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# Attachment to Home Country and Country Competitiveness- Exploring Some Possible Factors for Brain Drain in the Contexts of Singapore and Hong Kong

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**Abstract**

Building on the 'push/pull' model by Lewin (1951), as well as the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), this exploratory study examines the importance of attachment to home country, or attachment to home domicile in the case of places that are not sovereign nations, as a determinant of people's inclination to stay or leave their home country. The primacy of the home country as a home, and people's attachment to it, has been largely ignored by the literature on talent retention and talent flow. Instead, research has largely considered push factors as negative, and emanating from the home country itself. However, there is a need to reconceptualize the push/pull model as it pertains to cross border movements of talent, acknowledge the complexity of motivations behind push factors, and, concerning pull factors, recognize that these can be *positive* as they pertain to the home country. We thus contribute to this lacuna in the research on brain drain by borrowing from the rich literature in attachment research. By arguing that these attachments are systematically linked to individuals' psychological functioning, and hence attitudes toward staying/leaving, we provide an important perspective on the possible relational, epistemic and existential motives for people's intentions to stay/leave the home country for work.

Keywords: Brain Drain; Global mobility; Attachment to home country; Push/Pull model; Talent Retention.

'Brain drain' as a phenomenon has been widely documented by the literature (Baruch, Budhwar, & Khatri, 2007; Mahroum, 2000; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Historically, one of the main reasons for highly skilled migration was political conflict that forced the cross-border movement of professionals (Iredale, 2001). However, due to criticisms that researchers had overly dwelt upon the effects of macro-level structures on individual action (Nystrom & McArthur, 1989; Carr, Inkson & Thorn, 2005), in recent years, research has more specifically focused on a suite of reasons for the psychology of migration, including the economic, cultural,

family, and career forces motivating this (Carr et al., 2005). Concurrently, some researchers note that the term 'brain drain' might be too all-encompassing, and that the term 'talent flow' might be a fairer representation of the phenomenon of people movement across borders (Baruch et al., 2007; Carr et al., 2005), and, on the *flip side*, that 'talent retention' should be examined from a multifaceted perspective as to why people stay within their home country.

Despite this recognition, the literature to-date shows that, with regard to the issue of talent retention, underlying socio-psychological mechanisms for why people stay within their home country [1] have not been adequately studied. For example, most studies (e.g., Baldridge, Eddleston, & Veiga, 2006; Van der Velde, Jansen, Bal, & Van Erp, 2017) in organizational psychology and international human resource management have focused on an individual's demographic and personal attributes, such as a spouse's contribution to family income, presence of pre-school-aged children at home, perceived strength of a spouse's and children's community ties, gender, career and partner role salience, as well as family and organizational support, as determinants for willingness to stay or relocate. In recent times, studies (e.g., de Eccher & Duarte, 2018) have also explored country image, language proficiency, perceived level of safety and cultural attraction of the host country, and the influence of these on an individual's willingness to accept overseas assignments. Nevertheless, these factors are

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[1] Or home domicile, for places that are not sovereign nations such as Hong Kong.

external to the self and may not provide a complete picture of the individual's internal socio-

psychological processes that may predict their intentions and actions (to stay or leave their

home country).

Building on the 'push/pull' model by Lewin, 1951 (refer also to Baruch, 1995), as well as

the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), this exploratory study examines the importance

of *attachment to home country*, or attachment to home domicile[2] in the case of places that are

not sovereign nations, as a determinant of people's inclination to stay or leave their home

country. In this case, the theory of planned behavior predicts that the actual action of individuals

to stay or leave their home country will be positively related to their inclination to do so, which,

in turn, would be affected by their attitudes, which, we argue, include their attachment to home

country. To our knowledge, the *primacy* of the home country as a home, and people's

*attachment to it*, has been largely ignored by the literature on talent retention and talent flow.

