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Headline: Some influencers in Singapore keen to pay for Meta Verified subscription to tackle fake accounts and boost earnings

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Ms Dawn Cher, also known as “SG Budget Babe” on social media, has experienced her fair share of fraudsters trying to impersonate her on Instagram in the last 10 years.

The 32-year-old, who works as an account director, said that she ends up having to do extra “recovery work” by replying to multiple direct messages about these fake accounts.

So when technology giant Meta announced on Feb 19 that it is testing a new paid subscription service called “Meta Verified” that allows content creators to get a verified badge — the coveted “blue tick” — for a monthly fee, Ms Cher and some other social media influencers here told TODAY that they would be willing to pay for the service.

This will give them some peace of mind and in exchange, they feel that they are getting the added credibility and protection from fraud and troubles arising from fake account users pretending to be them.

Experts who do research on social media also agreed that there are benefits in paying for the service, saying that the verification label acts as a symbol of enhanced authenticity and safety.

The trial that Meta has launched, only in Australia and New Zealand for now, mainly targets content creators and is not available for businesses yet.

WHAT SOCIAL MEDIA GIANTS ARE DOING

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Meta's move comes after Twitter launched a similar service called "Twitter Blue" in November last year.

But Twitter's move was largely deemed a failure because it allowed any Twitter user to pay for the blue tick, leading to a surge in fake accounts on the platform — including people impersonating big brands such as Tesla, SpaceX and Roblox — and Twitter had to stop and relaunch the service after adjusting its verification procedure.

Mr Mark Zuckerberg, chief executive officer of Meta that is the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, said that Meta Verified will have certain checks before verification is approved for a user.

To be eligible, accounts must meet minimum activity requirements such as having a track record or history of content posts.

Applicants must also submit a form of governmental identification document — such as a valid identity card, for example — that matches the profile name and photo of their account.

Verified users will then get a verified badge on their profile and receive account protection and access to account support, as well as increased visibility and reach, Meta said.

WHY IT MATTERS TO SOCIAL MEDIA USERS

Dr Dianna Chang, a senior lecturer at the School of Business in the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS), said that the verification label will act as "a symbol of enhanced authenticity and safety".

Most Singapore content creators told TODAY likewise, saying that getting verified on social media platforms matters to them.

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If it helps me get more jobs or brand deals at the end of the day, that would be my focus and why I will pay for the verification.

Ms Anda Chaudhry who goes by the handle “andathesea” on Instagram

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Ms Cher said: "It's a lot of work for me to keep answering all messages from people and telling them, 'Ya, it's not me', and also to post an announcement each time a new scammer targets me and creates an impersonator's account."

This cost of paying for the subscription and being verified is, to her, a "convenience fee".

It will cost US\$11.99 (S\$16) a month for users who sign up via the internet and US\$14.99 for those using mobile applications.

Meta has not said if the price will vary across countries.

Ms Anda Chaudhry, 26, who goes by the handle “andathesea” on Instagram and puts out beauty, lifestyle and travel content, said that she would pay the fee.

"If it helps me get more jobs or brand deals at the end of the day, that would be my focus and why I will pay for the verification."

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Another social media user Jade Rasif, who has been verified on Instagram, also said that she would be willing to pay the extra fees.

"I make a happy living off (Instagram) and I'm happy to compensate Meta for the use of its services, regardless of whether it is for verification or for an advertisement-free service."

HOW DOES IT AFFECT ACCOUNTS ALREADY 'VERIFIED'?

For now, Meta has confirmed that there will be no changes to Instagram and Facebook accounts that are already verified based on present requirements.

These accounts were verified based on criteria such as authenticity and notability, meaning that one's account must represent a "well-known, highly searched-for person, brand or entity".

With its new Meta Verified service, however, Meta has said that the aim is to help "up-and-coming creators" grow their presence and build community faster.

It added that it is "evolving the meaning of verified accounts on our apps so we can expand access to verification and more people".

Blogger Divya Gupta noted that the ease of getting a blue tick will make it difficult to differentiate between a content creator who has worked hard to achieve a certain level of notability by being on the radar of online users and one who has simply paid for it.

The 37-year-old, who is known as "learningisfunwithus" on Instagram, said: "Among the creators' circle, you won't know if it's based on the merit or a paid subscription (once Meta Verified is in use)."

Agreeing, Ms Althea Lim, chief executive officer and co-founder of influencer marketing company Gushcloud, said that getting a blue tick will mean that having a verified account will no longer be that "exclusive" since more people can pay for it.

This will pose a challenge for influencers to further set themselves apart, such as through increasing their engagement with followers, Ms Lim told TODAY.

She added that Gushcloud will encourage their influencers to pay for the service and work with them to help in the payment as long as they hit all the criteria that are required by Meta.

Mr Diogo Martins, the lead of Bloomr.SG, Mediacorp's Social Media Creative Studio, said that social media verification is useful in filtering out bots and fake accounts from genuine ones.

"This will add an extra layer of credibility to verified accounts, and give clients and agencies greater confidence when working with celebrities and content creators in the online space," he said.

However, he noted that it is the quality and authenticity of the content that ultimately determine how credible and well-received a social media personality is.

WHAT ARE THE DOWNSIDES OF 'META VERIFIED'?

Although obtaining a verified account may seem easier with the new service, such paid services may create more class divides.

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Dr Natalie Pang, a senior lecturer at the communications and new media department of the National University of Singapore

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Dr Natalie Pang, a senior lecturer at the communications and new media department of the National University of Singapore, said that the benefit of how platforms used to operate is that they had low barriers of entry. Users were therefore able to build up their profiles and community with minimal costs.

"With this new service, those who are already well-off can become more visible, more influential than others. The kind of access that new entrants used to be able to get will not exist anymore," Dr Pang added.

On whether she foresees Meta getting into the same bind as Twitter, Professor Lim Sun Sun from the Singapore Management University (SMU) said that it is "entirely likely" that it could go the same way that Twitter did.

The communications and technology professor noted, however, that verifying accounts based on the governmental identification document that users have to submit will add an extra layer of authentication, which was something Twitter did not do.

Agreeing, Dr Chang from SUSS said that the failure encountered by Twitter may not necessarily repeat for Meta.

She said that content creators often use Twitter as a gateway or teaser to attract users to the main content hosted on another platform such as Instagram, so extra features under Twitter Blue such as longer word counts for tweets may not be deemed a perk or extra useful by content creators.

Giving too much information or writing too much in a tweet may not encourage readers to go beyond Twitter to the main content, which is what influencers ultimately want.

Meta is different. Users do not need to be directed to a different site or platform and content creators intend readers to spend time on and consume the content on Facebook or Instagram itself, Dr Chang added.

On the significance of Meta's new service, Prof Lim from SMU believes that the end goal is to allow the tech giant to test the market appetite for such paid products, as well as the verification system requiring a valid identity document, to see how well it works and how robust it is.

This is so that eventually, if Meta's metaverse comes into mainstream use, users may also be able to use, say, a similar governmental identification system in the metaverse, which broadly refers to a three-dimensional virtual world where people socialise, work and play.

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"If you look at the most ideal realisation of the metaverse dream, it is that our metaverse virtual life should be a seamless extension of our identity," she said. ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY DEBORAH LAU