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KOTA KINABALU: Setting a minimum age of 16 for social media account registration is a reasonable step to protect teenagers from growing cyber threats, said Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) academic Assoc Prof Dr Haryati Abdul Karim.

The senior lecturer at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities said the proposed age limit could help reduce young users' exposure to harmful online content and activities that may affect their safety and development.

"Without appropriate age restrictions, teenagers, particularly those under 16, face a higher risk of exposure to dangerous content, including violence, pornography, online scams and extremist ideologies such as racism and Islamophobia," she said in a statement.



Assoc Prof
Dr Haryati
Abdul Karim

Haryati cited findings from a previous UMS-UNICEF Communication for Development (C4D) study, which revealed that Malaysian teenagers are exposed to at least six forms of cyber threats.

"These include violent content that may influence behaviour, as well as the risk of sexual grooming through online interactions.

"Most teenagers already own smartphones and begin accessing social media platforms as early as 13. Without age restrictions, exposure to these threats begins

earlier and becomes more difficult to manage," she said.

According to Haryati, a minimum age of 16 is appropriate as individuals aged 17 and above generally possess greater maturity to assess and filter online content.

She noted that the move is in line with measures adopted in several developed countries, including Australia, which has introduced legislation prohibiting children under 16 from opening social media accounts and imposing penalties for non-compliance.

However, Haryati stressed that age restrictions alone are insufficient to address online safety concerns.

"There are still challenges, including the ability of younger users to bypass restrictions through technologies such as Virtual Private Networks (VPNs).

"The role of parents, families

and educational institutions remains crucial in improving digital literacy among teenagers so they are better equipped to recognise and manage online risks.

"Laws alone are not enough. Continuous education and guidance are needed to prepare young people to navigate an increasingly complex digital environment," she said.

She also called for stronger cooperation from social media platform operators to improve safety systems, age-verification mechanisms and content moderation measures.

Meanwhile, the government, through the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), has introduced additional frameworks, such as the Child Protection Code and Risk Mitigation Code, to strengthen online protection for young users.