

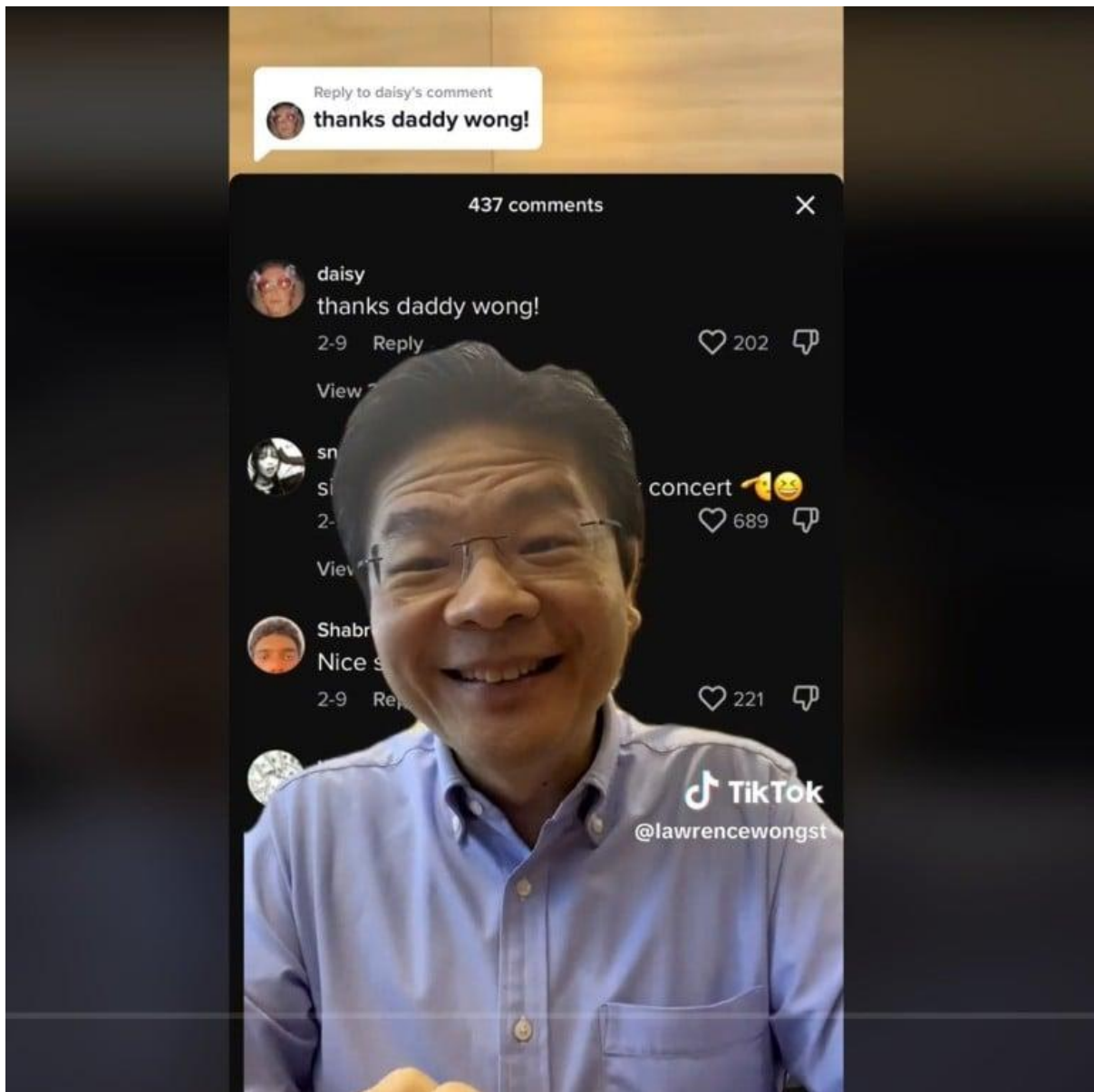
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Headline: Singapore's first social media PM: can Lawrence Wong win Gen Z votes or will he become 'just a meme'?

Singapore's first social media PM: can Lawrence Wong win Gen Z votes or will he become 'just a meme'?

- Wong has transformed his social media presence in recent years to appeal more to youth, as attested by his TikTok base of 120,000 followers
- If he hopes to win over the Gen Z segment in the next general election, he needs to rule on social media, according to analysts



Lawrence Wong's first foray into TikTok in June 2020 was a 51-second video of him in a white collared shirt wishing netizens a happy Mid-Autumn Festival, with barely legible font and no pop track in the background.

For most Gen Zs, the clip broke multiple rules of social media. No music? Meh. No fun stuff or funny emojis? Double meh. Dragging on for almost a whole minute? Triple meh. The numbers showed their indifference, with only over 600 likes and eight comments.

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But attribute that to a rookie mistake. Since then, Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Wong's TikToks have almost completely transformed – with sleek transitions and beat-heavy pop songs, most of which run no longer than 30 seconds. He has close to 120,000 followers and is averaging thousands of likes per TikTok clip.

