

<Spreading the Digital Love/>

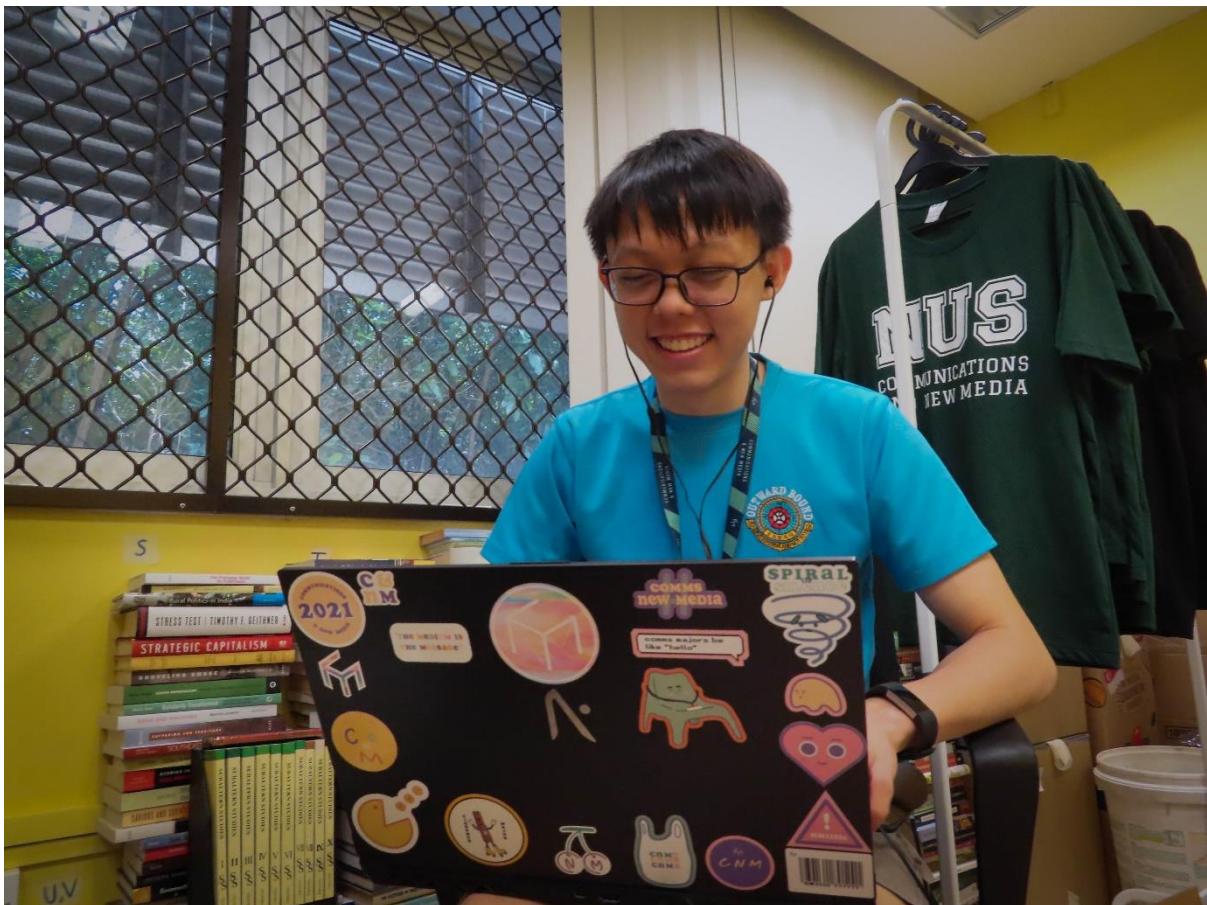
While most schools in Singapore have shifted to home-based learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, those without access to the internet have been left behind. **Zhan Hong** speaks to a group of NUS students who have devoted themselves to helping these students.

HALFWAY through his first semester in NUS, Yong Jia Yu's laptop broke down. He was close to following suit — not having a proper computer amidst an online curriculum would be a death sentence for any student.

Yong, now 22 and in his second year, recalls the frustration he had felt trying to stay afloat in school with a laptop that could barely last two hours at a time.

This led him to think of the many others who shared his plight, not to mention those without computers in the first place.

The necessity of computers in daily life has been further emphasised by the Covid-19 pandemic, which saw many operations going online, including primary to tertiary education.



Yong Jia Yu, like many other students, has had a majority of his school life brought online due to the pandemic. His laptop has become an absolutely indispensable possession.

PHOTOS: CHOONG ZHAN HONG

“Usually, your idea of a school computer is just a thing to run programmes, used only once in a while,” he said. “What happens when it becomes your whole learning experience?”

Aiming to make a difference, Yong and a few other students from the Communications and New Media (CNM) department started CNM Cares in late 2020.

Bridging the Digital Divide

CNM Cares is an initiative intended to equip disadvantaged students with the skills to survive in an increasingly digitalized Singapore.

They had just concluded their first digital literacy mentorship programme in August this year.

