Twitter Blue Tick - A Study of its Impact on Society

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Abstract

The Twitter account verification badge or popularly known as "blue tick," is the most in-demand feature. Twitter calls it an authentication sign, not the endorsement, and as per policy, it can be assigned only to the accounts of public interest. Still, it is an aspiration for many users, and many discussions keep happening around it. In this paper, a systematic review of academic and industry literature was done to study the user understanding and aspiration for the blue tick badge, its impact on the users and society at large, and the platform's policy to award them. Results showed that the blue tick is the "status symbol" for Twitter users, and accounts with this badge are considered elite and influencers. This perception for blue ticks is not sentimental but has been crafted by the platform by keeping its supply low and restricted to famous account owners. Also, the study highlighted that there are no specific and clear guidelines on Twitter's end for account verification and disproof. As a result, the platform comes at the center of controversy and public ire on several occasions. The results of the study also contribute towards building theory and drawing managerial implications for industry practitioners. This study is unique as no past research has been conducted to deep dive into the blue tick ecosystem, though it is one of the most talked-about topics on the internet.

Keywords : Twitter, blue tick verification, social media, fake news, COVID - 19

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The emergence of social media platforms has transformed users from being passive information consumers to active content creators and distributors (Shimpi, 2018). It has revolutionized the entire "conversation ecosystem," where user conversations are now a vital source of market intelligence for the businesses that can be used for product development and process optimization (Arora et al., 2018). Social media is more about people than customers (Yadav, 2017).

Twitter, the microblogging platform launched in July 2006, has gained massive popularity within a few years of its inception. Post the fourth quarter of 2019, the platform's daily active users were around 152 million (Lunden, 2020a). According to Smith (2020), over 500 million Tweets are posted each day. These whopping numbers reflect the scale of the platform's adoption and usage. Twitter is an important source of information for users (Farhan & Yousaf, 2016) and has emerged as an interactive medium for businesses to communicate with customers (Chandel et al., 2017).

Today, Twitter is extensively used by governments, world leaders, celebrities, sports personalities, media houses, armed forces, global institutions, non-government organizations, besides individual users (Boyd, 2020).

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For customer service management, Twitter is prominently used by brands, especially in the service sector (Shakeel et al., 2020). Twitter is amongst the preferred mass communication channels (Kaur & Verma, 2018). Twitter, as a platform, authenticates user accounts or profiles by showing a "blue tick" on them (Spirou, 2014). Over the period, the blue tick has emerged as a signal of influence and authority amongst the users (Elledge, 2020), though the platform calls it just an authentication (Lyons, 2020b). Still, it is the most sought-after platform and is also termed the highest form of social media currency (Osman, 2017).

Users often blame Twitter for being biased and non-transparent while authenticating the accounts (Martin, 2017). As a result, the account verification/authentication policy has drawn much criticism for Twitter on multiple occasions (Yadron, 2016). Because of this, the platform frequently gets into the review of the policy.

Research Gaps

In the past, several research studies have been conducted on Twitter, such as user sentiment analysis, election and stock market predictions, fake news, etc., but there is no specific work on Twitter account verification or blue tick. Kirabo et al. (2020), in their study, highlighted that tweets from blue tick or verified accounts received more engagement compared to those from non-verified accounts. They also found that verified accounts had an additional impact on engagement, which is not dependent on the number of followers. The recurring controversies around the feature raise doubt over the platform's argument of the blue tick being just an authentication sign. Platform users seem to have a different perception of the blue tick, triggering a worrying trend of platform divide, which is eventually spreading in the real world. It is worth studying whether this classification of verified and non-verified users is just a part of the process or a structured attempt to create user strata like privileged and non-privileged, exclusive and non-exclusive.

Twitter controls the platform activities of real-world influencers/users with a more extensive follower base (by tiding them with blue tick badge policy norms) and establishing a progression/advanced level for non-verified users to get verified (to encourage them to create more content, expand follower base).

Research Aim

This paper attempts to understand the blue tick ecosystem on the platform through a systematic literature review (SLR). The paper is organized as follows. First, a detailed literature review has been done to understand Twitter as a platform, followed by the blue tick and its criticism, and lastly, the account authentication process and changes over time. Then, the findings are discussed, followed by the conclusion, practical implications, and future opportunities for research.

