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THE COLOURS AND CONSTRAINTS OF **COSPLAYING**



PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

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DID YOU KNOW?

What is the purpose of awarding the NOBEL PRIZE?

The Nobel Prize is awarded to honour individuals and groups that have made outstanding contributions to humanity in various fields, including physics, chemistry, physiology or medicine, literature, peace, and economic sciences.

The economic foundations for the Nobel Prize were laid in 1895, when Alfred Nobel signed his last will and left much of his wealth to the establishment of a prize and the subsequent Nobel



Foundation. The foundation is tasked with the mission to manage Nobel's fortune and has the ultimate responsibility for fulfilling the intentions of his will.

In accordance with the instructions Nobel left through his will, various independent prize-awarding institutions have selected Nobel Prize laureates in each of the six prize categories for over a century.

Since its inception, the Nobel Prize has been awarded to 1,026 laureates.

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Underrated horror movies to watch on Halloween

TINATH ZAEBA

A good scary movie has that perfect balance of fear and fascination, the kind that lingers long after the credits. Whether you're after a psychological or ghostly scare, here are some excellent, underrated horror movies with the right atmosphere, mystery, and emotions for Halloween.

Oculus

Rather than jump scares, *Oculus* toys with your perception of reality. Two siblings reunite to destroy an antique mirror that may have caused their family's tragedy. What unfolds is a mesmerising blend of memories, madness, and supernatural incidents. The film moves between past and present, leaving you unsure what's real and what's an illusion. Director Mike Flanagan crafts tension with precision, where every scene has its own plot twist, and the story is half of the horror itself.

The Autopsy of Jane Doe

Few horror films are as quietly anxiety-inducing as this one. Set almost entirely within a small-town mortuary, a father-and-son coroner duo begin examining an unidentified woman. As the autopsy continues, strange and unexplainable events mount, building dread in a slow, methodical rhythm. What makes the film brilliant isn't blood or chaos, but the way the movie builds on a silence, a stillness, and the growing sense for the viewer that something strange is going on.

What Lies Beneath

Michelle Pfeiffer and Harrison Ford bring emotional depth to a story that starts as a domestic drama and slowly unravels into a ghostly mystery. Set by a calm, glassy lake, the film's beauty contrasts sharply with the horror hidden underneath. It's about love, guilt, and the ghosts that memory can conjure. The result is suspense that feels both grand and deeply personal, a haunting story of the heart and a home.

The Others

If you like your horror steeped in atmosphere, *The Others* is



COLLAGE: **AZRA HUMAYRA**

essential. Nicole Kidman shines as a mother protecting her two children in a remote mansion, a setting that is homely and creepy. The film's slow pace invites you to lean in, to listen closely, and to question everything you see. The movie crafts a gothic world where every movement, every character and every scene has meaning. There are ghosts, belief, loss, and the fragile line between the living and the dead.

A Tale of Two Sisters

Beautiful, tragic, and deeply unsettling, this South Korean gem is a masterpiece of psychological horror. Inspired by an old folktale, it tells the story of two sisters returning home to an oppressive stepmother and them trying to

solve a mystery. The film has haunting visuals that create a dreamlike unease that builds towards an unforgettable conclusion.

Each of these films captures a different type of fear—from the supernatural to the psychological. A good horror film doesn't just scare you; it unsettles you in ways you can't quite explain. Just a word of advice: don't watch them alone, and definitely keep the lights within reach. It's not what's on the screen that stays with you, but what your mind keeps seeing afterwards.

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TRIGGER WARNINGS EXPLAINED

TINATH ZAEBA

Sticks and stones may break bones, but words can inflict just as much pain. That is exactly why trigger warnings exist, though oddly, not everyone seems to understand them or even think that they are necessary.

So why do we need trigger warnings? Is the internet getting too “soft”?

A trigger warning is basically a simple notice before something that could cause someone distress. It’s as simple as including one sentence about the content before the caption or on the image. For topics such as sexual assault, domestic abuse, animal cruelty or violence, it’s essential to treat distressing content with the sensitivity it requires.

