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The unimaginable road to fame

AMUSING POSTINGS: The Internet has a way of making people famous for the most absurd of reasons. *Arman Ahmad* takes a look at the phenomena

ON a boring Tuesday afternoon, to idle away the time, Azrina Syazwani posted: *"Saya xtau nk tulis ape, ni pon main tekan2 jew ni."* (I don't know what to write, so I'm just tapping on the keyboard) in her Facebook status box and it generated 607 likes.

A total of 99 people commented. The messages ranged from people confessing that they liked her to remarks of how cute she was.

It's hardly surprising that Azrina received that many responses to her post. After all, she has more than 57,000 subscribers.

You may wonder who Azrina is. Is she a budding actress or reality show star? The truth is, Azrina is just an ordinary girl with a Facebook account, whose charm and pretty face has made her famous on Facebook.

Before the convergence of the World Wide Web, one would need to have some serious talent to become famous such as being able to sing and act like P. Ramlee or play football like Mokthar Dahari.

Today, you can become famous for being, well, just cute.

Recently, Zeddie Little was photographed while taking part in a 10km marathon in South Carolina, the United States.

The photographer's description of him as a "ridiculously photogenic guy" propelled him to worldwide fame on the Internet, and soon network television stations across America were scrambling to get a chance to interview him.

So, what causes ordinary people to become overnight sensations on the Internet?

Dr Adrian M. Budiman, a senior lecturer at the School of Multimedia Technology and Communication of Universiti Utara Malaysia, said several factors could lead to someone becoming well-known overnight.

"The 'ridiculously photogenic guy' is a classic example of what is known as an Internet meme — a cultural artifact that is spread through the Internet to produce a regional and, at times, global sensation. This method of distribution is also known as 'gone viral' due to the nature of its growth, which is like a virus that spreads exponentially and reaches a large number of people in a minimum amount of time."

"I wrote about how boring my life was with exams and stuff like that."
Yuyu Zulaikha

He added that the Internet memes sometimes defied convention.

"If you google 'Magibon', you will also find another Internet meme who is strikingly similar to Azrina.

"She is an attractive teenager who creates videos of herself doing nothing. She just sits, stares and blinks. She almost always never talks but her videos are viewed by millions of people worldwide, mostly in Japan."

"I set up my first account in 2009, ***which generated 5,000 friends.*** *Now, I have another account with 1,000 friends. I also have more than* ***1,000 pending friendship requests."***
Shue Aida

So, what creates a meme or an Internet sensation?

"If I knew the answer, I would be a wealthy man because as far as I know, there is no one formula that makes a person or a cultural artifact attractive to the collective Internet community," said Dr Adrian.

"I believe there are a few key elements at play such as how interesting it is, how easy it is to distribute or access the material and if it is relevant to the times. Almost all of the memes, including Azrina, fit into this model."

Another person who recently found Internet stardom is local lass Yuyu Zulaikha. The 23-year-old from Langkawi, Kedah, with her pretty, impish looks, has 79,536 subscribers on Facebook.

The majority of her subscribers got to know her through her blog, kupukupukecik.blogspot.com.

When she started blogging, she wrote mostly about personal stuff.

"I wrote about how boring my life was with exams and stuff like that."

In December 2010, she had 200 followers. Now, it has snowballed to 17,600. She sometimes posts images from her photoshoots.

"The followers started multiplying after I began 'blogwalking', that is commenting on other people's blogs. People would surf to my blog, too. Whenever I made an entry, it would spread."

She said people mostly visited her blog because they liked her easy writing style.

"My style of writing is informal," she said, admitting that in the beginning, she found the attention rather perplexing.

"I gave *salam* and suddenly there were 1,000 likes. I found it weird that there were so many likes."

Her newfound fame has led to endorsements and appearances on TV, including over Radio Televisyen Malaysia's *Al-Hijrah* and an event organised by the Youth and Sports Ministry, all with financial returns.

"I don't have to ask money from my parents any more," she quipped.

Another person with a huge fan base is Shue Aida. The 23-year-old from Ipoh, who models Muslim attire, has two Facebook accounts.

"I set up my first account in 2009, which generated 5,000 friends. Now, I have another account with 1,000 friends. I also have more than 1,000 pending friendship requests.

"It takes a lot of time to sort through it. Every time I log into Facebook, I get friendship requests."

She said she began generating requests to befriend her after she began doing photoshoots for Muslim attire.

"Before I posted my photoshoot and modelling photos, I didn't really get that many friendship requests."

So, has the trend of becoming overnight Internet sensations any impact on society?