Research Methodology

This section defines the methodological approach that will explore the studies conducted around Twitter, its blue tick award policy, and user sentiment for the same. The objective and nature of the study support a systematic literature review. Hence, researchers have proposed identifying, evaluating, and interpreting all academic and industry research relevant to the topic area. According to the literature review guidelines laid by Kitchenham and Charters (2007), the research is divided into three levels: (a) planning the review, (b) conducting the review, and (c) interpreting the review outcomes.

Review Planning

This study explores the impact of the Twitter blue tick badge on the platform users and society at large. With this

objective, the study makes the ground to explore this research domain and then find the scope for future research. We collected academic, industry, and peer-reviewed journal articles. At the onset, an orderly electronic search using multiple databases including ABI/INFORM Global (ProQuest), Elsevier, Science Direct, Springer, and Emerald was carried out. Related keywords like "Twitter," "Twitter blue tick," "Twitter verification," and "Twitter verified profiles" were also used to explore the literature. Secondly, a manual review of the journals dealing with social media and consumer psychology (e.g., *Online Social Networks and Media, Social Media and Society, Journal of Digital and Social Media Marketing, Journal of Consumer Psychology, Computers in Human Behavior, Journal of Interactive Marketing*) was also done to ensure covering all the significant research articles on Twitter and its profile verification process. Following the norms of systematic literature review, criteria for inclusion and exclusion of the studies were set. The criteria ensured that the publications were academic, industry, and peer-reviewed, with a prime focus on Twitter. The studies dealing without the deep analysis of the Twitter ecosystem were excluded. A total of 82 articles related to social media and Twitter published in the last 14 years, that is, between 2007 and 2021, were identified for the study.

Twitter – The Power of 280 Characters

Twitter enables users to exchange brief messages called "tweets" (Kwak et al., 2010). All tweets are public information that can be accessed by anyone (Chary et al., 2017). Earlier, the length of a single tweet was allowed to be a maximum of 140 characters, but in 2017, this was expanded to accommodate 280 characters (Rozen, 2017). The impact of a tweet, especially from reliable accounts, can be imagined from the incident that occurred in 2013, when a fake tweet from the official handle of news agency "Associated Press" — that claimed two bomb explosions at The White House — wiped almost $136 billion from the US Stock markets (Fisher, 2013).

Twitter also offers various business-specific features to manage customer support services like displaying availability hours, direct messaging, etc. (Lull, 2016). According to Cairns (2016), the cost of resolving a customer query through Twitter is one-sixth the cost of a call center interaction. Twitter has been considered a vital source of competitive information in the business sphere, where collective tweets for a topic represent a trend or user's sentiments (Bose et al., 2019), which works as feedback for the businesses.

Twitter has been a popular topic of research. Several researchers have conducted studies on different aspects of the platform. Some notable studies include predicting the mood of the stock market using Twitter (Bollen et al., 2011), election prediction through Twitter (Tumasjan et al., 2010), real-time event detection using Twitter (Sakaki et al., 2010), amongst others. In some scenarios, tweets are even admitted as legal evidence. In the US, multiple inflammatory tweets from an individual account were considered proof of the offense by a local court, and the accused was sent to jail (Herrman & Herrman PLLC, 2018).

As a policy, Twitter also allows creating parody accounts (Bhalla, 2018). According to Highfield (2016), parody accounts are pretty common on Twitter and often post disrespectful content for public figures and others. Parody accounts have often been alleged to spread fake news and propaganda (Dixit, 2018). In their study, Edgerly and Vraga (2019) revealed that users paid little attention to the verification mark when judging the credibility of content posted by a verified account, and this is why users sometimes fall prey to a parody account, considering them as legitimate accounts.

Twitter Blue Tick – The Social Media Knighthood

In 2009, Twitter launched user accounts verification program and started displaying a "blue tick" or "blue checkmark" badge near the display names of the verified accounts (Cashmore, 2009). According to Twitter's official blog post, accounts with the verification badge represent their authenticity but should not be treated as an

endorsement by the platform. It is important to note that Twitter does not verify the tweets by the verified accounts (Vaidya et al., 2019). According to Twitter, authentication has been restricted to the accounts deemed to be of public interest. However, the perception of the blue tick is quite different at its users' end. Since its launch, the blue tick emerged as a sign of influence, authority, and even equivalent to "knighthood" for the platform users (Abraham, 2020). The blue tick represents an exclusive, handpicked club of privileged people (Barton, 2019). According to Carman (2019), the blue tick is more than just authentication. The significant advantage of blue tick is that people pay attention to the content, and everything tweeted is perceived as original and unique (Ukoha, 2018). The Twitter blue tick is a status symbol that is usually reserved for the elite (Worthington, 2016). Verified accounts appear in a list of suggested users presented to new users on the platform that helps them to grow their follower base quickly (York, 2016).

