

JUGGLING BOOKS AND BUSINESS

With greater access to entrepreneurship programmes, as early as secondary school, it is no wonder that many Gen Zers – those born after 1995 – are keen to explore starting their own businesses. **Isabel Kua** reports



Cakes, cupcakes and cream puffs from communication studies student

Undergraduate Nur Irsyad Abu Bakar has been selling baked goods online since he was 17.

"I like to bake and wanted to bake for people," says the communication studies student at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), who is now 22.

He makes \$800 to \$1,000 a month from his home-baking business, The Mixing Bowl (@themixingbowl-official), which sells items such as cakes, cupcakes and cream puffs.

Like Mr Irsyad, many Gen Zers – those born after 1995 – are showing off their entrepreneurial chops.

A Gallup Student Poll done in the

United States last year found that 40 per cent of students surveyed from grades five to 12 said they wanted to run their own business and 24 per cent said they have already started.

Professor Foo Maw Der and Associate Professor Marilyn Ang Uy from NTU's Nanyang Business School tell *The Sunday Times* they believe the number of Gen-Z entrepreneurs here has grown in the past few years.

While most run small businesses, there are also the likes of 19-year-old Harsh Dalal, chief executive of software development company Team Labs.

Besides running the US\$25 million (\$33 million) tech company with 120 employees globally, the permanent resident is also a student at Singapore Polytechnic.

A contributing factor to the rise of Gen-Z entrepreneurship, the two experts say, is that students now enjoy greater access to entrepreneurship programmes, which are offered not just in tertiary institutions but also secondary schools.

Gen-Z youth are more likely to start businesses than earlier generations, Prof Foo notes. "In earlier generations, entrepreneurship was seen as too risky and not an ideal

career option."

With the digital age, it is also easier to start a business these days.

Gen-Z entrepreneurs are "more likely to use online platforms as the main way to sell their products and services", Prof Foo says.

"Gen Z grew up with the Internet... They are able to navigate the e-commerce world as it is part of their DNA."

Technology, he adds, has also made it easier for these young entrepreneurs "to source for suppliers and build relationships with their clients". They also "understand what is on trend".

Some common businesses started by Gen Zers include those selling handmade jewellery, skin-care and healthy beverages.

Mr Irsyad has also noticed more people his age starting their own businesses. Five of his friends did so last year.

He says: "We are not so afraid of the risks involved in starting a business. Plus, I think we are always looking for ways to turn our hobbies into something profitable."

Here are four other Gen Zers who have taken the leap into entrepreneurship.

Baking enthusiast Nur Irsyad Abu Bakar (above) churns out his creations at home.

ST PHOTO:
LIM YAOHUI

Making and selling jewellery for charity

When Covid-19 spread among migrant workers last year, Ms Sidney Chong organised a donation drive on Instagram to get her followers to give to Healthserve, a non-profit organisation for these workers.

Inspired by Ms Chong's efforts, Ms Gheslynn Gerard and Mr Bryan Ho, her schoolmates from Victoria Junior College, joined in.

In a day, the trio, all aged 20, raised \$550.

The encouraging response spurred them to take their efforts further, says Ms Chong, a computer science student at National University of Singapore (NUS).

The three friends started non-profit jewellery business nbwu (an abbreviation of "and be with you") during the circuit breaker.

Profits are donated to organisations such as the National Council of Social Service and Migrant Workers' Centre.

Even though they had no experience making jewellery, they decided to do it using resin as the material is simple to work with and affordable.

Ms Chong is in charge of finance and the IT aspects of the business; Mr Ho, who is doing his national service, focuses on public relations; and Ms Gerard, a medical student at NUS' Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, designs and makes the jewellery.

"It was a week-long process of trial and error before we success-

fully made our first piece," recalls Ms Gerard.

Their first batch of jewellery in July last year – which consisted of 15 pairs of earrings – sold out on Instagram in an hour.

"The response took us by surprise. We were so touched by the support," says Ms Gerard.

The business has since gained more than 600 Instagram followers, released nine batches of jewellery – comprising four to 15 pieces each – and raised \$40 to \$190 for charity a batch.

Two other people – Ms Natalia Tan and Ms Vivian Chon, both 20 – have joined the team to help with marketing and making the jewellery.

They were recruited through the NUS Social Impact Catalyst club, a youth organisation focused on social entrepreneurship and innovation.

The team regularly posts infographics on nbwu's Instagram page (@nbwu.sg) to raise awareness of social issues such as the living conditions of migrant workers.

"We hope nbwu will not just be a business, but also a means through which people can be informed more about the causes they can support," says Ms Gerard.

Mr Ho says: "Though we started with no experience and expertise, that did not deter us from wanting to make a change. At nbwu, we believe even a small spark can cause a great fire."



Founders of nbwu – (above from left) Ms Sidney Chong, Ms Gheslynn Gerard and Mr Bryan Ho – with their handmade jewellery they sell to raise funds for charity organisations. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

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MS GHESLYNN GERARD on the non-profit jewellery business nbwu (an abbreviation of "and be with you") she co-founded with Ms Sidney Chong and Mr Bryan Ho



Polytechnic student Charlotte Chan (above) started her thrift clothes label, Charmai, as a passion project. ST PHOTO: JOEL CHAN

Sew fun to merge the old and new

Thrifting started out as a cheap and novel way of shopping for clothes for Ms Charlotte Chan.

In 2019, the first-year design student at Nanyang Polytechnic discovered local thrift shops on Instagram. These shops, typically run by young people, have been sprouting up on the social media platform in recent years.