David Lian, Asia-Pacific digital head of Text 100, said: "The emergence of memes shows the Internet culture is fast being assimilated into the regular culture."

"Several reasons can lead to someone ***becoming famous overnight."***
Dr Adrian M. Budiman

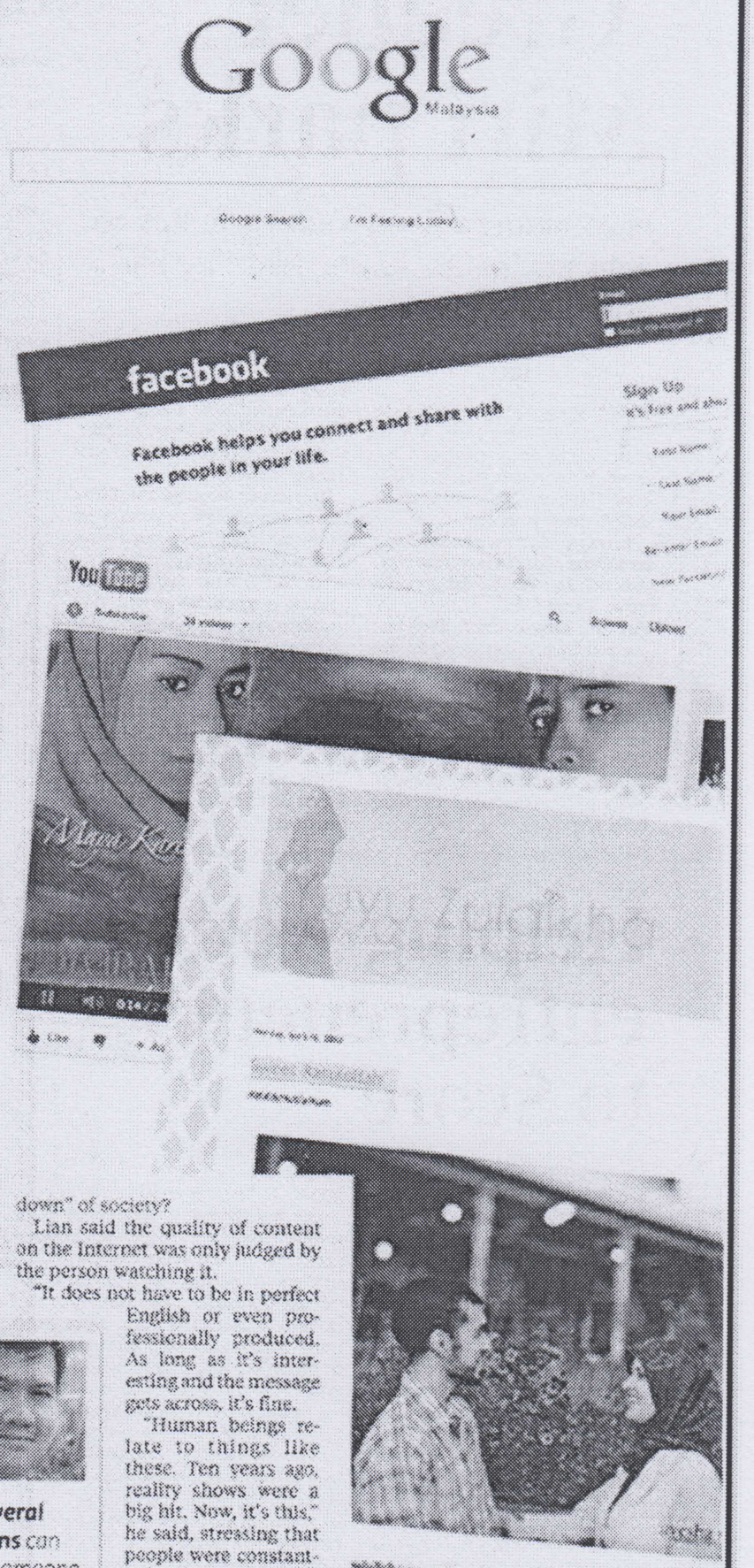
But is the popularity of memes pointing to a gradual "dumbing down" of society?

Lian said the quality of content on the Internet was only judged by the person watching it.

"It does not have to be in perfect English or even professionally produced. As long as it's interesting and the message gets across, it's fine.

"Human beings relate to things like these. Ten years ago, reality shows were a big hit. Now, it's this," he said, stressing that people were constantly consuming content across all levels.

"Someone might share a silly picture on the Internet, but he might also share a *New York Times* article the next day."



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