Yet despite how straightforward this seems, most media outlets and social media platforms rarely use them. You might scroll through your feed and unexpectedly see an unfiltered video of animal abuse or read a headline about a violent assault with no warning beforehand. Nowadays, it’s more common to scroll and find pictures and videos generated with artificial intelligence (AI) to display news of assault and death.

In those moments, the person on the other end is left to deal with the shock, panic, or resurfacing memories entirely on their own. And for some people, that shock can spiral into flashbacks, anxiety, serious panic attacks and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Trauma is personal. Two people can experience the same event, and one might develop lasting triggers while the other feels fine. That’s why common arguments about whether “everyone” needs trigger warnings miss the point.

A survivor of domestic violence might see a scene in a skit or reel that mirrors their own experience and suddenly feel as if they are back in that moment, traumatised and suffering all over again.

The point is, some people do, and it’s such a small thing to provide for them.

We already accept age ratings for films, content warnings for strong language, and awareness for smoking, which are all important, yet why is this the one-line people refuse to cross? A short notice, like a trigger warning, might save people from prolonged periods of grief.

It’s also important to remember that being “triggered”



ILLUSTRATION: **AZRA HUMAYRA**

has a very specific meaning. It’s not the same as being mildly offended or just not liking something. In psychology, triggers are stimuli that elicit a reaction, often bringing on or worsening symptoms related to mental illness or past trauma. They can be external, such as sights, sounds, smells, or textures that remind someone of a past experience, or internal, such as strong feelings that arise based on previous negative or traumatic experiences. This reaction can include anxiety attacks, flashbacks, dissociation, and symptoms of PTSD.

For example, a survivor of domestic violence might see a scene in a skit or reel that mirrors their own experience and suddenly feel as if they are back in that moment, traumatised and suffering all over again.

Unfortunately, the term “triggered” has been thrown around so casually online that its meaning has been diluted. It has become a punchline in memes or a way to mock someone for reacting strongly to something. And while the people making those jokes probably think they’re harmless, they’re actually trivialising something that can completely disrupt someone’s day, week, or month. It may make it

harder for people with real trauma to speak up because they don’t want to be laughed at and not taken seriously.

However, trigger warnings do not aim to eliminate all potentially upsetting content from the world. Let’s be real, it would be impossible. These warnings are just about respect: acknowledging that some topics hit harder for certain people and giving those people a moment to brace themselves. A single sentence at the start of a piece of media costs almost nothing to include, but it can make the difference between someone feeling safe enough to engage and someone being pushed into a panic attack.

Being triggered is a clinical reality, not an internet meme, and trigger warnings are not about coddling anyone. They are the bare minimum acknowledging mental health and its effect from certain content. The fact that so many remain unaware is a sign that we still have a long way to go regarding mental health awareness.

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THE COLOURS AND CONSTRAINTS OF COSPLAYING IN BANGLADESH



PHOTOS: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

Growing up, all I wanted to be in life was Goku. The idea of putting on his blue-orange gi and hitting a kamehameha was something that enamoured me for much of my childhood. But for better or worse, I haven’t been able to live up to my dream yet. That is, perhaps, one of the key reasons why I admire and respect cosplayers so much. Despite a barrage of roadblocks, they succeed in materialising the dreams of many.

AYAAN SHAMS SIDDIQUEE

From protagonists and villains of the same franchise posing for a selfie together to old and new-gen heroes sharing a bite, the air buzzes with excitement and a touch of the surreal at conventions. Such is the allure of cosplaying in Bangladesh. And for a growing number of people, it has become a special way to express creativity and build a community.

While cosplaying has certainly gained traction in recent times, it is by no means an entirely new concept. Shazmeen Haq, popularly known as Sylwen Cosplay in the community, has been a part of this craft since 2014.