Instead, research has largely considered push factors as negative, and emanating from the home

country itself (Ho, Seet & Jones, 2016; Toren, 1976). For example, in the literature, push forces

tend to be premised on dissatisfaction with career and life in the home country, and these in

turn are engendered by individual hardships and poor job conditions (Froese, 2012; Suutari &

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[2] The original scale was named "attachment to home country", but it can also be used, with some adaptations, for places such as Hong Kong, which are not sovereign nations in their own right. "Attachment to home country" or "Attachment to home domicile" refers to the attachment for places that people treat as their home, or that they live in and have substantial connection with.

Brewster, 2000). On the other hand, pull factors are predominantly associated with the destination country, and are overwhelmingly conceptualized as positive (Ho et al., 2016; Toren, 1976). However, there is a need to reconceptualize the push/pull model as it pertains to cross border movements of talent, acknowledge the complexity of motivations behind push factors, and, concerning pull factors, recognize that these *can be* positive as they pertain to the home country. We thus contribute to research by examining important attitudes toward home country, as well as the variegated, affective responses that individuals may have toward this, so as to illumine the role of attachment to home country in determining mobility intentions.

In order to address the complexity, and ambiguity behind people's often-complicated attitude toward their home country, we begin with reference to cultural attachment theory, since, similar to children forming emotional bonds to their care-takers, people do attach themselves to their home country. Cultural attachment theory postulates that the adaptive solution of acculturation is analogous to infants' attachment to their caregivers, and that forming secure attachment to people in one's environment enables one to function adaptively therein (c.f. also Bowlby's attachment theory- Bowlby, 1969; 1973; 1980; 1982). Forming a secure attachment to these can help individuals cope with anxiety and stress, and gain a sense of safe haven (Hong, 2017; Yap, Christopoulos, & Hong, 2017). Overall, cultural groups can serve as attachment bases, and they are a particular case of social group that is able to provide

emotional support and protection to individuals comparable to the support and protection given by childhood attachment figures (Hong, 2017). In the same way, *home country attachment* may bear similar patterns to the attachment to a significant other, or to a cultural group. Again, similar to attachment figures and cultural groups, the home country may also be viewed as accepting or rejecting the self (Hong, 2017; Komissarouk, Hong, Higgins, 2017).

Based on prior research (Komissarouk et al., 2017), four different dimensions of home country attachment have been identified: 1) secure attachment, which occurs when people feel they can rely on their home country to attend to their needs for emotional support and protection; 2) fearful attachment, which is associated with negative self-representation (c.f Mikulincer, Gillath & Shaver, 2002), and also refers to the tendency to be afraid that the home country would not attend to one's needs; 3) dismissive attachment, which occurs when people prefer to avoid their own country and exhibit little desire for closeness and dependence on it; and 4) preoccupied attachment, which occurs when people are anxious about abandonment by their home country (Komissarouk et al., 2017). These four attachment styles have been shown to be predictive of how adults react in stressful situations to strangers-both from their own country and from other countries. Prior studies using national samples from the USA, Israel, Korea, Ukraine and Russia have shown that individuals' secure attachment style led to more trustful cooperation with strangers from *their own* as well as other countries, whereas

individuals' dismissive, anxious and fearful styles consistently predicted mistrust and lack of cooperation (Komissarouk et al., 2017).

We therefore predict that a secure attachment toward home country would predict greater intention to stay in that country, since having a secure attachment means being comfortable with being dependent upon, and close to, one's home country. Conversely, since dismissive attachment is the attachment style most closely associated with avoidance of home country, we predict that a dismissive attachment would predict greater intention to leave that country. We test these hypotheses in two different contexts- i.e., Singapore and Hong Kong, amongst university students, who are often depicted in the literature as a major source of brain drain (Baruch et al., 2007; Mok & Han, 2016; Tansel & Güngör, 2002). Findings supported our hypotheses. We found that Secure and Dismissive attachment affected the propensity to stay (to work) in Singapore, and we replicated this result in Hong Kong in the aftermath of the 2019 social unrest. With the Hong Kong dataset, we further demonstrated that the results held even after controlling for political orientation, and we also showed that confidence in the future of Hong Kong, which is a psychological response to anticipated changes in its social-political system (Ho, Chau, & Chiu, 2013), was an important predictor of attachment style. Other than showing consistent replication effects, the Hong Kong dataset was useful in that it revealed that, even in a place undergoing uncertain political transition and political instability, and

regardless of political orientation, secure or dismissive attachment predicted "stay" or "leave" intention. Therefore, one implication for policy makers would be that, increasing confidence in the future of a country would help with increasing secure attachment toward it, and thus help prevent outflow of talent.

