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US to scan social media of all H-1B, H-4 visa applicants from December 15

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In a significant tightening of America's visa-vetting system, the US State Department has announced late on Wednesday night, that all H-1B workers and their H-4 dependents will undergo mandatory social-media screening from Dec 15. Applicants will have to switch their social-media accounts to “public” settings to enable scrutiny.

Immigration experts say the move marks a major expansion of Washington's digital-footprint policy. Mitch Wexler, senior counsellor at global immigration law firm Fragomen, said, “An online presence review has been in place for F, M and J visa applicants (students and exchange visitors) since late June 2025; expansion to include the H-1B and H-4 categories is the first

ramp-up of the policy.” He adds that, applicants should expect far more intensive review of their posts, interactions and overall digital activity.

According to the State Department, consular officers will review an applicant's social-media profiles, public posts and information available across online platforms and databases. The Department reiterated that “every visa adjudication is a national security decision” and stressed that a US visa is “a privilege, not a right”.

Internal guidance circulated in June for student visas suggests the parameters officers may rely on. Negative inferences can be drawn if applicants keep portions of their accounts private or have no online presence at all. Officers are also expected to evaluate whether any content reflects hostility toward US citizens, institutions or culture; support for designated terror groups; attempts to access or misuse sensitive US technology; or a pattern

of political activism that could continue after entering the US. Derogatory or questionable material can lead to follow-up interviews, prolonged background checks or visa refusal.

Wexler warns that the expanded checks will increase the burden on consulates. "The vetting standards also mean that applicants may face an increased likelihood of being flagged for lengthy background checks and longer waits for visa issuance. These factors could mean that H-1B and H-4 visa applicants are delayed in their ability to enter the US." This will be a concern for Indians, especially IT professionals, who form the largest H-1B cohort. USCIS data shows that in fiscal year 2024, Indians led all nationalities, securing about 80,500 new H-1B visas, followed by China with just 19,600 such visas.

The latest expansion follows a series of measures over the past year that brought digital behaviours to the forefront of visa screening. When similar rules were introduced for student and exchange-visitor visas, interviews were briefly paused while consulates implemented new screening protocols, prompting concerns about vague 'hostility indicators' and inconsistent interpretations.

The heightened scrutiny also comes amid a broader debate in the US over online speech. According to Reuters a recent internal cable sent to all U.S. missions on December 2, orders US consular officers to review resumes or LinkedIn profiles of H-1B applicants - and family members who would be traveling with them - to see if they have worked in areas that include activities such as misinformation, disinformation, content moderation, fact-checking, compliance and online safety, among others.

"If you uncover evidence an applicant was responsible for, or complicit in, censorship or attempted censorship of protected expression in the United States, you should pursue a finding that the applicant is ineligible," under a specific article of the Immigration and Nationality Act, the cable said.

Rajiv S. Khanna, managing attorney at Immigration.com expressed dismay that a country which professes to be a shining beacon of free speech does not appreciate it. Cyrus D. Mehta, immigration attorney, told TOI that, "The

policy to punish H-1B holders who have been involved in censorship in the tech sector appears to be hypocritical. The Trump administration will deny a visa benefit if you (say as an executive in a social media company), have censored a person or viewpoint they favour - however politically incorrect, hurtful or obnoxious it may be. On the other hand, the Trump administration will have no compunctions to punish you if you have expressed views that they disfavor such as views perceived to be anti-Americanism even if it is protected under the First Amendment.”