

Sexual Misconduct among Upper Secondary Students in Malaysian Ministry of Education(MOE) Institutions: A Systematic Review of Factors, Impacts, and Prevention Strategies

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ABSTRACT

This systematic review examines the issue of sexual misconduct among upper secondary students in Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) institutions—a phenomenon that has been increasingly prevalent and poses significant implications for students' safety, psychological well-being, social development, and academic performance. Guided by the PRISMA methodology, the findings reveal that sexual misconduct is influenced by multiple factors including family dynamics, peer pressure, exposure to digital media, and weaknesses in the implementation of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) within the school curriculum (Pakianathan, 2016; Amin & Fariduddin, 2023). Regionally, cases of sexual violence rose from 6,980 (2020) to 9,588 (2022), demonstrating the growing vulnerability of adolescents to sexual exploitation (Meilantika et al., 2024). The impacts include severe psychological trauma such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation; academic decline; social withdrawal; and a diminished sense of safety at school (de Lijster et al., 2016; Muzana et al., 2024). The review also identifies four primary prevention strategies: awareness-based education, strong school policies, parental and community engagement, and professional psychological support (Farahani et al., 2024; Askarial et al., 2023; Saffa et al., 2024; Meilantika et al., 2024). Overall, these findings underscore the need for an integrated prevention approach grounded in adolescent developmental theories to promote schools that are safe, inclusive, and free from sexual misconduct, in alignment with SDG 4, SDG 5, and SDG 16 (United Nations, 2015).

Keywords: sexual misconduct, secondary students, MOE Malaysia, comprehensive sexuality education, student trauma, prevention, SDGs, school safety

INTRODUCTION

Sexual misconduct among school students is a critical issue that directly impacts their well-being, safety, and psychosocial development. In the Malaysian context, the increasing number of reported cases each year indicates that schools are facing serious challenges in ensuring learning environments that are safe, inclusive, and conducive to holistic student development. Furthermore, this issue is closely aligned with Malaysia's commitment to global efforts aimed at protecting children from all forms of sexual exploitation, in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Addressing sexual misconduct within educational institutions forms part of the nation's responsibility to safeguard the safety, dignity, and rights of children.

In addition, lifestyle changes among adolescents who are now more exposed to social media, unsupervised internet use, and risky digital interactions have contributed to the rise in sexual misconduct cases. This situation demands prompt and comprehensive action to ensure that every student receives adequate protection, consistent with Malaysia's goal of upholding safe education under the SDG framework. More concerningly, Meilantika et al. (2024) reported that the number of sexual violence cases among adolescents in several Southeast Asian countries has increased significantly over the years. This trend suggests that students are becoming increasingly vulnerable to sexual exploitation, thereby reinforcing the importance of conducting this study.

Additionally, findings from de Lijster et al. (2016) reveal that victims of sexual violence are at risk of experiencing long-term psychological trauma, such as depression, anxiety, emotional distress, social difficulties, and declining academic performance. These findings further highlight the need to examine this issue systematically, given its substantial and lasting impact on student well-being.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept Of Sexual Misconduct

Sexual misconduct refers to any behaviour of a sexual nature that occurs without consent, violates personal boundaries, or creates harm toward another individual. In the context of schooling, sexual misconduct encompasses a wide spectrum of behaviours ranging from verbal harassment, coercive communication, exposure to explicit content, non-consensual touching, to more severe forms of sexual assault. Understanding this concept is essential, as it forms the foundational basis for exploring the contributing factors, impacts, and preventive strategies relevant to adolescents in educational settings. Existing literature highlights that sexual misconduct among students is often rooted in complex social, psychological, and environmental dynamics. These include family conflict, peer influence, digital exposure, low supervision, weak reporting systems, and gaps in comprehensive sexuality education. Such inconsistencies in conceptual understanding require a systematic literature review to capture a holistic definition aligned with current global and regional educational realities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework adopted in this article is strengthened by the findings of Meilantika et al. (2024), who emphasised the need for multi-layered approaches when analysing sexual misconduct among adolescents. Three major theories serve as pillars for this analysis: Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory, Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral Development, and complementary behavioural perspectives.

