

Profile Assignment: Irene Kim

By: Rachel Lin

For the third time today, Irene Kim goes to her building's mailroom. She gives a guilty but warm smile to the lady working the counter, who Kim knows by name now, and she retrieves yet another mountain of packages.

The weight and movements of the cardboard boxes build up her anticipation, but Kim first turns on her fluorescent desk lamp, clears her background, and then sets up her phone camera at a diagonal. She presses record.

“Hello, hello! Today we are trying snacks from around the world,” Kim enthusiastically announces to the camera, opening the first package to reveal a colorful assortment of chips and candies in all different languages. Exotic Snacks Company, Insomnia Cookies, and Chamberlain Coffee are just some brands that send Kim packages to review on her TikTok of 400,000 followers.

Irene Kim is a 21-year-old student who went viral on the popular platform TikTok after posting a collection of food reviews, eat-with-me's, taste tests, and other food content under the username @ireneykim during the middle of last year.

Growing up Asian American and as the daughter of sushi restaurant owners gave Kim the necessary communication skills and natural inspiration to launch her career in social media

content creation. The influencer started from being behind the cash register, taking meal orders as an eight-year-old, to behind a camera confidently expressing herself to thousands of viewers on TikTok. Such humbling experiences as a restaurant kid shaped Kim's mission to bring a trend of authenticity and empathy to digital platforms. The videos she makes are raw, real, and far from rudimentary. Collaborating with inclusive brands while fulfilling her adventurous zest for new things, Kim lets her rich upbringing lead how she portrays herself online.

“I can say that I became of foodie because of my parent's restaurant. I was so exposed to such good food. My parents would always cook good food because, obviously, that's their profession,” Kim said. “It has helped, as I'm growing up now, in making content. I can say that this product is good, and then I want to share it with the world.”

Tucked in the suburbs of Las Vegas, Sushi & Joy opened 20 years ago by Kim's immigrant parents. The takeout store soon became their only child's versatile playground as a kid. Proud of her unique upbringing and that her parents owned a restaurant, Kim did not always feel this way. Kim shook her head at herself as she thought back to when she was insecure that her family didn't have 9-5 jobs like her classmates' parents. Her struggle to fit in as an Asian American within the undiversified outskirts of town and her unconventional home life would significantly play into her character development.

“Growing up in a restaurant definitely made me have a really big imagination,” Kim recollected about the moments in her childhood when her parents were always working. “They would buy

me some toys, and I had to just sit in the back [of the restaurant] and use my imagination to play with them alone. That led to my creativity and who I am today.”

Kim moves with a comfortable grace and delicacy, accompanied by her perky posture. Her long, jet-black hair contrasts with her cream sweater and snow-white skin, exhibiting her ability to pull off an elegant but youthful style. On the inner corners of her almond eyes, her artistically applied glitter makeup shines and catches the attention of others. Talking using her hands and lively gestures, Kim is bubbly by default and has a consistently cheerful tone—the essential qualities of an internet personality.

Along with millions of others during the middle of the pandemic, Kim found herself extremely bored and scrolling through the addictive content of TikTok. She resorted to trying new things and posted various videos on the app. Unexpectedly, one particular video went viral and jumpstarted Kim’s journey.

“It was a video of me saying that my parents were sushi chefs,” Kim said. “I said that we had sushi night every week at my house—come eat with me.” Eventually, people started liking her food content and commenting for her to try more products. Her sushi video now amounts to approximately 500,000 likes and views.

The influencer entered and succeeded in the foodie community quickly because of her eager openness to newness and the continued mantra that she adopted as someone who ate diverse foods from a young age: “I won’t say I don’t like something if I don’t try it.”

Kim's pure intention of making videos for fun and entertainment turned out for the better when companies started sending her snacks from all over the world, including Morocco, Argentina, and Egypt. It wasn't until her friend told her that she should charge for her videos before she realized her worth and began utilizing her account to form a budding career.

