

# TikTok trolls posing as IMH docs cause concern

Their comments could trivialise mental health issues, say experts

Kolette Lim

A growing number of TikTok users are posing as doctors from the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) to post nuisance comments on the video-sharing platform, a trend that has sparked concern among experts.

These online trolls, who have nicknames like “Doctor Daniel Zhang of IMH”, have in recent months left comments on videos that usually say something like “See me in my office” or “Remember to take your prescribed medication”.

Their targets of choice are usually videos of TikTok creators dancing in public or doing other silly and unusual things.

While they are meant to be tongue-in-cheek, experts and other users say the comments could trivialise mental health issues.

TikTok user Wabikaeru, who has consulted a psychiatrist for 10 years for his anxiety disorder, found the trend silly and funny when he first came across it four months ago. But the content creator, who wanted to be identified only by his TikTok handle, was concerned when it became increasingly common.

“Now, day in and day out, people who log on to TikTok are reminded that going to IMH to see a doctor should be a matter of shame as you will be the butt of other people’s jokes.”

Wabikaeru, who lost his grandmother to suicide, told The Straits Times: “People don’t make fun of patients seeking help for other issues. Why should those with mental health issues be the subject of jokes daily?”

An IMH spokesperson said the hospital is aware of this trend.

“These accounts are disrespectful of our doctors, but we are more concerned about the resulting discussions on these accounts that trivialise the challenges of persons living with mental health issues,” added the spokesperson.

The troll accounts use stock images of doctors or public figures, such as North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, as their display photo. Many usernames play on vulgar Hokkien phrases, and some make references to secret societies.

Some comments by these account users tell video creators to visit IMH for a “medical review”, “comprehensive urine test” or a “voice appointment”.

While these account users might be driven by the desire for validation by being the source of jokes, they are contributing to the association of humour with mental health conditions, said Nanyang Technological University psychology professor Albert Lee.

“When funny things are repeatedly framed in terms of mental illnesses, it is a matter of time before people begin to take mental illnesses less seriously,” he said, adding that this would cause people to be less willing to seek professional help if they need it.

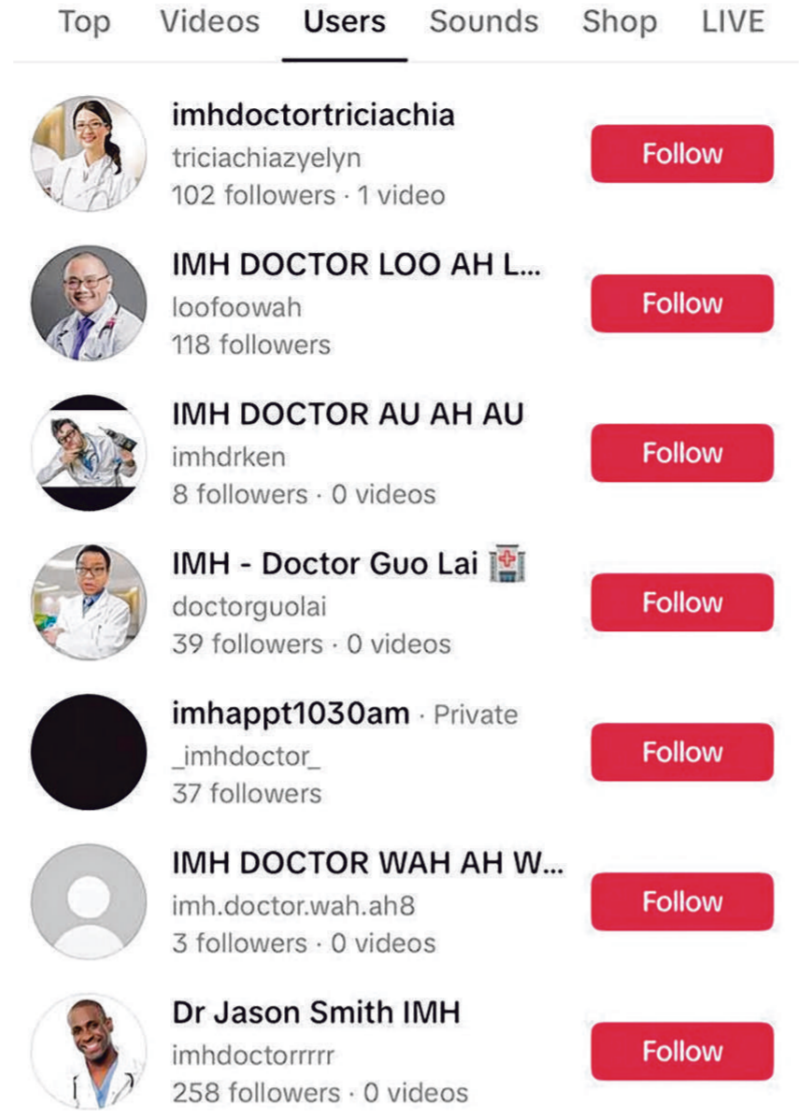
Clinical psychologist at The Psychology Practice Shawn Ee said it could cause viewers to misdiagnose others or themselves if they take these comments seriously.