“As a fan of anime at the time, I came across some *Naruto* cosplayers on YouTube, which made me want to dress up as my favourite characters,” she recounts. “I tried doing it for fun at first, but later realised I was good at making costumes. That realisation has been the catalyst for pushing me deeper into the craft. Eventually, I became a cosplaying judge and have judged more than fifteen cosplay competitions to date.”

Md Rifat Rahman, known to most as ‘Orion Cosplay’, had a similar cosplaying origin story. His first attempt was at Unmad Jamil’s Comic Con in 2015, where his standout feature was nothing more than a *Tokyo Ghoul* mask.

“I had no idea about the sheer vastness of what cosplaying was,” he laughs. “I just knew people dressed up as their favourite characters.” Today, Rifat is a serious armour-based cosplayer, spending months perfecting his elaborate designs and bringing ridiculously complex characters to life.

Others, like Maliha Meherin, who goes by the stage name ‘Tomie_re’, discovered cosplay even earlier. She says, “I first heard

about it in 2013 and officially debuted my first cosplay at an event in 2016. At first, it was just a fun hobby, a way to connect with people who loved the same things. But over time, I wanted to take it seriously and do something unique with it.”

However, taking this craft seriously does involve steep learning curves. In particular, the process of creating a costume from scratch can take weeks or even months. Rifat, for example, has made the decision to cosplay as only one character every year, investing all his time and effort into producing the best possible outcome.

Explaining his methodical approach, Rifat shares, “First, I gather the raw materials needed for the costume, such as EVA foams, super glue, contact cement, and other accessories. After that, I study my character thoroughly and make a few sketches to understand the patterns of the costume. Then, I start taking measurements of the parts from my body, sketch the patterns, and cut them out from EVA foam. Lastly, I apply priming, paint, sanding, and other additional details required for the final touches.”



For Maliha, the focus is on fabric and texture. “I’ve been making my costumes from scratch since the beginning,” she shares. “Through my journey, I’ve been very picky about fabrics, and I add lace, beads, paint, or even 3D-printed parts to my cosplay when needed. Everything I’ve picked up has been self-taught through YouTube and Pinterest.”

Even for newer faces in the community, the process of making their favourite characters come to life has been driven by passion and a constant urge to improve. Efty Mahbub, a cosplayer who has been in the scene since 2022, has developed his own share of resourceful methods to ensure timely cosplays.

Sharing what he’s learnt thus far, he says, “If I want to make something out of EVA foam, my best bet would be to go to Bongshal, where I can buy it in bulk at a cheap rate. If I need any sort of wig, I either go to New Market or, if it’s too complicated, order it beforehand on Aliexpress or similar platforms. If I’m working on any fabric-related items, I go to Gausia Market.”

He continues, “These skills didn’t come naturally, though. I’ve burned my fingers with hot glue guns and wasted foam on wrong blueprints more times than I can count. But once

you fail enough times, you start getting it right, and nothing can beat that satisfaction.”

One might wonder, what motivates cosplayers to continue their craft despite the immense hard work that it demands? For Efty, the realm of cosplaying has always felt like a place where he belongs. “Cosplay conventions are places where people don’t judge you for being strange,” he opines. “Seeing everyone make their own costumes and accessories from scratch was something that I found really inspiring, which, in turn, motivated me to do better as well.”

As the craft evolves, so does the community. Depending on who you ask, the cosplay scene in Bangladesh is either blossoming or in transition. “The local scene is still small — maybe consisting of around a hundred people — but everyone knows each other,” says Shazmeen. “Watching other talented cosplayers pull off intricate costumes is inspiring. Good or bad, everyone puts in effort.”

Yet, those who have been around for a long time see subtle shifts in the culture. “When I started, the community was smaller but full of creativity, making their own costumes



all the time,” says Maliha. “During and after the pandemic, though, this practice changed a bit. A lot of people started buying their cosplay materials, or even an entire costume, outright. The originality seemed to fade for a while, but I’ve recently seen the passion coming back.”

