

RISE OF THE INFLUENCER

The online spat between blogger Xiaxue and social media marketing firm Gushcloud has highlighted the already buzzing term



Bryna Singh

Although she is just 18, Ms Naomi Neo has more than 170,000 followers on Instagram and gets \$45,000 worth of sponsorships a year for clothing, beauty products and gadgets.

She is among several other young, hungry and media-savvy individuals here who call themselves "influencers".

"I'm an influencer because of my following and because I have the ability to influence how youth think. I impact their lives," the second-year Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts student says confidently.

The term "influencer" is a social media buzzword that is becoming a phenomenon here. It has found its way into many things, from personal bios on Instagram to designations on namecards.

It is generally used to describe people who have a substantial reach and following on social media platforms, are trend-setters and can shape the opinions and behaviour of many.

Social media marketing agencies say they look at what potential influencers post on social media, their interaction with followers and traffic to their social media channels to determine if someone has what it takes.

The term has been used often in the ongoing Xiaxue vs Gushcloud spat. It started after the 30-year-old blogger, whose real name is Wendy Cheng, alleged about a week ago that local digital and social media marketing company Gushcloud got its influencers to mask paid advertorials as reviews and pump up their blog page views, among other accusations.

Gushcloud's CEO and co-founder Vincent Ha, 30, then posted a lengthy reply, refuting her claims. Its co-founder Althea Lim, 30, also issued an emotional personal statement to Xiaxue, in which she questioned her intentions, because the blogger is signed with Nuffnang, a rival company.

While the word is most frequently used to refer to popular bloggers, influencers can also be actresses, DJs, socialites, gym buffs and even CEOs.

Mr Dennis Toh, 37, says his official title is that of influencer director and founder of The Influencer Network Communications, an influencer marketing and media agency similar to Gushcloud and Nuffnang.

He says: "By default, as the founder of The Influencer Network Communications, I do need to embody and demonstrate the traits of an influencer through my work and personal life.

"I manage a core group of writers and bloggers through my network, calibrate their digital direction and work through our network's services and consultancy."

His company has signed on about 200 influencers. Nuffnang has more than 60,000 bloggers but says about 100 of them are the more influential ones. Gushcloud says it has about 200 influencers.

These people have wide-ranging interests, so their social media feeds showcase everything: their daily lives, what they wear, the beauty products they use, where they travel to and even their fitness regimens.

Ms Flora Isabelle Lim, 29, who is signed on with The Influencer Network, enjoys blogging about make-up and skincare, fashion and her life as a newlywed.

She has more than 4,400 Instagram followers and says her blog gets about 10,000 daily views. She also receives hair, nail and other beauty sponsorships.

Because she is the owner of online fashion store ClubCouture, her job and social media worlds mesh.

"On Instagram, the pictures that get the most engagement are those of my outfits and pretty dresses from ClubCouture, and



INFLUENCER
(Noun) A person who has a substantial reach and following on social media platforms, is a trend-setter and can shape the opinions and behaviour of many.

PHOTOS: XAVIER ONG, FLORA ISABELLE LIM, NAOMI NEO

(Clockwise from top) Mr Xavier Ong, 20, Ms Flora Isabelle Lim, 29, and Ms Naomi Neo, 18, have a wide sphere of influence.

make-up and skincare brands, as my friends and followers are mainly female," she says.

She adds that she writes only about products and services that she has "tried and tested and actually really like", and there are non-sponsored products that she has written about too.

She estimates that her followers' ages range from 20s to late 30s and she believes she has an impact on them because many e-mail her to ask about the products she promotes.

One of her followers is engineer Therese Pereira, 24, who came across her Instagram profile early last year.

"I saw that her pictures were nice and her feed showcased nice clothes, so I decided to follow her," she says.

While she has not bought any clothes from the online store or any of the make-up products that the blogger promotes, she says Ms Lim has shaped her sense of fashion.

"I keep a look out for items that are similar to those Ms Lim sells and get them if they are within my budget," she says.

Young influencers say they appeal to followers even younger than they are.

Gushcloud influencer Xavier Ong, 20, says his followers are aged between 12 and

18. He has 12,000 Instagram followers. Ms Neo says her followers are between 13 and 21 years old.

Mr Ong says he started to see himself as an influencer in late 2012, after he noticed his followers checking out things or places that he had talked about and turning to him for advice on their problems.

"I realised I have the ability to help them tide through whatever they are facing," he says.

Ms Neo agrees. She started blogging in 2009, but it was not until she started "using my fame and power for good" last year that she deemed herself an influencer.

She deliberately decided to start slanting her posts to have a self-help, Agony Aunt tone and wrote entries on topics such as bullying, being alone and self-acceptance.

She found that many of these entries went viral and more teenagers started turning to her for advice.

"Being an influencer is not about my number of followers per se, but about being able to help others," she says.

Because of their reach, some of these young personalities say it has made them more mindful of what they post online.

Mr Ong, for instance, says he used to be "pretty emotional online", but now tries to be more positive with what he says,

because he recognises it makes a difference to the reader.

He also tries to advocate having a good relationship with family members.