Dash (2013), in his blog, explained the Twitter verification process as "secretive" because nobody knows about the criteria which the platform follows to bless the accounts with the blue tick. Further, he also called the Twitter blue tick "membership of an exclusive worldwide Illuminati cabal." The blue tick is such a sought-after honor on social media that Twitter management and its officials are often chased for it (Mandal, 2019). Twitter India MD put a disclaimer on his account bio "No power to verify" (refer to Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Screenshot of Public Twitter Bio of Managing Director of Twitter India*

Criticism of Twitter's Blue Tick Policy

On many occasions, Twitter comes in the line of fire of its users and draws vast criticism. Lyons (2020a) called the

Twitter account verification policy flawed, messy, and vague. Twitter once 'unverified' the account of writer Milo Yiannopoulos for violating "unspecified" rules that resulted in Milo's followers slamming Twitter and calling the un-verification as an attempt to curb free speech (Edwards, 2016). The same year, the account of popular YouTuber PewDiePie was un-verified over his alleged joke of joining ISIS (Oppenheim, 2016). In 2017, major public outrage happened when Twitter stamped its prestigious blue tick on account of Jason Kessler, one of the main organizers of the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville (Heim & Tsukayama, 2017). Another backlash happened in 2019 when platform users in India launched a campaign ##CancelAllBlueTicksInIndia, alleging the platform to be caste biased in verifying and unverifying the accounts (Jha & Taskin, 2019). Blue ticks are the symbols of caste persecution, and Twitter ignorance of this shows the difference between its policy and practice (Bose, 2019). Similarly, a discussion sparked when the account of Jay Shah (son of a top political leader in India) got the blue tick within a few days of its creation (Tiwari, 2019).

In 2020, the platform faced major embarrassment when it verified a parody account of US President Donald Trump (Rodrigues, 2020) and also a fake account created by a high school student Andrew Walz in New York (O'Sullivan, 2020). For Mandal (2019), the blue tick is unequal, hierarchical, and arbitrary. Maragkou et al. (2019) slammed Twitter's verification policy by terming the verified users as "blue tick brigade" and accused Twitter of creating the "blue tick echo chamber" of "elite." Users with a large follower base and non-verified accounts consider the verification policy insulting (Bishop 2017). Fairchild (2018), in a blog post, demonstrated her experience and findings of using Twitter. She argued that the blue tick accounts are the epitome of an "elite" club having priority placement on the news feeds, "whom to follow" suggestions, and even on the hashtags searches that help expand the account holder's account influence. On one side, Twitter stripped the blue tick badge of a famous YouTuber for his alleged joke of joining a terror group, and on the other side, it verified the account of Sadhvi Pragya, a bomb blast accused and a political leader in India (Aggarwal, 2019).

Timeline of Twitter Verification Policy

(1) **Blue Tick for Handpicked Accounts :** Initially, the blue tick verification was launched to verify real accounts on the platform meant for public interest (Kanalley, 2013).

(2) **Democratization of Blue Tick :** In 2016, Twitter made account verification open for the public, which means any user can request verification (Quackenbush, 2016).

(3) **Blue Tick Verification on Hold :** In November 2017, post the wave of criticism over the verification of account of Jason Kessler, the main organizer of the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Twitter officially paused the accounts verification process, and its founder publicly admitted that they had created confusion about how the blue ticks should be perceived and promised to rework on all the whole mechanism (Perez, 2017). Despite the official pause, Twitter secretly verified the accounts of the parents of its founder Jack Dorsey and thousand others (Bell, 2019).

(4) **Relaunch of the Process :** Almost after three years of official pause, the blue tick verification was set to be relaunched will clear guidelines (Kaser, 2020). In May 2021, Twitter relaunched its awaited account verification policy, calling it specific and transparent.

(5) **Pausing it Again :** Days after the relaunch of the account verification policy, Twitter paused it again ("Twitter verification program paused," 2021), citing an overwhelming response to it.

(6) **Relaunch of the "Relaunched" Policy :** After a brief pause, the verification process resumed (Singh, 2021). Figure 2 shows tweets related to the closure and reopening of the revised verification policy.