Not every observation is optimistic, though. Efty, for example, describes the scene as “hanging on a thin string between good and bad”. He believes local conventions haven’t kept up with international standards like they should have. He also alleges that competitions sometimes tend to reward cosplayers who bought their costumes instead of handmade ones.

“It’s discouraging for people who put in every bit of their blood, sweat, and tears behind their dream cosplay,” he laments. “Regardless, most cosplayers still work really hard, which keeps the entire community alive.”

Recognition, however, remains one of the biggest hurdles for any cosplayer in Bangladesh right now. Despite paying homage to characters as closely as possible, positive outreach remains difficult, which makes it difficult to warrant any sustainable enthusiasms.

“The biggest challenge right now is finding a platform for

international exposure,” Rifat explains. “Our cosplayers work so hard but rarely get the appreciation they deserve from local audiences or international ones.”

The challenges involved are also largely social. “People still don’t fully understand cosplay,” says Maliha. “We face tons of criticism and harsh comparisons to the original characters. It’s frustrating when people dismiss your art because it doesn’t match some foreign standard.”

Efty agrees, and also raises a more uncomfortable truth — the persistence of bias amongst the local people here tend to prefer cosplayers with a lighter complexion. “Brown or darker-skinned cosplayers get harassed online because they don’t meet standards set in fiction. That needs to change if we want a healthy, inclusive



community,” he says.

Then there are the logistical headaches. “Materials are hard to find, traffic eats up your day, and everything’s getting expensive,” says Shazmeen. “You have to plan months ahead just to pre-order something like a wig. Inflation and limited access to crafting supplies have made cosplay an increasingly demanding pursuit, both financially and mentally.”

Despite the obstacles, the passion driving the community remains strong. When asked what the scene needs most, everyone had a similar answer: better conventions, stronger organisation, and more support. Nonetheless, there’s a shared optimism among all the cosplay artists I talked to. Although they admit that progress is slow, it is still happening.

Note: We would like to extend our gratitude to the cosplayers Shazmeen Haq, Md Rifat Rahman, and Esfak Mahbub Efty for helping us execute the vision of this photoshoot.

Ayaan immerses himself in dinosaur comics and poorly-written manga. Recommend your least favourite reads at ayaan.shams@gmail.com



PHOTO: FASBEER ESKANDER

The cosplayers representing Bangladesh in Japan

Arika Ahsan and Khushnud Mahzabin, who go by their cosplaying aliases ‘AKIRA’ and ‘Shionchawn’ respectively, recently represented Bangladesh at the Pop Culture Hiroshima event held in Japan earlier this month. This marked the first time two Bangladeshi cosplayers had the chance to showcase their craft in Japan.

Both described the experience — from the first day of rehearsals to the final parade through Hiroshima’s vibrant streets — as overwhelmingly positive.

“We met so many talented cosplayers from all around the world, and they were all super friendly, kind, and sweet,” shares Arika. “They even helped us with our cosplays and gave us a bunch of gifts to make sure we felt

included every step of the way.”

Khushnud echoed similar sentiments, saying, “It was a bit scary at first, given that we were representing Bangladesh in a foreign land, but everyone’s compassion made us feel very comfortable.”

Both cosplayers designed and made their costumes, choosing to rely on their own craftsmanship rather than store-bought pieces. “We continuously worked for almost three months to prepare our costumes, accessories, and props,” shares Khushnud. “Eventually, we cosplayed as Kagome and Inuyasha from the series Inuyasha during the parade, and Himemiya Anthy and Utena Tenjou from Revolutionary Girl Utena during the final stage performance.”

A LEVEL LAW

Should you consider taking it?

TARANNUM KHONDKAR

Many aspiring law students, including myself, may have believed that to pursue law in university, one must have it as a subject in A levels as well. This assumption may quickly fade once the course begins. While it is true that the subject gives you a boost in terms of legal knowledge, the extent of its addition in giving you a boost on your university application is still up for debate.