“If we see behaviour that we don’t understand, we cannot just make comments like these,” said Dr Ee, who used to be a clinical psychologist at IMH.

The trend may also create the perception that mental health treatments are quick and easy.

Some content creators have chosen to voice their concerns about the trend on the platform. Wabikaeru said in a video that these accounts and their comments can make IMH patients feel like pariahs.

Others such as psychology research assistant Cheryl Cheng said on TikTok that the trend stig-



There has been a growing number of TikTok account users posing as doctors from the Institute of Mental Health. PHOTO: SCREENGAB FROM TIKTOK

matismes mental health issues.

“It creates a divide between the neurotypical people versus people who are dealing with mental health issues,” the 25-year-old told ST. “If someone who is actually dealing with mental health issues sees these comments, they may feel their experiences are being invalidated.”

Her video drew more than 500 comments, with many netizens divided in their views – some agreed with her, but others felt that she was taking harmless jokes

too seriously.

Ms Sabrina Ooi, co-founder of Calm Collective Asia, a social enterprise that aims to normalise conversations about mental health, said these “distasteful remarks” have catalysed fresh discussions on the topic.

“Their comments reflect some very honest sentiments that our society has held towards people with mental health conditions and the healthcare system.”

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# SMRT to get new group chief financial officer in October

Esther Loi

On Oct 1, Mr Phua Yung Keat will replace Ms Cindy Lau as group chief financial officer of SMRT.

In a statement on Wednesday, the transport operator said Ms Lau, who has been the group CFO since 2017, has resigned from the company to pursue “her personal interests”.

As group CFO, Mr Phua will be responsible for SMRT’s finance, tax and treasury functions.

Mr Phua, 45, was head of finance at technology and engineering firm ST Engineering’s land systems division between November 2018 and June 2023.

He joined SMRT in June as its head of strategic finance and vice-president for finance.

He also took on the role of group treasury head, said SMRT spokeswoman Margaret Teo in response to questions from The Straits Times.

Ms Teo said Mr Phua “provided finance business partnering support to the commercial businesses, including the RTS Operations project”. RTS Operations is the operator of an upcoming 4km rail link between Singapore and Johor Bahru.

Mr Phua was brought in as part of succession planning as well as to strengthen SMRT’s leadership bench for business growth, said Ms Teo.



Mr Phua Yung Keat will take over from Ms Cindy Lau as group chief financial officer on Oct 1. SMRT said Ms Lau has resigned from the firm to pursue “her personal interests”.

He has 20 years of experience in finance, strategic investments and business development in the mobility and urban development sectors, including large-scale integrated projects in China and India.

According to Mr Phua’s profile on professional network LinkedIn, he also held leadership roles at urban development firm Ascendas-Singbridge.

SMRT said Ms Lau would be redesignated as Mr Phua’s adviser between Oct 1 and Nov 16.

Before being named group CFO, Ms Lau, 52, was the company’s vice-president for group finance and shared services. She covered the group CFO’s responsibilities following Mr Ong Eng Keang’s resignation in 2014 after just eight months in the role.

Ms Teo said: “SMRT would like to express our deep appreciation to Cindy for her service and contributions to the company over the past 11 years.”

At the same time, Ms Lau thanked the firm’s finance team for their support, and added that she was confident the team would provide the same support to Mr Phua for a smooth transition.

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# Bid to smuggle live leopard gecko foiled at airfreight centre

Michelle Chin

A scan of a package at Changi Airfreight Centre on Aug 3 foiled an attempt to smuggle a leopard gecko.

Anomalies detected in scanned images of the package led to the discovery, said the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA) in a Facebook post on Tuesday.

The case has been referred to the National Parks Board (NParks) for investigation and the reptile is under the care of its Centre for Wildlife Rehabilitation.

The leopard gecko, which comes in an array of colours and patterns, is native to dry and semi-desert areas in Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran,

north-west India and Nepal. It is not listed as an endangered species, and in some countries is considered a popular beginner’s reptile. The San Diego Zoo, for instance, says “these hardy little reptiles have been kept and bred as pets for more than 30 years”.

However, ICA reminded the Singapore public that they should not bring in wildlife illegally, purchase wildlife or keep them as pets.

“Illegal trade in wildlife threatens biodiversity and disrupts ecosystems around the world and can also pose serious health risks, as it evades biosecurity and sanitary controls,” the authority said in a Facebook post.

The poor conditions and manner in which animals are smuggled in could cause them unneces-



Anomalies detected in scanned images of a package led to the discovery of the reptile on Aug 3. PHOTOS: ICA/FACEBOOK

sary suffering and even lead to death, it added.