This study, while conducted at the individual level, obviously has implications for the national level. In terms of contribution, we go some way toward explaining *attitudes* (toward leaving one's home country for work), which make up an important component in the decision-making matrix of planned behavior (Azjen, 1991; Ho et al., 2016). Current research lacks nuance where it concerns attitude toward one's home country, which may be complicated, ambivalent and abstract. Additionally, there is a lacuna concerning socio-psychological explanations for why individuals decide to stay or relocate overseas for work, and to-date many factors underlying the psychology of migration have been undiscussed and undiscovered (Baldrige et al., 2006; Tharenou, & Seet, 2014).    At the same time, with our more robust test of our basic model in the Hong Kong context, this exploratory study holds the promise that such attachment style could possibly be malleable. For example, research on native or host cultural group (such as that by Hong, Fang, Yang & Phua, 2013) has previously postulated, but not tested, the possibility that potential agents which could render attachment style malleable include changes in one's socio-ecological environment (for e.g., nurturing or losing social

relationships, or interaction with government policies), or even the acquisition of domain-specific skills (for e.g., language skills) which could modulate the formation of a secure foundation with respect to the other culture/host cultural group. With regard to home country, it could be that similar agents could render attachment malleable. In this paper, we have *specifically explored* whether confidence in the future of a place is mediated by attachment style, and find that this holds for secure and dismissive attachment. Therefore, our study holds promise in that attachment to home country, being fluid, may be alterable, and this knowledge will help policy makers who wish to retain talent. Overall, by contrasting the case of Hong Kong with Singapore's, our study explores how confidence in the future of the home domicile could predict attachment style, and that if confidence can be increased this should concurrently increase secure attachment, decrease dismissive attachment, and hence leaving intentions. We hope that this study will encourage more detailed research into the socio-psychological drivers of staying or leaving abroad for work; and also, increase appetite for research that conceptualizes the psychology of migration as more dynamic, and attitudes toward staying/leaving as more malleable, than hitherto believed.

Theoretical Background

Factors affecting brain drain

The 'push–pull' model was developed by Lewin (1951), and it depicts an analysis based

on Lewin's (1951) field theory, in which people experience contradictory forces in making the decision of whether or not to move to a different country (Baruch, 1995; Baruch et al., 2007). A great deal of research has used it to account for cross border movements (Baruch, 1995; Ho et al., 2016), for example, for students' global movements (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Baruch et al., 2007). A host of factors at the individual, organizational, and national levels can explain the nature and direction of the forces, and numerous factors, including economic, social, or legal, amongst others, tend to influence an individual's decision to relocate abroad (Baruch, 1995; Baruch et al., 2007). Some factors pull individuals back, whilst others push individuals toward a move (Baruch et al., 2007). Oftentimes, when decisions about expatriation are concerned, usually it is individual choice that influences the final decision, and in recent decades self-directed expatriation is becoming increasingly common (Baruch et al., 2007; refer also to Richardson & Mallon, 2005; Suutari & Brewster, 2000).

In the main, the literature has shown that push forces are premised on dissatisfaction with life and/or career in the home country (Ho et al., 2016). Conversely, research depicts pull forces as emanating from the host country, and are based on the positive benefits that individuals expect to gain if they live in the host country (Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010). Examples of pull factors include greater learning potential through enriched work, improved career advancement and higher income, amongst others (Dickmann, Doherty, Mills, & Brewster, 2008; Froese,