Figure 2 : *Screenshot of Tweets Related to the Closure and Reopening of the Revised Verification Policy Posted by Twitter Official Verification Handle*

Blue Ticks and COVID - 19

During the COVID-19 outbreak, Twitter took the initiative to prioritize the information by authentic sources to ensure that only credible information related to the pandemic was disseminated amongst the platform users. This drive verified thousands of accounts related to health experts, agencies, and academicians working specifically on the topic #COVID19. Lunden (2020b) called this exercise the actual and purposeful use of the blue tick badge.

Twitter Support (2020) described this account verification policy and process to get the blue tick through a series of tweets. Nevertheless, this initiative has some contradictions as well. According to Bell (2020), like its original nature, the verification policy is still opaque and relies more on authorities and its policy teams to identify the correct accounts. The platform does not have an open policy for doctors and researchers to submit the account verification request and is dependent on the middlemen, like always.

Recent Controversies in India

India is the third-largest market for Twitter in terms of users after the US and Japan. As of January 2021, it had 17.5 million active users (Tankovska, 2021). Like its older versions, the relaunched blue tick policy also came in the line of fire, not once but multiple times. One such incident occurred when Twitter rejected the verification application for Nithin Kamath, Co-Founder & CEO of Zerodha, one of India's most celebrated bootstrapped US$2 billion valued fintech firms. After Kamath mocked Twitter about the rejection, Twitter took no time to verify his account (Shaikh, 2021).

A similar dispute happened when the microblogging platform un-verified the personal account of the Vice President of India and some senior functionaries of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), including its chief Mohan Bhagwat. As given by the platform, the reason for the badge revoke was "account inactivity" but later restored (Ajmal, 2021). However, this incident took Twitter by storm, and many users demanded action against the

Figure 3. *Screenshot of a Public Tweet*

platform by trending #TwitterBanInIndia (Varma, 2021). Through a tweet, Aditya Raj Kaul, a senior Indian journalist, also questioned Twitter's account verification policy while referring to it as biased. His tweet fetched similar sentiments from other users as well (refer to Figure 3).

Discussion

The literature review indicates that as claimed by the platform, the blue badge is not just a user authentication sign, but more than it. The users have often accused the platform of being partial and non-transparent when awarding the blue tick badges. This sentiment is not specific to any country, region, or user segment but scattered across the Twitter-verse. The study also shows that blue tick badges empower accounts with additional user engagement that shows enhanced reach for the tweets created by the verified accounts. On several occasions, the verification policy flipflop, verification of impersonated accounts, un-verification of verified accounts without specific reasons, and non-verification of accounts with a more extensive follower base have brought denunciation for the platform.

Another significant outcome is that the popularity and adoption of the platform are instrumental in creating the platform divide, public outrage, and chaos to extend that sometimes authorities and governments have to intervene (Sharma & Prabhu, 2021).

The systematic literature review underlines four important aspects of the verification policy from the Twitter perspective:

(1) Lack of Objectivity : The blue tick badges were initially conceptualized to differentiate the imposter accounts from the real accounts. Twitter should have verified all the actual accounts on its platform by this principle, but this has never happened. Over the period, the policy quietly shifted to verify the "users with influence" and popularity in the real world while also unverifying accounts under vague and unspecified guidelines.

(2) Ignorance of Human Behaviour Theories : While creating this "status symbol" on the platform, the significant elements of human behavior have been completely ignored. "Maslow Hierarchy of Needs" talks about the various needs of an individual in the form of a hierarchy. The theory very well applies to the context of Twitter as well. A user joins the platform as part of physiological needs to get a sense of community belongingness and to feel connected. Once this need is fulfilled, the next level of the hierarchy is to attain "self-esteem." This need can be fulfilled on Twitter by achieving limited privileges such as a blue tick badge, and hence, users aspire to achieve it.