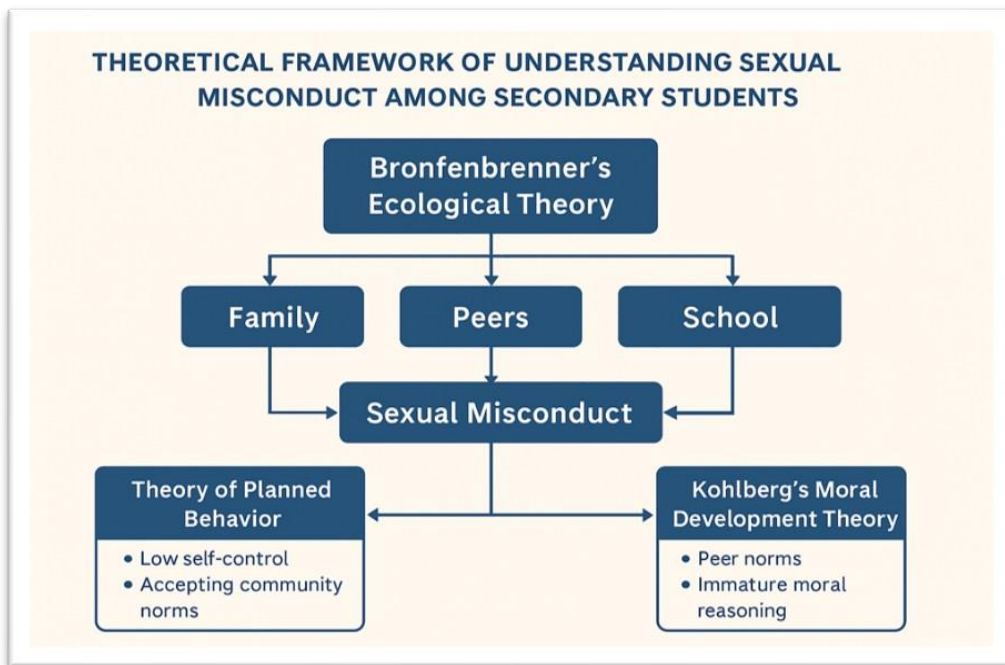


Figure 1: Conceptual Theoretical Framework for Understanding Student Sexual Misconduct

Note: Adapted from the Social Ecological Theory, the Theory of Planned Behavior, and the Theory of Moral Development.

Figure 1 illustrates how sexual misconduct among secondary school students is shaped through the interaction of three major theoretical frameworks. Bronfenbrenner’s Social Ecological Theory explains the influence of environmental systems such as family, school, peers, and media. Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral Development

highlights the role of adolescents' moral reasoning stages in evaluating sexual behaviour. Meanwhile, Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) demonstrates how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control contribute to adolescents' inclination toward risky sexual behaviours. Together, this model provides a holistic understanding of the issue.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory explains that a student's behaviour is shaped by multiple, interrelated systems. These include the microsystem (family, peers, school), mesosystem (interaction between environments), exosystem (institutional influences), and macrosystem (cultural values, societal norms). In the context of sexual misconduct, adolescents who experience weak parental supervision, negative peer influence, exposure to harmful digital content, and permissive cultural norms are at heightened risk. This theory assists in understanding sexual misconduct holistically across individual, interpersonal, and societal levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development

According to Kohlberg, adolescents typically operate within the conventional stage of moral reasoning, where their decisions are influenced by social expectations, rules, and perceptions of right and wrong. At this stage, students may struggle to fully recognise sexual boundaries, especially when peer norms normalise risky or inappropriate behaviours. Kohlberg's theory helps contextualise why certain adolescents fail to identify harmful sexual behaviours and highlights the need for structured moral and ethical education within schools (Kohlberg, 1981).

Systematic Review Findings

Contributing Factors

The findings consistently highlight that sexual misconduct among students is strongly influenced by family instability, weak parental supervision, and dysfunctional household dynamics. Adolescents growing up in environments lacking emotional support or characterised by conflict are more likely to engage in or fall victim to risky sexual behaviours (Pakianathan, 2016). Secondly, peer pressure emerges as another significant contributor. Adolescents tend to conform to peer expectations and social norms, making them more vulnerable to engaging in inappropriate or risky sexual activities in pursuit of acceptance and social belonging.

Thirdly, uncontrolled exposure to digital media also plays a crucial role. With the increasing accessibility of social media, online platforms, and explicit digital content, students are at higher risk of being groomed, targeted, or experiencing online sexual harassment. Fourthly, the educational environment itself influences students' vulnerability to sexual misconduct. Factors such as inadequate monitoring systems, ineffective reporting mechanisms, and limited teacher training on managing sexual misconduct contribute to insufficient early intervention across micro- to macro-level systems.