2012). Economic pull factors appear to be especially important for individuals who self-initiate their move abroad (Jackson et al., 2005), and Pinto et al (2012) found that pull factors were mainly career-related and reflected positive motives such as wanting to take on a challenge or better career prospects.   However, comparing expatriate assignment (which is company mediated) versus overseas experience, Inkson, Arthur, Pringle and Barry (1997) distinguish between the two, arguing that many individuals, especially young people, opt for overseas experience for a variety of reasons as diffuse as wanting to "see the world," "try something different," or "find" oneself (p. 352). Overall, however, given that research tends to regard many young people's cross-border movements as a *personal odyssey* (Inkson et al., 1997), it is strange that little research has examined non career-influenced reasons for their "staying". In fact, there exists a deficit of research on the positive factors that motivate these individuals to stay in their home country. Instead, the literature has tended to treat home country push factors as negative, and all related to either professional or personal dissatisfaction, such as individual hardships, poor job conditions, economic recessions and distancing from personal problems (Ho et al., 2016; see also Froese, 2012; Suutari & Brewster, 2000). Doherty (2013), in her review article, also indicated that, with regard to relocation, individuals exhibit a complex nature of mobility motivations and behaviors, and that the complex decision-making processes involved with staying or leaving one's home country have not been adequately captured by

extant research (refer also to Tung & Lazarova, 2006). Most likely, this is because the bulk of studies on expatriation have been conducted on assigned expatriates, so these may emphasize career-related influences to the exclusion of other push–pull factors (Ho et al., 2016). To our knowledge, in the literature on international human resource management nothing has been said on the *emotional bond* that individuals have with their home countries with regard to predicting their staying or leaving intention. We argue that one important challenge for talent retention research is to develop a model to understand individuals' home country emotional experiences. It is with this in mind that we propose a new theoretical construct- attachment to home country- to elaborate on the role of the emotional bond that people form with this.

We note that this would help fill a knowledge gap in existing research on brain drain by borrowing from the rich literature in attachment research. By arguing that these attachments are systematically linked to individuals' psychological functioning, and hence attitudes toward staying/leaving, we provide an important perspective on the possible relational, epistemic and existential motives for people's intentions in this regard. Attachment to home country can be said to be linked to relational, epistemic, as well as existential motives. For example, relational motives stem from the fact that people are social animals, and thus belonging and connecting to a social group is important. On the other hand, epistemic motives refer to the desire to form a thorough understanding and knowledge of situations, especially under uncertainty. The

culture of a country provides shared values, beliefs, and norms, which will aid individuals'

sense-making. Finally, existential motives are linked to the understanding that no human being

can escape his or her inevitable death (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986). To shield

from this fact, the culture of a country, because of its linkage from the past to the future,

provides individuals with symbolic existence beyond death. Therefore, we stress that

attachment to home country may, in part, fulfil important relational, epistemic, and existential

needs that relate to individuals' attitudes toward staying/leaving.

<u>The theory of planned behavior</u>

In terms of siting our model in established theory, we utilise the theory of planned

behavior, or TPB (Ajzen, 1991) to explain intention to stay or leave the home country. As

mentioned, underpinning this conceptual model is 'push/pull' theory, which underscores the

complex, contradictory forces people experience (Lewin, 1951; Baruch, 1995; Baruch et al.,

2007) when they confront the decision of whether or not to stay or leave their home domicile.

According to the TPB, intentions represent a person's motivation in terms of her or his

conscious plan to exert effort to enact the behavior (Conner & Armitage, 1998). In addition,

attitudes toward a specific behavior exert their impact on behavior via intentions (Conner &

Armitage, 1998). In this case, we elaborate on the 'attitudes' component of the decision-making

matrix of planned behavior, by focusing on individuals' attachment toward home country to

explain their 'stay' or 'leave' decisions. With respect to the issue of migration, in particular, van Dalen and Henkens (2008) also found that intentions are good predictors of future emigration, i.e., in their study, 24 percent of those with a stated intention to emigrate actually emigrated within two years. Taken together, the research suggests that intention is an extremely powerful predictor of behavior.

Hypotheses Development

We focus on the *emotional challenge that individuals face* upon confronting the decision to relocate or stay. We argue that, attendant to this decision, individuals will face a complex mixture of emotions, such as fear (of exclusion and rejection), anxiety (related to acceptance), anger (also in response to rejection and/or discrimination from the home/host country), and comfort (feeling "at home") (c.f also Hong et al., 2013). The theory of attachment to home country can be applied here in order to better understand the complex admixture of emotions individuals experience when they confront the decision to stay or leave.