First, it is important to understand that A level Law is more than just exciting cases of serial killers or mass murderers. While it does have its fair share of those mentioned, the syllabus mostly covers the legal framework of the justice system, from the court structure to the policy-making process. A level Law goes into the intricacies of what it takes to build up a country's legal administration. It is a theoretically taxing subject and requires long hours of dedicated study time along with immense patience.

It should also be taken into consideration the board under which you are taking up the course. For Cambridge, Law is the usual two-year course with four papers in total, but for Edexcel, it's linear, meaning that the course needs to be completed in one year with a total of two papers. To make matters worse, Edexcel also does not have a proper student book on the subject, and students need to rely on the Cambridge book, which lacks important topics from the former board's syllabus.

By now, you might be thinking that I am trying my best to make you turn away from law, but remember, good and bad go hand in hand. With proper interest in the subject, law can be easy to excel in. While the initial introduction of how law in the world actually works might be jarring, over time, it becomes an interesting course to bring your own two cents into.

Not just that, studying law at A level introduces you to the fundamental principles of law and can provide a solid base for further legal studies. This early exposure becomes irreplaceable, as it truly teaches you whether or not you want to pursue law in the near future and provides a rough estimation of what the workload for the subject is like.

Beyond understanding the exam format, it's important to grasp what the learning process entails as well. Although popular as a career worldwide, A level Law may not gain as much demand due to the taxing path that lies ahead. As such, the amount of support you may find might be limited as well. Due to its exclusivity, tuition fees for the subject are normally twice that of a conventional subject, and its specialised

nature requires not a normal teacher but one with legal expertise, aka a lawyer, to teach it.

A few years ago, it was common for aspiring law students to focus on basic subjects like science, humanities, and a supporting subject. Taking A Level Law was often frowned upon, with prestigious universities like Oxford preferring the more traditional combination of subjects. This was based on the belief that the simplified way A Level Law was taught clashed with the more rigorous teaching methods at universities, potentially stunting students' academic growth.

However, perceptions have shifted over time. Universities are beginning to recognise the value that A Level Law can offer when taught effectively. Now, many institutions are either welcoming or neutral toward it. So, if Law has sparked your interest, this might be the right time to pursue it.

Despite how it may seem, the article isn't to force you away from a path you are clearly interested in. It is simply to educate you on what you might be getting yourself into and to let you be the judge of your capabilities. It is imperative to approach this subject with utmost enthusiasm and not as a last option you picked because you ran out of all others.

A choice that stems from determination and confidence will help you sustain yourself in a subject that will demand so much from you within that one-year time span. As long as you've weighed your pros and cons and are ready to grind for the upcoming years, I'd say A level Law may be the right choice for you.

Tarannum Khondkar is a struggling student and a contributor at The Daily Star.



THE WHISPERING MOSQUE OF BADEHARIPUR

A M FAHAD

When the old caretaker of the mosque retired to stay with his daughter's family six villages away from where he lived, Hussain was appointed by the local elders to look after the mosque, the state of which could be best described as "almost-broken-down".

For a salary of eight thousand taka a month, he would do all the cleaning and gardening around the small mosque and the graveyard of Badeharipur. He would live in the mosque and have groceries provided for him. Hussain was in his late teens. He didn't study or work, and the *Murubbis*—after consulting with his mother—decided that it would be best to appoint him as the caretaker of the mosque. They thought that he shouldn't waste away his life gnawing at his old mother's very limited and materialistic mental faculties. He had no aspirations for an education, as the closest school was forty kilometres away.

A small village in Sunamganj with a few residents, Badeharipur mostly housed farmers and fishermen who were used to working till midday. In the afternoon, they would gather at Jamal bhai's quaint tea stall by the small, almost still, river that flowed by the village and play carrom. They went to sleep early at night, but Hossein slept all day. He was sceptical of the new job at first.