NParks works closely with ICA on strict import controls to tackle the illegal wildlife trade, safeguard the health and welfare of animals, and prevent the introduction of exotic diseases into Singapore.

Under the Wildlife Act, offenders caught importing wildlife

without approval could be fined up to \$10,000, jailed for up to 12 months, or both.

Members of the public who spot incidents of illegal wildlife trade can contact NParks at [cites@nparks.gov.sg](mailto:cites@nparks.gov.sg). Information shared will be kept confidential.

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you ask. we answer.

If you have a question, e-mail us at [askst@sph.com.sg](mailto:askst@sph.com.sg)

# New Covid-19 jabs offer broad, better protection: Experts

Salma Khalik  
Senior Health Correspondent

The Republic will be bringing in the latest Covid-19 vaccines by the end of October. The Health Sciences Authority has approved Pfizer’s new vaccine and is reviewing Moderna’s vaccine. Both are monovalent, targeting the XBB.1.5 Covid-19 strain. Is there really still a need for such vaccines? For those who are due for their booster jabs, should they wait for the new vaccines? Here’s what the experts say.

**Q** The pandemic is over, so why is Singapore bringing in more Covid-19 vaccines?

**A** The virus is still circulating. In the week of Sept 3, more than 7,000 people here were diagnosed with Covid-19. While this is far lower than the numbers seen in April and May, which peaked at over 28,000 a week, it remains significant, as 151 people were hospitalised that week, with two needing intensive care.

Health Minister Ong Ye Kung recently cautioned that with falling vaccination take-up rates here, “over time, our protection against Covid-19 will weaken”.

Urging people to get their booster shots, he said: “The virus has not gotten milder. It is we who have gotten stronger, through vaccinations and safe recovery from infections.”

In the first seven months of this year, 172 people died from Covid-19 in Singapore.

**Q** But the new vaccines do not target the dominant circulating strains, so what’s the point?

**A** It’s true that the new monovalent vaccines target the XBB.1.5 strain that is no longer dominant, but experts say they do provide better protection than current bivalent vaccines against the various Covid-19 Omicron strains that are circulating.

Professor Hsu Li Yang, vice-dean of global health at the National University of Singapore’s Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said that while the new vaccines target the XBB.1.5 strain, they “will still generate a strong immune response that will protect against the current variants EG.5 (Eris) and BA.2.86 (Pirola)”.

Dr Asok Kurup, an infectious diseases specialist in private practice, said immunity from previous vaccines would have waned, so having vaccine updates is likely going to be a regular affair.

Associate Professor Lim Poh Lian of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases said: “There is good cross-protection between the different Omicron sub-variants. So it doesn’t matter that much that the sub-variant targeted is no longer dominant because the protection provided is fairly broad.”

Dr Sebastian Maurer-Stroh, executive director at the Agency for Science, Technology and Research’s Bioinformatics Institute, which tracks Covid-19 strains here, said the main circulating strains in Singapore today are the EG.5.1.1, HK.3 and EG.2, all of which are part of the XBB.1.5 family.

**Q** The new vaccines are monovalent, which means they target just one strain. The vaccines currently used here are bivalent, targeting two strains. So aren’t the older vaccines better?

**A** Not so, say the experts.

Prof Lim said the new vaccines are “fully targeted against the Omicron variant, which has been circulating for over a year now”. They therefore provide better protection against the Omicron variant “because the full amount of the booster – instead of just half of it – is targeted at Omicron”, she said.

Prof Hsu explained that including a non-Omicron strain may generate an immune response in our body to older variants “that might impair protection against newer variants of the virus”.

**Q** Since the new vaccines are better, there’s no point in getting a booster jab now, right? We should all wait for the new ones to become available here.

**A** Both Prof Hsu and Dr Kurup say it would make sense to wait for the new vaccines, which should be available here by the end of October.

Prof Lim, however, urged people who answer “yes” to any of the following to get a booster now:

- Are you at risk of Covid-19 complications because of your age (the Ministry of Health recommends booster vaccines for people aged 60 and older) and medical conditions?
- Was your most recent vaccine booster more than 12 months ago?
- Do you plan to travel and what is the Covid-19 situation like at the travel destination?

She said: “Antibody levels generally drop over time, although immune memory persists. So it is important for medically vulnerable persons to be protected by strengthening their immunity with a Covid-19 booster, ideally within 12 months from their last dose.”

**Q** Younger people are less likely to get seriously ill if infected, so do they really need to get a booster?

**A** That is a personal decision. Young and healthy people who have had the “minimum protection” – which the Ministry of Health defines as three doses of the Pfizer, Moderna or Novavax vaccine, or four doses of the Sinovac vaccine – retain long-term protection against severe illness if infected.

Dr Kurup said they may want to have boosters annually to “ring-fence” vulnerable family members, or if they do not want to get sick as they plan to travel or are sitting exams, or just to maintain good health.

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