Attachment to home country explicates the variance in the quality of relations with the home country, and it elaborates on the emotional bond that people form with this. It is based on attachment theory, as proposed by John Bowlby (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1982), a theory which was applied to understand the role of relationships in human development from the cradle to the grave. Attachment theory focuses on differentiating secure versus insecure attachment

styles of individuals to their significant others (e.g., Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980, 1982; Collins & Read, 1990; Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). Extrapolating from attachment theory, research has found that social groups can also serve as attachment bases such that the groups can provide emotional support and protection to individuals, comparable to the support and protection from adult attachment figures (Hong, Roisman, & Chen, 2006; Hong et al., 2013). Socio-psychological research has found that social groups consisting of others who share common experience and fate can provide emotional support to buffer anxiety and fear (Hong et al. 2013; Smith, Murphy, and Coats, 1999). For example, social groups can provide individuals with emotional support and protection against contextual adversity. As a case in point, Friborg, Sørlie & Hansen (2017) found that indigenous Norwegians' strong ethnic group identity helped buffer against the harmful effects of discrimination by others. Research in cultural attachment theory has also focused on attachment to cultural groups as a particular case of attachment to social groups, and how common culture provides individuals with a base for validating their existential values and meanings (Hong et al., 2013; Pyszezynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004). Researchers argue that such social groups are often demarcated by racial and ethnic categorizations, as well as *national boundaries*, and arguably that these groups still provide symbolic support and tangible protection, for example, during domestic upheavals such as war (Hong et al., 2013). More broadly speaking, however,

attachment to home country involves attachment to any/all of the "components" of a country.

Defining a "country" is a difficult task for many scholars. Nevertheless, a typically accepted definition of a country is a common community of individuals, a shared set of institutions, land/place, and finally, culture, which is defined as the "collective programming of the human mind" that distinguishes the members of the group from those of another (Hofstede, 1984: 389). Therefore, an individual's attachment to a country would be the attachment to any/all of its components so that he/she can function adaptively therein, drawing from these components a sense of comfort and safe haven (Mikulincer, Hirschberger, Nachmias, & Gillath, 2001).

According to the theory, therefore, secure attachment style is characterized by ease in forming and maintaining a close relationship with the home country without worrying about being abandoned by it. On the other hand, people who rate high in fearful attachment have a negative self-concept, are afraid of rejection, and are worried that their home country would not attend to their needs (Komissarouk et al., 2017). They therefore rate high in avoidance and high in terms of anxiety. Conversely, preoccupied attachment is an attachment style characterized by anxiety about abandonment by home country. It rates high in anxiety but low on avoidance (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991; Fraley, Fazzari, Bonanno & Dekel, 2006). Finally, dismissive attachment is characterized by *avoidance* of the home country. Analogous to the concept of attachment to significant others, a dismissive attachment indicates a desire to

avoid closeness and dependence upon the home country, and this desire stems from consistent rejections of attempts at closeness (Smith, Murphy, & Coats, 1999). In other words, people rating high in dismissive attachment may view themselves as being autonomous (Smith et al., 1999) from the home country; such people rate high in avoidance and low in terms of anxiety.

Therefore, based on the foregoing, since the dismissive attachment shows the strongest type of avoidance attachment, we hypothesize that individuals with greater dismissive attachment toward home country would have greater intention to *leave*. Conversely, since individuals with greater secure attachment feel that they can rely on their home country, and are comfortable with being dependent upon, and close to this, they are more likely to wish to *stay*.

Accordingly:

H1 Secure attachment to home country predicts greater intention to stay in the home country.

H2 Dismissive attachment to home country predicts greater intention to leave the home country.

