

## When is the bus coming? Ask Bus Uncle lah

**SINGAPORE** – Part snarky, part witty, he provides you with the latest bus arrival timings, complete with Singlish zingers cheeky enough to put a smile on your face.

Your bus arrives in 15 minutes? That's enough time to "lim kopi", he deadpans, using the Singlish term for "drink coffee". If your bus is arriving

soon, he tells you, almost ominously: "It's now or never."

A real person? No, this is Bus Uncle, a chatbot on Facebook created by 24-year-old Abhilash Murthy which provides commuters with bus arrival timings.

Bus Uncle has spread like wildfire, with more than 16,000 users liking

the chatbot's page since it went live on Oct 20. During peak hours, it receives 40 to 50 requests per minute. Many have praised its humour and ease of use. Facebook user Gherry Harahap wrote: "Best thing ever since sliced Kaya toast bread and soft-boiled eggs."

On its popularity, Mr Murthy, a software engineer at a tech startup,



Mr Murthy said Bus Uncle was his first foray into chatbots and hopes it will show Singaporeans that there are bots that can work for them.

PHOTO: ALFRED CHUA

said: "I have made a few apps like these only for friends to play around with. This, for some reason, was shared very quickly. It is very unexpected."

He told TODAY the idea was conceived in the middle of last month, while he was, well, waiting for a bus — service No 65 to be exact.

"I had a few bus arrival timing applications on my phone, and while they do give me the correct timing ... I had to scroll through a list ... of information that I might not need," he said.

Then the idea struck him to create something that gives commuters "exactly the information (they) want".

The alumnus of Singapore Management University, who had experience building apps and websites, said this was his first foray into chatbots.

The basic working prototype took him two days. It took him another four days to add functionality — searching for a bus stop by text, for example, instead of just bus stop numbers. Bus arrival timings are drawn from data from the Land Transport Authority.

Then, he wanted to give it "some personality". The India-born Singapore permanent resident said: "I was immediately reminded of all the times I took buses, and the bus drivers would be very kiasu, and sometimes grumpy. That's the perfect personality for Bus Uncle ... something that a lot of Singaporeans can relate to."

So he turned to his Singaporean girlfriend, Ms Chan Yin Yin, for the Singlish zingers, and another friend gave it the final design touch.

The popularity of the chatbot has led to multiple server crashes, sometimes "a couple of times a day". To that end, Mr Murthy is working to "fix the infrastructure", for which he is now paying "a little premium" for better and more stable servers and security.

Due to the runaway success of his chatbot, Mr Murthy revealed that "a few companies in the transportation sector" have approached him on the possibility of collaborations. "My primary goal was to open the eyes of a lot of Singaporeans to show that ... there are also bots that can work for you."

Calling chatbots the "new frontier in technology", he said: "I hope ... to be able to see a movie or food recommendation bot in the future."

ALFRED CHUA



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