability for persons in a position of trust who exploit children.	Imprisonment up to 30 years and mandatory whipping.
	Section 19	Requires individuals to report sexual offences against children.	Imprisonment up to 2 years and/or fine.
Penal Code	Section 509	Criminalizes words or gestures intended to insult a person's modesty, including minors.	Imprisonment up to 5 years , fine, or both
Child Act 2001 (Act 611)	Section 31	Criminalizes neglect, abuse, or exposure of a child to harm.	Imprisonment up to 20 years and fine up to RM50,000
	Section 27-29	Requires individuals (e.g., medical officers, family members) to report suspected child abuse.	Imprisonment up to 2 years and fine up to RM5,000

THE WAKE-UP CALL

The alarming revelations regarding "Abang Bas" show a wider issue confronting numerous societies in the digital age in safeguarding minors from exploitation in an environment where social media disguises boundaries and predators can utilize technology to manipulate victims.

New amendment of Section 233 of Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 which prevents the "grossly offensive" content on social media, sets a higher threshold for child grooming offences, taking into account expressions or actions that surpass considerations of morality, norms, and the cultural decorum of Malaysia's harmonious society concerning online content. Furthermore, Social Media Service Providers must implement appropriate, proportionate, and effective age verification measures protecting the privacy of child users or age assurance mechanisms to prevent child users from accessing harmful content or any content which is not appropriate for their age and potentially containing harmful interactions.

In conclusion, the "Abang Bas" case exceeds individual inappropriate conduct, serving as a compelling demand for systemic reform in child protection frameworks, highlighting the necessity of prevention, enforcement, and awareness to address the ongoing menace of child grooming and exploitation.

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STATUTE

- 1 Section 11,12,13,14,15, 15A, 15B, 16 and 19 of Sexual Offences Against Children Act 2017
- 2 Section 509 of Penal Code
- 3 Section 27, 28,29 and 31 of Child Act 2001
- 4 Section 233(1)(a) of Communications and Multimedia Act 1998