The mosque, right next to the Badeharipur cemetery, didn't inspire anyone to go near it at night. Badeharipur was one of the many villages that were nearly wiped out by the Cholera epidemic, leaving behind the memories of people who lived and dispersing the graveyard with reminders of what the village endured. As a child, he grew up hearing stories of this graveyard being visited by people, who were perhaps not really people, late at night to pay their respects

to the deceased. He was warned not to get in the way of those visiting at night. That was when you were meant to pray, sleep, and wait for the *Mu'adhin*—Bashir Mia—to recite the call for prayer.

The first few days slipped by. He would sweep the prayer hall in the morning and trim the bushes when his mind didn't drift away with the saccharine setting sun of Badeharipur, but things started to change slowly. Often at night, he started hearing scratching sounds on the tin walls of the latrine, almost as if someone was repeatedly scratching it with a sharp knife.

When he'd go to check who or what was causing it, there would be nothing, except the flickering old light. The thin tin latrine door would open and clasp itself shut on nights with no wind. One night, when he had been sleeping in the prayer hall, he woke up to the sound of whispers, something resembling a quiet muttering. It stopped as soon as he rushed himself up, sweating.

The power had gone out. Yet, it wasn't the sound of the Chairman's house generator, still rumbling its low mechanical noises a few blocks away. And then there it was, a loud crash, the sound of a jar shattering in the tiny makeshift kitchen behind.

Hussain started reciting the *Ayatul Qursi*, which his mother had taught him. He had to inspect what was happening.

He ran to the backyard, chanting the words loudly, sighting movement in the bushes. It was almost time for *Fajr*, and a cold wind blew across his face. And he heard it again, movement in the long bushes stretching far beyond into the graveyard. He started following the direction of the footstep with loud thuds of his own, almost manic now.

He needed to know what was going on; he kept running, didn't know what for, and didn't have a name for this feeling either. Was this fear? Delirium? Acceptance?

His body was sweating on a cold winter morning, and he kept chasing after this seemingly nameless, faceless entity. Sweat poured down his face. And then there it was, a loud hissing noise left him half-paralysed. Whatever it was, it most certainly wasn't a person. And then it came again. He pushed the bushes aside to look down in front of him, and there he found the source of his grievances.

A feral mother cat with her babies. She had found a dry corner in the graveyard and built a small nest with them. The mother cat continued hissing at Hussain, who, now finally relieved, sat down in his tracks. Bashir Mia's melodic Adhan poured out all around the mosque. Hussain finally started breathing again. Having come back to his senses, he realised that he had to do something about the situation.

He returned to the mosque to find some leftover fish and rice he had kept under a lid and set it down a few feet away from the mother cat, who had been nursing her kittens. Hussain's days in his new job also started lighting up after that night. The mother cat developed a bond of trust with the teenager. He was allowed to move the kittens inside, who were now louder than the Chairman's generator in their purring. He named the mom cat Bulbuli, who would now join him in his afternoon naps after he was done with his sweeping duties for the day, and they would watch Badeharipur's sunset together during *Maghrib*, waiting for Bashir Mia to come and recite the *Adhan* with his magical voice.

Fahad is a first-year student of Economics and Computer Science at Berea College.



ILLUSTRATION: SYEDA AFRIN TARANUM


ILLUSTRATION: **ABIR HOSSAIN**

PUNOMI RAHMAN TITIR

The act of grooming doesn't always reveal itself through the lens of suspicious behaviour. More often than not, the predator will appear to be someone who seems kind, attentive and trustworthy. They might offer genuine compliments, lend a listening ear, or make you feel seen in ways others don't. But beneath the guise of friendliness lies a slow and calculated attempt to gain assurance and control.

Grooming is not about affection, rather it is about manipulation. It is the gradual process of drawing someone in, breaking down their boundaries and creating dependence until the groomer has full influence over their emotions and decisions. It usually involves someone who is much older or retains a position of power over the victim, making children between the ages of 12 and 17 particularly vulnerable.