"Getting my hands on pieces I really like is like finding a needle in a haystack," the 17-year-old says.

She so enjoyed the experience that she decided to set up her own thrift shop on Instagram.

In November 2019, after her O levels, she launched Charmai (@charmai.thrifts) – the name is coined from her own name and the Chinese word for sell ("mai").

She started by sourcing from thrift shops at Lucky Plaza.

Her first batch of clothing, which consisted of second-hand pieces from thrift shops and closets at

home, was mostly purchased by her friends. "I didn't have high expectations to begin with," says Ms Chan, who made it a point to release new batches every week or two.

Her efforts paid off when her Instagram followers doubled from 500 to more than 1,000 by February last year. That figure has since ballooned to more than 3,000.

Ms Chan attributes the jump also to "better marketing", including posting nicer photos of the clothes, whose styles she describes as homely, warm and floral.

"I started Charmai as a passion project so I was pleasantly surprised by the support," says Ms Chan, who now earns up to \$350 a month.

When schoolwork caught up with her in the first two semesters of polytechnic, Ms Chan, who started her last semester of her first year this month, did not have time for the business. She went back to it only during the school holidays.

She has since got her friend Natalie Yong, 19, also a polytechnic student, on board and they added 12 thrifted pieces two weeks ago.

"I hope we can spend more time on the business this semester," says Ms Chan, who picked up sewing skills last year.

She has reworked some thrifted pieces, such as sewing on materials from other clothes or adding elastic bands to create ruffles.

"I find it gives a new charm to the used clothes and helps update the styles," she says. "The final product is a combination of old and new."

Her advice to fellow Gen Zers who are thinking of starting a business? "Go for it. At our age, we don't have much to lose and, even if the business does not go as planned, we can learn so much from the process."

But she cautions: "Don't dive into it blindly. Observe and learn from others in the industry first."

Doodling passion leads to vinyl stickers and more

As a child, Ms Sarah Goh loved doodling – first on notebooks, then on her schoolwork – as it helped her relax.

In 2017, she started following international artists like Perth-based Claudia Lam on Instagram and spent her free time visiting art markets here such as Public Garden.

Seeing the handmade products by independent artists and small businesses piqued her interest in turning her passion into something more.

So, in December 2019, she started Avocagoh, an on-line store selling vinyl stickers that feature her illustrations. The shop's name is a combination of avocado, Ms Goh's favourite fruit, and her surname.

Today, Avocagoh's Instagram page (@avocagoh) has more than 17,000 followers. Ms Goh has since expanded her merchandise line-up to include art prints, acrylic keychains and, most recently, canvas tote bags.

"I didn't expect the business to reach the point that it has," says the psychology student at Nanyang Technological University. "Initially, I was rather discouraged as most of Avocagoh's Instagram followers were my friends and family members."

Sales picked up when she sold stickers in January last year to raise funds for Wires, a wildlife rescue organisation in Australia that was involved in rescue-and-care efforts during the 2019-2020 Australian bushfire crisis. Ms Goh gained about 500 followers that month. She makes a small profit every month, but declines to reveal figures.

It is tough juggling school and the business, she admits. "Sometimes, I get too caught up with my school assignments or am too tired and need to rest, which means I'm unable to do any illustrations."

What keeps her going is support and encouragement from her loved ones and customers. "My friends and family members help out occasionally – be it with packaging or manning my pop-up booths," says Ms Goh, who peddled her goods at two creative markets last year. "Some customers left notes of encouragement after they made purchases. Just knowing there are people who love my work spurs me on to continue doing what I love."



Avocagoh founder Sarah Goh (above) has expanded her merchandise line-up to include art prints, acrylic keychains and tote bags. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

Tattoo artist for shoes

Ryan Tham has always thought about becoming an entrepreneur.

He tried his hand at offering spray-painting services, but it did not work out.

But his latest business foray has spawned encouraging results.

In May last year, the 21-year-old, who is doing his national service, started Ryeone Studios (@ryeones; Ryeone is a pun on his name) to provide custom shoe-painting services.

Consider him a tattoo artist for shoes, he says.

"My clients usually have an idea of what designs they would like. We would then come up with a mock-up to ensure we are on the same page," he says.

He stumbled on the custom shoe craze in January last year when he came across videos.

For the next two months, he was hooked.

"I watched countless YouTube videos, read articles and practised on my own shoes," recalls Mr Tham, who does not have an art background.

He has a place at the National University of Singapore's architecture course, but intends to reapply for its industrial design course.

To diversify his portfolio and get more practice, Mr Tham initially



National serviceman Ryan Tham watched YouTube videos, read articles and practised on his own shoes before offering his custom shoe-painting services. ST PHOTO: ARIFFIN JAMAR

Painted his friends' shoes for free.

Today, he gets about 15 orders and earns around \$1,500 or more a month.

Social networking platform TikTok has helped him gain traction outside of Singapore – he receives four to five overseas

orders every month.

Some videos of him customising shoes have hit tens of thousands of views. His most-viewed video has garnered one million views.

He also markets his services on Instagram and online marketplace Carousell, where he posts

pictures of his work.

Running a business comes with sacrifices, says Mr Tham, who is also a member of the Singapore Men's National Floorball Team.

"Painting a pair of shoes takes 10 to 12 hours. Sometimes, I have to forgo sleep or meet-ups with

friends to get work done."

But it is all worth it, he adds. "It makes me really happy to be able to make people's dream shoes a reality. I hope I can do this for as long as possible."

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