(3) Users' Perception of the Blue Tick : From the literature review, it seems that users' perception of the blue tick as

a "status symbol" is not accidental but built by the platform itself. Wiedmann et al. (2007), in their study, mentioned that for anything to be called "luxury," the two critical components are "minimal supply" and "recognition of its value by others." Verhallen (1982) also highlighted that the "limited availability" of a product makes it unique and exclusive. Now, consider the blue tick badge; over time, it has been awarded to handpicked users (compared with the platform's total user base) and is also highly valued (sought after) by the platform users. This shows that the platform has intentionally positioned the verification badge as an exclusive feature that emerged as a sign of status amongst its users.
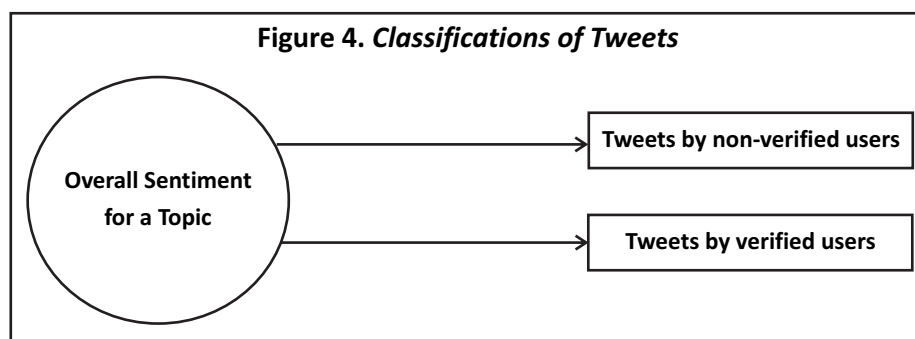
(4) Platform Divide : In the last few years, the platform has created two groups of users, "verified" and "non-verified," similar to a "rich" and a "poor" in real life. This social divide was prominently seen when non-verified users celebrated the account hacking of some eminent verified users (Cooper, 2020; Kuperinsky, 2020).

Conclusion

Twitter officially states that the blue tick is just a symbol of identity authentication and not an endorsement, but this study refutes this claim. As per the Cambridge dictionary, "authentication" means "the process of proving that something is real, true, or what people say it is." By this definition and considering Twitter's policy of unverifying the accounts, it is hard to understand how an account once authenticated can be "unauthenticated." Also, the distribution of blue tick badges to parody unpopular accounts and non-verification of accounts with a more extensive follower base raise serious questions over the integrity of the platform's account verification policy. Twitter has created a "hierarchy" on the platform through the blue tick badge that every other user wants to attain. By awarding the blue tick to a handpicked user (especially celebrities and famous personalities), Twitter has intentionally kept it exclusive and carefully orchestrated its positioning as a luxury feature.

Theoretical Contribution

This paper is the first attempt to study Twitter's famous blue tick badge. Multiple studies have discussed how user sentiments on Twitter can be used to predict various real-life situations but have ignored the significance of the tweets from the verified accounts. The study indicates that blue tick accounts possess the strength to drive users' sentiments on the platform to form narratives and build perceptions. Hence, it is imperative to consider tweets from verified accounts for a particular topic while evaluating the overall sentiment (refer to Figure 4).

Figure 4. *Classifications of Tweets*

Overall Sentiment for a Topic → Tweets by non-verified users

Overall Sentiment for a Topic → Tweets by verified users

Managerial Implications

The blue tick badges can help individuals and businesses create a favorable perception of being an authority and

thought leader on their respective domains amongst the followers, facilitating enhanced "Share of Voice" (SOV) for them on the platform. Blue tick badges also get followed by other verified accounts, thus creating an "influencer network" within the platform. Blue ticks enable advanced analytics and enhanced security measures to the verified accounts (Parsons, 2017). For businesses on Twitter, blue ticks are the only way to look authentic and protect the business identity, which helps the platform users discover the official business accounts efficiently and accurately. Business accounts without the blue tick badges suffer due to lookalike and unofficial accounts. As part of influencer marketing (Johnson, 2020), brands can also use verified accounts to tweet branded content (Hatch, 2010). This channel can get enhanced exposure for business offerings and works effectively during short-term campaigns like product launches and crises.

Limitations of the Study and Scope for Future Research

This study has highlighted users' understanding and sentiments for the blue tick badge on Twitter. The outcomes are based on a systematic literature review. Future studies can analytically test whether the verified accounts get priority by the platform algorithms in terms of tweet impressions (enhanced exposure to the content posted) and weightage on trending a topic (to drive user sentiment for a topic).

Authors' Contribution

Sunil Barsaiyan identified the topic and conducted the entire systematic literature review. Dr. Charu Sijoria interpreted the literature review outcomes and wrote the Conclusion and Theoretical Contribution. Sunil Barsaiyan also outlined the Managerial Contribution and Scope for Future Research.

Conflict of Interest

The authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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