She explains how she gets paid from \$100 to \$1,500 per video. Though there is a monetary award placed on her content, Kim doesn't let that sole incentive drive her to do what she does.

"In my head, I don't think of it like, 'Oh, all of these people watch me.' Instead, I think, 'Oh, I'm doing this for fun,' and I hope at most my mom and friends are going to watch this," Kim said.

Kim has a laidback mindset that doesn't fit the usual views and likes-obsessed influencer archetype.

"Gen Z began to usher in a brand behavior change, as the cohort values truth and authenticity," according to a study by Maryville University in 2019. "The COVID-19 pandemic ramped up the demand for authenticity, leading brands to fully realize the importance of doing good, not just increasing profits."

After spending years of her life in customer service at the restaurant, Kim says she applies the valuable lessons she's learned to navigate the TikTok space.

“You have to have a certain personality to do well. You have to be genuine and your authentic self for people to like you. Kim said. “Because I worked in the restaurant industry, I learned how you should treat a human being. Now, I’m not going to be fake offline or online.”

With first-hand experience, the TikTok star is well versed in dealing with the frequent bullying and hate that she receives on her account. “There is a lot of toxicity on TikTok. People are commenting on how you eat, what you eat, or what you look like. Some people will go as far as finding your socials and sending you a long paragraph about why they don’t like you,” Kim said. It takes a toll on her, but she has dealt with it throughout her life before. “Sometimes I have to be the bigger person. It’s a lot about constraint and reserving yourself.”

Despite the negative aspects of having a digital presence, Kim finds belonging within a network of content creators like her. Natalie Ludwig, or @eatsbynat on TikTok, is one of the several online friends that Kim made after having entered the industry.

“The food TikTok community is incredible. As fellow foodies, we love to support one another in any way we can, and it’s amazing to see how strong of friendships you can create with others even though you are across the country from each other.” Ludwig said. “I’m incredibly thankful to have Irene in my life, and if it wasn’t for TikTok, it’s possible we would’ve never met.”

Being surrounded by optimism and an uplifting support system made up of her online and offline friends and family translates directly into Kim’s lively tone on her TikTok. “My parents were always super supportive. They weren’t like the stereotypical Asian parents because they

encouraged my passions and believed that I could make something of it.” Kim said. “I think because of our family’s different background, they always cultivated a positive environment for me.”

But this distinctive upbringing revealed a special bond that Kim developed with others. When she came to college, she miraculously found her strongest friendships to be also with the children of restaurant owners. “We just instantly connected personality-wise, and that was before we both knew that we had Asian restaurant backgrounds,” Sarah Sun, one of Kim’s roommates, said. “It’s crazy how we were drawn to each other. It’s comforting to know that we shared similar experiences, and it shows through how we both turned out.”

After almost a year on TikTok, Kim has produced over 200 videos and doesn’t plan to give it up. Though she has dreams of pursuing PR for a beauty & fashion company in a big city, she believes that her identity as an unfiltered content creator is a part of her.

“There are times where you just feel so discouraged. I get into my head and think that people in my real life are judging me because I talk to my phone, basically.” Kim said. But the influencer’s life-changing background has taught her otherwise— whether it is virtually or in real life, act through authenticity and sincerity.

Podcast Trailer Script:

What does it take to be Tik Tok famous? How does a video go viral? Who has that star quality fit for internet fame? I'm sure we have all wondered about this or shot their shot at this career, but what you don't know is the real journey and shaping of a successful influencer.

This is Rachel Lin with the COM201 Profiles Podcast and this week, you're going to hear the story and growth of an up-and-coming TikTok influencer, that you might have even caught on *your* For You Page before. Irene Kim is deemed as a "FoodToker" and has an accumulative 11.7 million likes on TikTok. Amazing right?

Her secret lies in her background as the daughter of Asian restaurant owners. Kim gives us an insider of how growing up around food and service framed her authentic internet personality and inspired her content. Take a behind-the-scenes look into the radiant world of Irene Kim as she tells us about how she conducts TikTok brand deals, social media haters, and more thoughts on the digital environment.

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