"I believe strongly in having strong family ties. Many of my followers have met my mother at events and I can see that having a good relationship with my family motivates them to maintain a great one with theirs too," he says.

With the impact that these influencers exert over their following, it is understandable why many sponsors have come a-knocking.

Lifestyle blogger Benjamin Toh, 25, has been getting his haircuts sponsored by Cleo Hair and Make in The Central Mall at Clarke Quay for the past 18 months.

The salon's marketing director, Ms Samantha See, says he was chosen because of his significant following online, "boyish looks and healthy and bright image".

She adds that since engaging him, the salon has had more male clients who are keen to try out the looks they saw on his social media feeds.

"Once, we did a rainbow hairdo for him. When he had walk-ins later asking for that too, we knew they were his followers, because he was the only one we had done



PHOTO: BENJAMIN TOH

'It's a demanding job'

With his flawless complexion and pretty-boy face, Mr Benjamin Toh oozes charm. The 25-year old "full-time influencer" has about 37,000 followers on Instagram and his blog gets about 76,000 views a month.

He signed on to be a blogger with Nuffnang in 2008, but it was not until 2010 that he felt he could call himself an influencer.

"Being an influencer is not just about the numbers. It's only when you have credibility that I think you can call yourself an influencer," he says.

How does he know he is credible? He says his gauge is when his followers tell him they buy the products he endorses, when he gets more and more projects from clients and when clients engage him more than once for product endorsements.

He gets sponsorships worth about \$2,000 every month for his hair, skincare, dental care, clothing and accessories.

These can be seen on his various social media feeds, where he is seen modelling the items in his posts.

Mr Toh says there is much interaction between himself and his followers, who are generally aged between 15 and 27.

While most send tweets to him via Twitter, asking him about everything from where he gets his hair done to the camera he uses, a good number also likes to e-mail him about their problems.

"I have shared very openly about my difficulties with friends and in my love life on my blog, and once wrote a post on study tips, which were all very well received," he says.

"I really like it that they respond to these and end up sharing with me about their lives. This shows me that they can relate to my posts. I make it a point to reply them."

He tries to tweet every day and writes blog posts two to three times a week.

"I like to take pictures and I like sharing things with people," he says of his motivation to keep posting.

"It's not just about earning money or being popular. It's about using my influence in the right way."

that colouring for," she says.

One of Ms Lim's latest sponsors is Taiwanese make-up and skincare brand 1028 Visual Therapy.

The local distributor of the brand, Ms Sharon Wu, says she chose Ms Lim to promote the brand's mascara last month because of her strong female following.

"I needed someone who could recommend the product to other women, to spread the word that the brand was available in Singapore," she says, adding that she has received inquiries since Ms Lim's posts on the product went out.

There are also big companies, such as athletic goods firm Puma, which tap on the reach of influencers as part of their marketing strategy.

Mr Gabriel Yap, head of marketing at Puma Southeast Asia, says the firm engages "quite a number of them targeted at different segments of the brand", but declined to reveal the exact number.

These individuals are usually "active, enjoy sports, possess their own sense of style, are steadfast in their beliefs, well-connected in their own circles and are not followers but trend-setters".

He adds: "When they embrace the brand and adopt it as part of their everyday life, it creates awareness for the brand and desirability for our products."

But with the increasing number of self-professed influencers on the scene, how credible is this new breed of digital natives?

Professor Mohan Dutta, head of the National University of Singapore's department of communications and new media, says the current digital climate sees people being "immersed in messages seeking our attention, seeking to influence us and seeking to make an impact on us".

"It is thus increasingly difficult to distinguish between what is authentic and what is not," he says.

To him, the concept of an influencer can be traced back to an early communication theory of the 1940s, which highlighted a multi-channel framework of persuasion.

"The term started catching on in Singapore in the last few years, with the increasing penetration of new media technologies and the growing popularity of social media platforms," he says.

He points out that the problem with the influencer trend is that the networks of relationships and human connections have now entered the realms of profit-making at an accelerated speed.

"There is a greater need to cultivate a critical approach to consumption, since our consumption habits are increasingly being shaped by a desire for status and to be seen with the 'right thing'," he says.

"Today's youth and prospective consumers need to carefully consider conflicts of interest, source of information, credibility of information and quality of information when considering the recommendation made by an influencer."

In response to that, influencers say that freebies and fame aside, it is hard being them.

Ms Neo says she gets haters who say she is attention-seeking and urge her to "cover up" and refrain from dressing in revealing outfits which show her cleavage and other body parts, since she has young followers.

"I tell my haters there is nothing wrong with dressing a certain way. It's up to me. It's my body. It's just boobs," she says.

She adds, however, that being an influencer has made her "really think" before posting her comments.

"I can't just tweet anything on impulse. It could get me into trouble," she says.

Mr Ong agrees. He says the pressure of being an influencer is that he has to watch his actions in public.

"I can't get all drunk when I go out and party anymore because there are haters who pick on every small thing I do wrong and magnify it by a hundred times trying to put me down. That's just one of the many things I changed along the way, now that people are watching," he says.

"I always remind myself that I have to be a good influence, a good example. With great influence comes great responsibility."

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What do you think of the reach of influencers? E-mail stlife@sph.com.sg