We make no predictions regarding fearful attachment and preoccupied attachment. Although fearful attachment also rates high in terms of avoidance, because of its high anxiety content it may not necessarily lead to leaving intentions. According to Smith et al's (1999) study on attachment, people who are especially anxious about being accepted by their groups

rate particularly low in terms of their own perceived worthiness as group members. Therefore, people who score high in fearful attachment may feel inferior and have such a negative view of self that they may think that they cannot contribute wherever they go (whether it is to their home country or to somewhere else). As such, it is not clear, despite their avoidance tendencies, that they would be inclined to leave. On the other hand, although people rating high in preoccupied attachment rate high in anxiety but low in avoidance, it is also not clear whether they would be more inclined to stay or leave. Although they rate lower in avoidance, which might indicate greater propensity to stay, their high anxiety might cause them to be indecisive, and so the eventual impact on their propensity to stay is not clear. However, although we make no predictions regarding fearful and preoccupied attachment, in this study we will still assess these, and explore how they are related to staying versus leaving intentions.

**Political Context – Singapore versus Hong Kong**

We tested H1 and H2 in both Singapore and Hong Kong. These places provided a contrast in contexts. Singapore's socio-political system is remarkably stable; the ruling People's Action Party enjoys a high level of confidence amongst its people (Mathews, Teo, Tay, & Wang, 2021; Aravindan & Geddie, 2020) and has been in power since Independence, currently holding the world-record for the longest, uninterrupted rule amongst multi-party parliamentary democracies of the world (Aravindan & Geddie, 2020; Oliver & Ostwald, 2018). Conversely,

Hong Kong's socio-political system has, of late, undergone much upheaval. Scholars posit that for Hong Kong, there are tensions between maintaining Hong Kong's unique political culture versus this being assimilated into that of mainland China's (Overholt, 2019, Ho et al., 2003). Although both the Hong Kong SAR and mainland China share some elements of the same political culture in the sense that they come from the same Confucian heritage (Ho, 1994), because of their radically different historical experiences, they have significant divergences in their respective political cultures regarding the role of government, freedom of the press, and legal institutions (Ho et al., 2003; Lam & Lee, 1993). Therefore, any suggestions of assimilating Hong Kong's political culture into that of mainland China's tend to trigger direct antagonistic clashes between the two traditions (Ho et al., 2003; Overholt, 2019), and the protests of 2019-2020 in response to the proposed extradition law are exemplar of this.

We therefore also posit that confidence in the future of a place, which is defined as the *psychological response to anticipated changes* in its social-political system (Ho et al., 2003), may also *affect* attachment toward it. At the same time, other than confidence in the future of a place, we recognize that political orientation may also contribute to whether people wish to stay or leave, and so to control for this factor, we included participants' political orientation as a covariate. This is because the political orientation of individuals affects their "perceptual filtering", in that individuals perceive and justify the instrumental merits of *any* issue based on

their values (England, 1967), and they will be more likely to take positions (on these issues) that are consistent with their ideological identification (Sniderman et al., 1991). We note that political orientation would be particularly salient during the aftermath of the Hong Kong 2019-2020 protests. This is because, in the Hong Kong context, political orientation is conceptualized in terms of "yellow" or "blue", where 'yellow' refers to being pro-democracy, pro-autonomy/independence, whilst 'blue' refers to being pro-establishment, pro-government, and pro-Beijing (Hartley & Jarvis, 2015; Liu, 2015; Zhang & Gu, 2022). Therefore, based on the foregoing discussion, confidence and political orientation would be the more context-appropriate factors to assess for Hong Kong. Hence, we collected data on these from Hong Kong tertiary students in the immediate aftermath of the political changes of 2019-2020, and for this sample, we controlled for political orientation. If, after accounting for political orientation, increased confidence in the future of Hong Kong still leads to individuals having a more secure attachment toward home country and hence decreased intention to leave, then we will have provided a more stringent test of our hypothesis that style of attachment to home country *matters* in terms of predicting stay/leave intentions.

At the same time, for the Hong Kong case, we predicted that attachment style mediates confidence in the future of a place, specifically, for secure and dismissive attachment, since these are opposites in terms of avoidance cognitions. Increased confidence is accounted for

by secure attachment, whilst decreased confidence is accounted for by dismissive attachment.

This is because secure attachment to the home domicile signals strong attachment to it, and gives individuals a durable sense of stability and security for trusting interactions with this. Conversely, dismissive attachment denotes unwillingness to depend upon the home domicile, which may be the mechanism to explain why lowered confidence leads to leaving intentions.

