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Singapore's TikTok historians

Mr Ho Yong Min (urbanist.singapore on TikTok) is a university administrator who creates content explaining Singapore's urban history. He also leads heritage-walking tours in his spare time. PHOTO: HO YONG MIN

Mr Dhevarajan Devadas (historyogi on TikTok) is a history graduate with a passion for delving into Singapore's archives and posting hidden gems on his TikTok account, Historyogi. PHOTO: DHEVARAJAN DEVADAS

Mr Ng Wee Liang (ngweeliang_ on TikTok) at Eden Hall, the residence of the British High Commissioner to Singapore, as part of a video he was making about its architectural heritage. PHOTO: NG WEE LIANG

Three home-grown creators have gained fans online by telling snappy stories of the island's hidden past

Teo Kai Xiang

On TikTok, you might have come across lesser-known aspects of Singapore's history.

Accounts such as Historyogi and Urbanist Singapore are run by home-grown creators passionate about the past and keen to make it fun and accessible. They have found an audience by posting archival material, such as audio and video clips, as well as fascinating trivia about the island nation.

When Mr Dhevarajan Devadas launched his TikTok account in 2021 under the moniker Historyogi, his aim was simple: to peel back the layers of Singapore's history and present its richness to a broader audience.

Little did he know that his clips – from snippets of speeches by figures like Singapore's first president Yusof Ishak to newsreels through the decades – would help him amass more than 100,000 followers.

For the 33-year-old public policy analyst and history graduate, the appeal behind history content on TikTok is twofold. "It allows younger generations a rare glimpse into Singapore's history, and for older generations to reconnect with a nostalgic past," he says.

He points to a video he posted of Singapore's "Centrepoint kids" of the 1980s as an example.

"Young, flamboyantly dressed, they look like they've stepped out of the pages of the latest teen magazine," says a news anchor in a segment about the teens who have claimed the Orchard Road mall as their base.

PHOTO: HISTORYOGI/ TIKTOK

The video delves into the public backlash against these loitering youngsters, and refers to them as "typical of a generation whose hallmarks are aggression, promiscuity and aimlessness".

Mr Dhevarajan captioned the video – which was posted in 2022 and has since racked up more than 350,000 views – with "these kids are now our parents lol".

> **It allows younger generations a rare glimpse into Singapore's history, and for older generations to reconnect with a nostalgic past.**
>
> **MR DHEVARAJAN DEVADAS,** on the appeal of posting history content on the app

One user commented, "old people constantly find fault in younger generations, and the cycle goes on". Others recounted their memories of hanging out at the mall.

Mr Dhevarajan says that finding such content is not difficult, as delving into National Library Board (NLB) archives and exploring old clips on YouTube is a pastime of his.

Archived forum letters from The Straits Times – available online on NewspaperSG, an NLB resource – are particularly revealing, he adds. They give an insight into what dominated discussion in Singapore over the decades, and show how people's anxieties – about youth behaviour, the pace of technological change and the country's fading landmarks – have always been around.

BREATHING NEW LIFE INTO HISTORY

The secret sauce that makes history come alive and resonate with a wider audience may be the pressures of creating content for TikTok, creators say.

The shortform video platform's algorithm and endless conveyor belt of short videos incentivise them to add elements – typically absent from history archives and textbooks – to hook users: sound, snappy editing and engaging commentary.

"It boils down to storytelling, as the information is out there and has been displayed on websites for aeons," says Mr Ho Yong Min, a 39-year-old university administrator and content creator.

Known as Urbanist Singapore on TikTok, he crafts videos decoding the island's urban landscapes.

His video on why there are "seemingly excessive escalators" in the underground CityLink Mall connecting the City Hall and Esplanade MRT stations has more than 500,000 views.

In just under 90 seconds, he explains the unwieldy placement of the escalators: It is because they have to go around the old Stamford Canal.

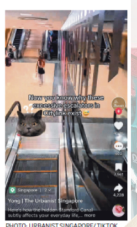

PHOTO: URBANIST.SINGAPORE/ TIKTOK

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Shining a light on the past

Mr Ho also overlays images of the now-hidden waterway on top of present-day streets, making sense of a hidden history that continues to affect Singaporeans today.

He says, "There's this perception that heritage is something of the past and doesn't have an impact on us. But I want to show people that there are clues and markers of what we see today that show how we've evolved from the past."

EASE OF SHARING

Mr Ng Wee Liang, 28, simply enjoys passing on trivia behind Singapore's nooks and crannies, and feeding what he sees as the public's innate curiosity about the past.

The second-year real estate student at the National University of Singapore (NUS) has a video series on the stories behind Singapore's road and building names.

In these videos, users frequently request follow-ups on buildings or streets in their neighbourhoods.

> **I want to show people that there are clues and markers of what we see today that show how we've evolved from the past.**
>
> **MR HO YONG MIN**

One can also piggyback on another user's popular videos. Mr Ng did a video response to a user's complaint about the similar-sounding Bencoolen and Bendemeer MRT stations to explain the history behind them.

On TikTok, short and amateur-quality clips are acceptable, so the barrier to entry is low.

For Mr Ng, that means being able to quickly put together videos like his tour of Singapore's "leaning tower of Pisa" – the Masjid Hajjah Fatimah, completed in 1846 and the first local mosque named after a woman.

His 43-second video takes viewers on a tour of the grounds, courtesy of his phone camera. It also uses old images of Hajjah Fatimah, who commissioned the mosque, to explain why she was inducted into the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame.

Dr Cheng Nien Yuan, a faculty fellow at the Singapore University of Technology and Design, says the rise of such content makes sense. Singapore's small size and rapid urban development mean that people here have come to appreciate and cherish their heritage.

"However, parts of our heritage may remain unseen and unheard – particularly the practices and objects that cannot easily be crafted into a short narrative, are not visually engaging enough or cannot grab the typical user's attention within those crucial first few seconds," she adds.

One of TikTok creator Ng Wee Liang's videos is a 43-second tour of the grounds of the Masjid Hajjah Fatimah, which is the first local mosque named after a woman. PHOTO: NGWEELIANG_/ TIKTOK

Dr Jack Chia, an assistant professor of history at NUS, also cautioned that TikTok's bite-size videos can sometimes lend themselves to over-simplified or one-sided historical narratives.

But he conceded that these videos make historical content accessible to a wider audience.

And these snapshots offer captivating peeks into our past. Mr Dhevarajan posted in May 2022 a short clip of a New Year's Day speech by Singapore's first president Mr Yusof, whose face appears on the city-state's paper currency.

The video of the speech, which was delivered in 1964 at a time of tense regional relations, has chalked up over 200,000 views.

One commenter posted: "I dare-say this is the first time in all 46 years of my life that I've heard his voice."

Mr Dhevarajan says: "It is a unique feeling to hear someone whose picture is the only thing you have seen. What he said may not have been iconic or repeatedly played, but this clip gives us a small glimpse into the kind of person that he was."

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