It is important to keep in mind that the ultimate aim of the abuser is to exploit their victim — emotionally, financially, or sexually. Grooming can take place online or in real life, to anyone, regardless of gender or background. Therefore, being able to identify certain behavioural patterns in early stages of grooming can be the most effective way to safeguard yourself and those around you.

Someone who intends to groom you may not look or act like a threat at all. In fact, a lot of the times it can come from a person you already know and place trust in, like a friend, family member or mentor. This is because it is usually more convenient for such individuals to exceed boundaries without raising immediate suspicion in comparison to a complete stranger. They may use their position of authority or emotional closeness to justify certain behaviours, including excessive flattery, prolonged physical contact, or private conversations that gradually become more personal. This familiarity makes it harder for victims to recognise the manipulation, as the person grooming them may seem genuinely caring or protective on the surface.

A common tactic groomers use is to create a sense of

exclusivity. They may try to cultivate the impression that your connection with them is singular or suggest that you uphold a level of maturity beyond your years. Once they are able to convince you of their supposed idea of you, they could discourage you from informing outsiders about your interactions with them, subtly isolating you from others who might be capable of noticing the red flags.

In some cases, the groomer may also constantly offer gifts, financial support, or other favours to strengthen your sense of obligation towards them. Over time, these favours will be turned into leverage, making you feel indebted or guilty if you do not comply with their requests. This pattern of conditional generosity is yet another form of control that can make it increasingly difficult to distance yourself.

Online grooming, in particular, can be dangerously deceptive. Social media platforms, gaming communities, and chat forums allow groomers to hide behind fake identities. They might pose as someone your age, sharing similar interests, jokes, or hobbies to build trust. They often ask for personal details, such as where you live, what school you go to, or what your parents are like — all under the pretext of wanting to get to know you better.

Gradually, they may begin sending more intimate messages or pictures, pressuring you to respond in kind, often through guilt or emotional manipulation. Once such material is shared, the victim may feel trapped, fearing shame or exposure if they don't comply further.

This form of abuse usually breeds over a gradual period of time, and therefore, can be difficult to recognise at once. The groomer often initiates with seemingly harmless conversations, asking friendly questions and showing interest in your daily life. As trust starts to build, they may share personal details about themselves too, creating a false sense of closeness.

In subtle ways, they gather bits of information from you — your feelings, insecurities, or secrets — and later use these to strengthen their control. They may even recall small details from earlier conversations to make you feel

valued and understood, when in reality, they are using this attentiveness as a tool for manipulation.

The more sensitive information you share, the easier it becomes for them to use it against you. Over time, they might start to pressure or threaten you, using your words, photos, or private messages to make you do things you are not comfortable with. This could include asking you to see them alone in person under unfamiliar settings or insisting on video calls that feel inappropriate. At this stage, the victim often feels isolated, afraid of what might happen if they refuse or speak up. That fear is exactly what the groomer depends on to maintain control.

Identifying these patterns early and opening up to someone you feel safe around can prevent the situation from escalating any further. If someone's behaviour makes you feel uncomfortable, confused, or pressured, it is necessary that you trust your instincts. It's always okay to step back or block communication with anyone who oversteps boundaries, even if they seem familiar. Be cautious about sharing personal details online, and avoid sending pictures or information that carry the possibility of being misconstrued.

If you ever find yourself caught up in such a situation, confide in a trusted adult immediately, preferably a parent or guardian. Explaining what's happening can feel difficult, especially if the groomer has convinced you to keep it a secret. However, it is crucial to remember that grooming thrives on secrecy and silence. The sooner you speak up, the faster you can be protected. Trusted adults can help report the incident, preserve evidence, and ensure you receive emotional support.

You can also reach out to immediate helpline services, such as child protection hotlines or local law enforcement, if you ever feel unsafe or suspect that someone is attempting to manipulate or blackmail you with sensitive information. Ultimately, protecting yourself from grooming begins with awareness and boundaries. Knowing what feels right and what doesn't will serve as your first line of defence.