

Publication: TODAY Online

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In a sea of hot takes across the world wide web, what was it exactly about travel vlogger Nina Gerhards' that quickly became the talk of the town? A TODAY journalist puts forth this theory: It's because when it comes to opinions about Singapore, we all care very much, whether we care to admit it or not.

When are Singaporeans at their most patriotic?

No, not on the 9th of August. It's anytime a non-Singaporean has the gall to make a bad comment about our country.

Recently, a travel vlogger named Nina Gerhards posted an Instagram reel lamenting that our precious clean, green city-state was boring, and that she would never travel here again.

Ms Gerhards' video clocked in at barely three seconds in length, and she didn't speak a word in it. Instead, she offered only a caption of slightly under 100 words (and eight #hashtags) as elaboration, before inviting her fellow netizens to join her in the comments for a good-natured discussion:

"What do you think about Singapore?"

Boy, did we take her up on that offer.

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'BORING' IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER?

In a matter of days, the video racked up more than two million views and hundreds of comments — the most 'liked' of which was a cordial smattering of unpublishable expletives, coupled with a polite suggestion that she shouldn't have come in the first place.

Clearly, our collective buttons had been pushed.

Many Singaporeans leapt to defend our Little Red Dot with long, elaborate essays on the country's merits (i.e., we're safe and it's easy to get around), and recommendations on where she could go to turn her unfavourable opinion on its head (i.e., anywhere but the well-trodden tourist spots).

Some in the same camp voiced their displeasure with far less tact and far fewer words. With Singapore being an island almost 500 times smaller than our immediate neighbours, they derided, was she expecting mountains, rivers, and sprawling wildlife amidst vast green plains?

On the flip side, there was a substantial number of people who agreed with the vlogger.

Singapore is boring, they declared. Singapore is expensive. Singapore is a lifeless concrete jungle.

It's a country not too dissimilar to the image of a rich man's soulless playground depicted in Hollywood flicks like *Crazy Rich Asians*, they said — that's why so many of us eagerly await the holidays and our own travel adventures to escape the mundanity of a society that prioritises work over fun.

While I understood both points of view, I couldn't help but wonder why this seemingly innocuous post managed to spark such heavy and heated reactions.

As far as I can tell, Ms Gerhards wasn't being nasty or disrespectful, nor was she deliberately trying to incite a riot (although whether the post was designed as clickbait is another matter).

She merely cited an opinion — and we see far more controversial and arguably crappy ones on the Internet every day. "Singapore is boring": Haven't we heard that before?

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In response to travel vlogger Nina Gerhards' post, many Singaporeans leapt to defend our Little Red Dot with long, elaborate essays on the country's merits. On the flip side, many chimed in to agree with her that Singapore is indeed "boring" and "expensive".

Perhaps the most grievous accusation the vlogger made that both camps wouldn't have been happy with was that our food "wasn't even delicious".

But even then, going off her social media pages, Ms Gerhards is German. Someone born and raised on the other side of the globe having a different cuisine preference is hardly a cardinal sin.

So, in a sea of hot takes across the world wide web, what was it exactly about this one that quickly became the talk of the town?

THE BEST DEFENCE ISN'T ALWAYS A GOOD OFFENCE

I think the answer has been staring us straight in the face: It's because when it comes to opinions about Singapore, we all care very much, whether we care to admit it or not.

Whether you think "Singapore's great" or you're firmly on team "Singapore sucks", we inherently and instinctively know more about our country than a visitor on a three-day visa does.

The post going viral in and of itself isn't necessarily a bad thing. The fact that so many of us jumped so heartily into the fray — either to highlight our strengths or to point out our weaknesses — just means we're passionate.

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What I do find problematic is lack of civility in the town square of public reactions.

When we resort to pointed personal attacks, does that not only serve to drive home the message that we are not a welcoming bunch?

What does it say about us when our hostility — not always so thinly veiled — results in her feeling a need to turn off her comments section?

I get it: When you put any hint of an opinion out on the Internet, you should expect to get flamed, cancelled, and everything in between. If you can't take it, don't dish it out.

But when it comes to a post talking explicitly about Singapore and its merits and demerits, do we really want to perpetuate a culture of reactionary resentment?

The urge to rush to defend that which we love is only human nature. But in an era where opinions on social media sprout up more frequently and randomly than pimples on teenagers, perhaps it's wise to leave some be, rather than poke at every single one.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Renald Loh is a journalist at TODAY who previously worked in the education industry and graduated with a degree in social science from Singapore Management University.