Our predictions are also consistent with other research, for example, in Ho et al's (2003) study of the effects of the 1997 transfer of Hong Kong from Britain to China, the authors found that confidence in the future of Hong Kong predicted two divergent responses— either emigration abroad (for people with decreased confidence), or people (with increased confidence) doubling down and staying on because they believed in a bright future for Hong Kong.

Accordingly, we postulate that:

H3 Increased confidence in the future of a place will lead to increased intention to stay in a place, and this is mediated by secure attachment.

H4 Decreased confidence in the future of a place will lead to increased intention to leave, and this is mediated by dismissive attachment.

**Study 1**

**Method**

*Participants & Procedures*

Participants were year 2 or above students from a University in Singapore. Data collection was completed in June 2019. Only students who indicated Singapore as the place they identified as their home country were included in this study. 1153 students participated. Participants completed an online survey that included scales on their attachment to Singapore, their propensity to leave Singapore to work overseas, and their personality traits such as Openness to experience, cultural adaptability, and other scales that are not related to this study. Participants were paid SGD10 each for their participation. Each page of the survey contained one scale. The order of the scales was fixed, but the items in each scale were randomized. At the end of the survey participants provided their demographic information. Three attention check questions were included in the survey. Those who failed two or more attention check questions were excluded from the study, resulting in a final sample of 796 students.

*Measures*

**Attachment to Singapore.** Participants completed the Attachment to Home Country Scale (Komissarouk et. al., 2017). This scale includes 4 items for each attachment style, resulting in a total of 16 items. Each item is a statement about participants' feelings towards their home country. A sample item for each attachment style is: "My Home Country provides support for my family and me" (secure), "I feel my problems and me are too small, too insignificant, for my Home Country" (fearful), "I despise people who criticize their Home

Country" (preoccupied), and "I see myself as more cosmopolitan than as a patriot" (dismissive).

Participants rated each item from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Their degree of

each attachment style was measured by the average of the four items for that attachment style

($\alpha$ ranged from .693 to .933).

**Propensity to work overseas.** Participants answered 12 career choice questions in which

they needed to decide between two jobs of the same desirability and pay, but one that required

them to work overseas (Job A), and another that required them to work in Singapore (Job B).

Participants indicated their career choice from 1 (*Certainly Choose Job A [go overseas]*) to 6

(*Certainly choose Job B [stay in Singapore]*) for each overseas location. Their propensity to

work overseas was measured by the reverse of the mean of the 12 items ($\alpha$ = .937). The 12

overseas locations included Mainland China**,** Developed Asian countries/regions (eg. Japan,

South Korea, Taiwan)**,** Emerging Asian markets (eg. India, Malaysia, Thailand)**,** the rest of Asia

(eg. Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh)**,** Euroasian economic union (eg. Russia, Kazakhstan,

Belarus)**,** Central and Eastern European countries (eg. Poland, Slovakia, Latvia)**,** Western

European (eg. UK, France, Netherlands)**,** Nordic Countries (eg. Sweden, Norway, Denmark)**,**

Australia & New Zealand**,** North America (eg. USA, Canada)**,** Central/South America (eg.

Argentina, Brazil, Chile) and African countries (eg. South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt).

**Openness to experience.** Openness to experience ($\alpha$ = .802) was measured by the 8-item

open-mindedness subscale of the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire-Short Form (van der Zee et al., 2012). Participants rated how each item is descriptive of them from 1 (*Not apply at all*) to 6 (*Fully Apply*). A sample item is "Tries out various approaches."

**Cultural adaptability.** Cultural adaptability ($\alpha$ = .763) was measured by the 5-item cultural adaptability subscale from Burke et. al., 2006. Participants selected the option which best corresponded to their opinions, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). A sample item is "I am able to maintain focus during emergencies."