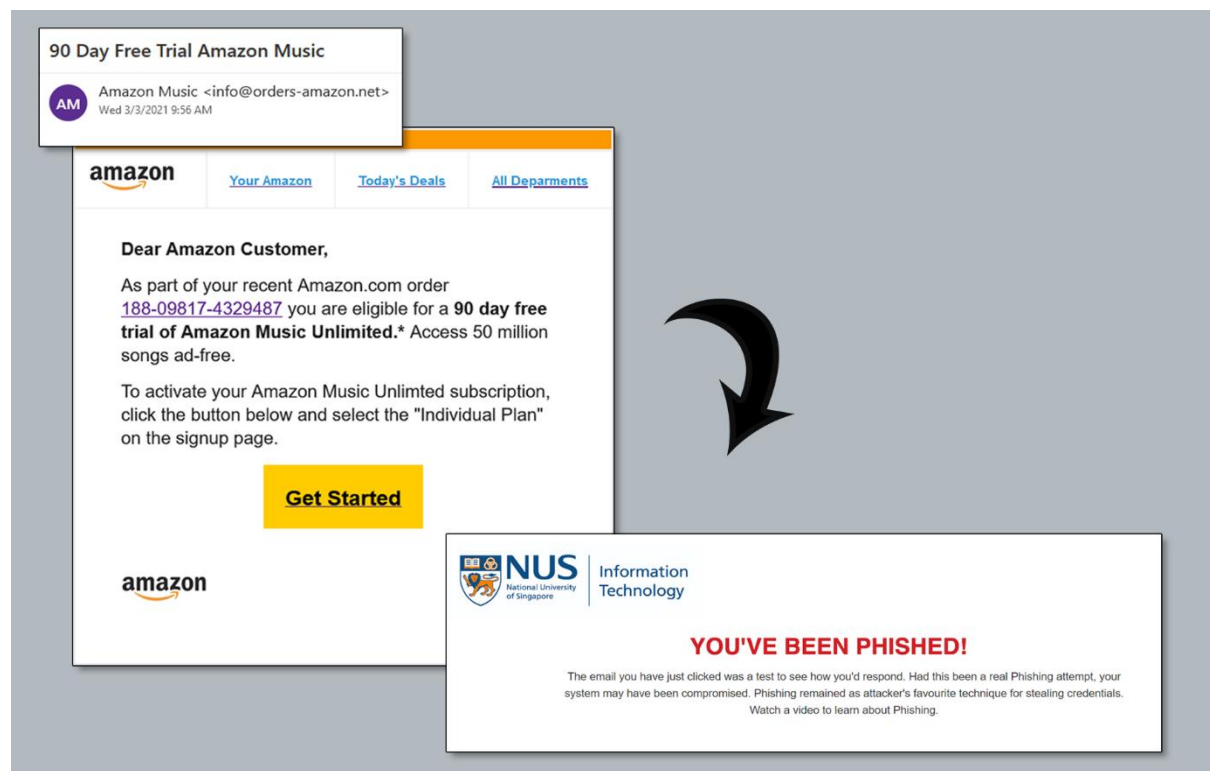
It was attended by secondary school and ITE students from Muhammadiyah Welfare Home, a residential shelter for 10 to 18-year-old boys.

The programme spanned four sessions that were held on Zoom twice a month. Each session introduced the students to issues ranging from privacy to cyber wellness.

The first two sessions of the programme taught the importance of securing their digital footprint and protecting their personal information on social media.

The next two focused on digital well-being, highlighting ways to identify scams and phishing attacks. The students were also taught positive behaviours to prevent cyberbullying.

These sessions were facilitated by interactive activities, including a “Guess the Scammer” game in order to familiarize the students with indicators of suspicious activity.



NUS Information Technology periodically sends e-mails that employ typical phishing techniques, fooling students and even staff, which stresses the importance of constant vigilance.

Besides learning about digital literacy, the students also engaged in fun activities, like making digital presentations about themselves and their interests.

Yong was pleased to see their identities shining through as they bonded over a common love for sports, while being introduced to software commonly used in schools and workplaces.

Change of Direction

CNM Cares first began with a donation drive for used laptops and desktops, to be distributed to disadvantaged students.

They had received computer donations from students and faculty, along with an overwhelming number of students who volunteered to repair them.

However, they soon shifted their focus away from providing material supplies as it was unsustainable, and distracting from their main goal of improving digital literacy.

In the end, they decided that imparting soft skills would better suit their capabilities.



Yong, with a box used to store laptops that have since been donated. CNM Cares had its humble beginnings in a tiny storeroom in the CNM office.

After the success of their first programme, CNM Cares has plans to continue hosting similar workshops, said Carmen Ng, a second-year CNM student.

The 20-year-old is due to take over Yong's position and will continue to lead the initiative.

They plan to partner with other volunteering organizations, such as Paya Lebar Youth Network, and Teach Singapore, another initiative spearheaded by the Office of Student Affairs.

Teach Singapore provides NUS student groups training and funding to pursue community outreach projects that involve educating and mentoring disadvantaged youths.

Seeing as computers have become an integral part of daily life, Ng is eager to further contribute to disadvantaged students in Singapore, continuing what Yong has started.

Looking back at the past year, Yong attributes the initiation of CNM Cares to his faulty laptop. "You never know what you have until you lose it," he said.