If Wong hopes to win over youth in the coming general election, which could happen as early as this year, he needs to rule on social media, according to analysts.

Who is Singapore's Lawrence Wong? From political underdog to next PM

The 51-year-old will not only be the first prime minister of Singapore born in the post-independence period, but also one whose political ascendancy has relied on and will continue to depend heavily on the wild world of social media.

The ruling People's Action Party (PAP) knows this and has spent the last two decades trying to conquer the various platforms. The government regularly makes major announcements over social media alongside mainstream channels.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, 72, for example, announced on Monday his decision to hand over the reins to Wong on May 15 through a statement on social media.

"For any country, a leadership transition is a significant moment. Lawrence and the 4G [Fourth Generation] team have worked hard to gain the people's trust, notably during the pandemic," Lee wrote in a Facebook post, urging Singaporeans to give Wong and his team their full support.

"When I was invited to enter politics in 2011, I agreed because I wanted to contribute to the Singapore story. I did not expect then to be asked to serve as the next Prime Minister of Singapore," he said. "I accept this responsibility with humility, and a deep sense of duty."

Such an approach has become the norm for political officeholders in Singapore.

In April 2022, when Lee announced that Wong was selected as the leader of the 4G team and was his anointed successor, the former made a post across his social media pages.

Wong had followed up quickly, posting a snippet of the press conference, where he talked about his plans for the team. "Where we fall short, we will strive to learn and improve and keep on doing better. So this is what Singaporeans can expect from me and my team," he said in the 44-second clip.

The video may not have fared as well as some others of him strumming his guitar or riding his motorcycle for charity, but overall, social media experts say that political officeholders must quickly master the rules of the game, or risk being labelled "cringe" by young voters heading to the polls.

The government has also grown to become among the biggest advertisers in the country. Its advertising spending totalled between S\$150 million (US\$110 million) and S\$175 million in the 2019 financial year (FY), according to estimates by the Ministry of Communications and Information. The amount rose by between 30 per cent and 50 per cent in FY2020 and FY2021 due to Covid-related announcements.

Lawrence Wong to become Singapore PM on May 15

Tracy Loh, senior lecturer of communication management at the Singapore Management University, said while traditional media remained an important platform for politicians, social media was necessary to "complement" their communications strategy.

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She noted that Wong's digital persona was very indicative of the type of leader he appeared to aspire to be – more approachable and relatable. "He's showing what he likes, and I think that resonates with a lot of people – when we see him as an animal-lover or through his music.

"Some people may vote on policy issues, but not everyone votes that way. Some vote based on personality, and [DPM] Lawrence Wong is one of the PAP candidates who is very active online."



Singapore Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance Lawrence Wong shakes hands with Apple CEO Tim Cook in Singapore on April 19. Photo: AP

In a similar vein, Joel Lim, managing director of digital media firm Zyrup Media, said Wong's social media projected an image of "relatability, authenticity, and accessibility", using a mix of "conversational content, trend videos and bite-sized informational videos".

"He has seen success with these different 'genres' of videos, showing that the social media space is welcoming of the diverse range of content types he employs," Lim added.

These fun videos of Wong getting quizzed on Gen Z slang or bowling could make all the difference among some first-time voters, Loh said, especially those still on the fence.

These young voters make up a sizeable slice of the electorate. The last 2020 general election happened when Singapore was at its "youth peak", with those aged 25 and 35 reportedly taking up a significant portion of its population pyramid.

Shanmugam rebuts 'sneering' Economist article on Singapore's political succession

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Voters in their 20s and 30s made up about a third of eligible voters, while first-time voters aged between 21 and 24 comprised around 10 per cent, according to a 2020 Institute of Policy Studies Commons commentary on the last pandemic-time general election.

Loh estimated that 30 per cent of the electorate were swing voters, and expected both sides of Singapore's political divide to fight hard to win them over.

But going up against the PAP's most formidable political rival, the Workers' Party (WP), would be no easy feat, she said, noting the WP had jumped onto the social media bandwagon as early as the 2015 general election.

"In 2015, what the WP did was very impressive, with a very personable introduction to their candidates. This was the same for the 2020 general election, and I think we're going to see it again in the next election. Social media is going to be playing a much larger part."

Lim, who is also host of Political Prude: The Podcast, is hopeful that this tilt towards social media could mark the start of a premiership that is more "transparent, interactive and perhaps more responsive to public sentiments".



Singapore Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Lawrence Wong taking a selfie. Photo: Facebook/ Lawrence Wong

"I do think that his premiership may see a shift towards more direct and personalised communication with the public on social media, which is actually an extension and continuation of how he is already utilising social media to communicate on his work as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance," he said.

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"This could potentially make his premiership one that is more transparent, interactive, and perhaps also more responsive to public sentiments."

Wong had been faring well so far, said Loh, but winning internet-savvy Gen Z netizens and keeping them would not be easy. Moods can change swiftly online, and opinions can be fickle.

"I think he has struck the right tone, without it being overly cringy – that's something politicians on social media have to be mindful of. It can easily go into cringy and off-putting, then you become a meme instead."