In addition, findings from Meilantika et al. (2024) highlight that weaknesses in school governance, limited enforcement of policies, and lack of capacity-building among educators are major causes of early intervention failure. The same study further emphasises that cognitive and behavioural factors also contribute to sexual misconduct risk among adolescents, as explained in the Prototype Willingness Model.

Impacts of Sexual Misconduct

Sexual misconduct has severe short-term and long-term consequences on adolescents' psychological, emotional, academic, and social functioning. Victims often experience fear, guilt, shame, trauma, and emotional distress affecting their sense of safety and belonging. Furthermore, such experiences may lead to significant declines in academic performance due to concentration difficulties, absenteeism, and reduced motivation to engage in learning. Socially, victims may withdraw from peers and school activities, develop trust issues, or experience disrupted interpersonal relationships.

Amin and Fariduddin (2023) emphasise that inadequate sexuality education limits adolescents' understanding of boundaries, respect, and safe interactions, making them more vulnerable to exploitation. Consequently, the lack of structured sexual education contributes to a widening gap in adolescents' ability to navigate interpersonal interactions appropriately within the Malaysian schooling system.

Prevention Strategies

In response to these issues, four main prevention strategies were identified. First, awareness-based education serves as the primary approach. Programmes focusing on consent, bodily integrity, personal boundaries, and students' rights help them recognise early signs of sexual harassment. Thus, awareness education should be a core component of school curricula. Secondly, strong school policies are essential. Schools must establish clear Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for reporting, intervention guidelines, and teacher training to ensure responsive and effective action.

Thirdly, community and parental involvement plays a vital role in reinforcing safe behaviours. Consistent communication and collaboration between schools, families, and community institutions help ensure that safety values are sustained across all environments. Lastly, psychological support systems need to be strengthened. This includes accessible counselling services, structured support groups, and professional intervention units in schools to provide safe spaces for students' recovery and well-being.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this systematic review reinforce the understanding that sexual misconduct among upper secondary students arises from the interaction of multiple ecological, cognitive, and behavioural factors. Consistent with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory, the microsystem including family, peers, and the school environment plays a central role in shaping adolescents' vulnerability. Students experiencing weak parental monitoring, peer pressure, or exposure to digital risks are significantly more susceptible to sexual exploitation. This supports earlier conclusions by Meilantika et al. (2024), who highlighted that the absence of strong governance and structured safety mechanisms increases the likelihood of such incidents occurring within school contexts.

Furthermore, the review affirms that effective prevention requires strengthening the implementation of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE). Amin and Fariduddin (2023) emphasise that CSE must go beyond basic biological knowledge to include modules on consent, digital safety, moral reasoning, healthy relationships, and respectful communication. However, its success depends heavily on teacher preparedness. Many educators lack adequate training in delivering CSE content effectively, leading to inconsistent implementation across schools.

Another key point highlighted in the findings is the importance of parental engagement. As shown in previous studies, parental involvement is critical in reinforcing safe behaviours and guiding adolescents in navigating interpersonal boundaries. When parents are active partners in the educational process, students demonstrate improved resilience, decision-making, and awareness of sexual risks.

Finally, the review underscores the need for multidisciplinary collaboration in addressing sexual misconduct. Schools cannot operate in isolation. Effective prevention requires the combined efforts of psychologists, counsellors, social workers, law enforcement, health professionals, and the wider community. This aligns with global recommendations that advocate for evidence-based, holistic approaches to reducing sexual violence among adolescents.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review concludes that sexual misconduct among upper secondary students in Malaysia is a multifaceted issue requiring comprehensive and coordinated action. The interplay of family dynamics, peer influence, digital exposure, and institutional weaknesses significantly contributes to adolescents' vulnerability

to sexual exploitation. The impacts ranging from psychological trauma to academic decline are profound and long-lasting.

Four key prevention strategies emerged as essential: awareness-based education, strong school policies, community and parental involvement, and accessible psychological support systems. Together, these strategies form an integrated framework aligned with global aims such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4, SDG 5, and SDG 16). To ensure safer school environments, institutions must prioritise early intervention, strengthen policy enforcement, invest in capacity-building for educators, and embed CSE as a core component of the curriculum. Moreover, collaboration among various stakeholders is vital to developing a holistic prevention ecosystem that safeguards adolescents from sexual misconduct.

In essence, protecting students from sexual misconduct requires not only robust policies and educational reforms but also a cultural shift toward promoting dignity, respect, and safety for every learner. This review provides a foundational reference for policymakers, educators, and practitioners to formulate evidence-based interventions that prioritise student well-being.

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