



Crystal Abidin ON THE WORLD OF INTERNET CELEBRITY

Digital anthropologist, ethnographer and author Crystal Abidin is well-known for her research on influencers and internet celebrities, but she has no plan to become one.

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CONTRIBUTOR/SWEDEN

Crystal Abidin has been doing extensive research on influencers, internet celebrities and microcelebrities, which landed her on Forbes 30 Under 30 Asia last year and Pacific Standard 30 Top Thinkers Under 30 lists.

"It's not a nine-to-five career. It's not a career where you can walk out of your office and think this is the end of my working day," she told *The Jakarta Post* at her office at Jönköping University in Sweden, where she is undertaking several research projects.

Later this month, she is leaving for Australia and kicks off two projects: Decoding the Weaponizing of Pop Culture on WhatsApp in Singapore and Malaysia (funded by Facebook Integrity Research Awards) and Social Media Influencers as Conduits of Knowledge in Australia and Asia (funded by the Australian Research Council).

She already listed her projects on *Wishcryst.com* — one of her 12 blogs — which include the schedules of her talks in Singapore, Australia and Italy, among others.

Her extensive academic work includes three books — *Internet Celebrity*, *Microcelebrity around the Globe* and *Instagram* — as well as more than 30 articles consisting of case studies from China, Denmark, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Norway, Singapore, South Korea, Sweden and Thailand.

Growing up in Singapore in the late 1980s — an era when the internet was just being rolled out globally — she came across girls her age, or even younger, harnessing the internet to sell second-hand clothes to earn money.

Crystal said the Outfit of the Day girls, as they were known, became minor celebrities and monetized their statuses.

"At the same time, advertisers went to these blog shop owners, blog shop models and bloggers to advertise on their sites [...]" added the senior research fellow and DE-CRA fellow in internet studies at Curtin University in Western Australia.

For her PhD thesis, *Please Subscribe! Influencers, Social Media, and the Commodification of Everyday Life*, she investigated how influencers posted their personal lives and lifestyles in digital and physical spaces to be relatable, accumulate followers and become commodifiable canvases for advertisers.

"I focused on vernacular internet cultures and studied

young people's relationships with internet celebrity, self-curation and vulnerability, and developed several key ideas and concepts pertaining to self-presentation on the internet," explained Crystal, who had several casual jobs in various industries to support herself through grad school, with the most interesting being her role as a 24/7 library officer.

Her studies presented empirical evidence that influencers — mostly women — came from diverse backgrounds.

In Sweden, she saw how mommy bloggers started to shape culture with a lot of their content focusing on family life, while in the United States, young women live-streamed on web cams from their bedrooms.

Thai girls made a lot of effort to be pretty, become viral and then get ranked as the top 10 prettiest girls in the country. Their next step was to get noticed by cosmetic companies or magazines to model for them.

In China, influencers started out on online forums where people gathered and conducted virtual discussions.

Crystal noted that being witty was one of the key aspects to stand out from the crowd. Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia also experienced the blog shop phenomenon that triggered the influencer industry in the mid-2000s.

"In Asia, you will see a lot more of these influencers playing with contagious ideas and playing with the ideas of shame, as well being more willing to trigger a scandal or some controversy to start a discussion [...] There are some push-and-pull in these spectrums, which is full of freedom and constrictions, and it is very easy to shock people or to gain attention on this scale," she says.

Crystal mentioned Japan and China to illustrate her point. According to her, in these countries where the way you presented yourself was a pivotal idea, some people abandoned these criteria to get attention, increase their popularity and monetize their viewership.

For instance, instead of showcasing their beauty at the beginning of a video, they reversed the process by removing their makeup, eye lashes, fake noses and scotch tape.

Over the past two years, Crystal has tracked influencers who are able to disseminate their messages — which can be political ideology, environmental issues, feminism and human rights — further.

"In their minds, they have to rationalize and create an image of what an influencer in this category should look like in order for them to get their message across. So, it is still a commodification in some way," said Crystal.

But the internet is not her only passion. Before academia, Crystal said in her blog that she used to be a percussionist for several orchestras.

"I play the marimba and glockenspiel at home, and am secretly working on how to sneak in the vibraphone," she says. "Deep inside, I still believe that one day in the future I will return to my first love and grow old playing percussion with other silver-haired people. After all, who doesn't want to grow old in style?"

— PHOTOS COURTESY OF CRYSTAL ABDIN



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