## Results

The correlation table of the measured variables is shown in Table 1. Propensity to work overseas is regressed on the 4 attachment styles ($R^2$ = .040, $F(4, 791)$ = 8.295, $p < .001$, Table 2). Secure attachment to Singapore negatively predicted propensity to work overseas ($B$ = -0.158, $p$ = .003), while dismissive attachment positively predicted propensity to work overseas ($B$ = 0.241, $p < .001$). However, fearful and preoccupied attachment did not significantly predict propensity to work overseas. The results hold even after controlling for openness to experience and cultural adaptability ($R^2$ = .063, $F(4, 791)$ = 8.811, $p < .001$). Openness to experience itself positively predicted propensity to work overseas ($B$ = 0.183, $p$ = .016), and so did cultural adaptability ($B$ = 0.162, $p$ = .038).

**Study 2**

**Method**

*Participants & Procedure*

Two hundred and forty-three University students in Hong Kong were recruited to complete an online survey. Data collection was completed in May 2021. The survey included scales measuring participants' propensity to leave Hong Kong, attachment to Hong Kong, political orientation, confidence towards Hong Kong's future, Big Five personality traits, cultural flexibility, collective narcissism, and other scales that are not related to this study. Each page of the survey contained one scale. The order of the scales was fixed, but the items in each scale were randomized. Participants provided their demographic information at the end of the survey. Each participant was compensated with HKD40 (~USD 8) after completing the survey.

Three attention check questions were included in the survey. Those who failed at least two attention check questions, and those who have lived in Hong Kong for less than 7 years were excluded from the study, leaving 169 participants in the final dataset. We chose participants living in Hong Kong for at least 7 years as an inclusion criterion because they are eligible for permanent residence according to the laws of Hong Kong.

*Measures*

**Propensity to leave Hong Kong.** We measured propensity to leave Hong Kong for foreign countries as well as propensity to leave Hong Kong for Mainland China. Each was

measured by a single item: "To what extent do you hope to move to (a foreign country/Mainland China) in the next few years?" Options were ranged from 1 (*very unwilling*) to 5 (*very willing*).

**Attachment to Hong Kong.** The 4 attachment styles were measured by the Attachment to Home Country Scale (Komissarouk et. al., 2017) used in study 1, except that "my home country" was replaced by "Hong Kong" for each item. Each attachment style was measured by 4 items ($\alpha$ ranged from .640 to .918).

**Political orientation.** Participants' political orientation ("yellow" or "blue") was measured by 2 items. Participants rated how supportive they were of "yellow/blue" from 1 (*strongly do not support*) to 7 (*strongly support*) based on their personal definition of "yellow" or "blue."

**Confidence towards Hong Kong's future.** Three items adopted from the "We Hongkongers" Research Report (Hong Kong Public Opinion Program, 2021) were used to measure participants' confidence in Hong Kong. Participants rated their confidence in various aspects of Hong Kong's future from 1 (*very unconfident*) to 5 (*very confident*). A sample item is "How confident are you in Hong Kong's political environment in future?" The mean of the items was used in the data analysis ($\alpha$ =.909).

**Big Five personality traits.** Participants' personality traits were measured with the 20-

item B5 Mini-IPIP (Goldberg, 1999). Four items were used to measure each dimension of the Big Five personality traits ($\alpha$ ranged from .546 to .769) Participants rated how accurately each item described them, from 1 (*very inaccurate*) to 5 (*very accurate*).

**Cultural flexibility.** Cultural flexibility ($\alpha$ =.752) was measured by 6 items adopted from Shaffer et. al. (2006). Participants rated to the extent to which they agreed with the items, from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). A sample item is "Learning about other cultures is interesting and fun."

**Collective narcissism.** Collective narcissism ($\alpha$ = .863) was measured by 5 items adopted from Zavala et. al. (2009). Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with the items, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). A sample item is "China deserves special treatment."

*Results*

The correlations of the variables in study 2 are shown in Table 3.

Propensity to leave Hong Kong for foreign countries is regressed on the 4 attachment styles ($R^2$ = .234, $F(4, 164)$ = 12.534, $p$ < .001, Table 4). As in the case for Singapore, secure attachment to Hong Kong negatively predicted propensity to leave Hong Kong for foreign countries ($B$ = -0.463, $p$ < .001), while dismissive attachment positively predicted intention to leave ($B$ = 0.361, $p$ < .001). However, fearful and preoccupied attachment did not significantly

predict propensity to leave Hong Kong for foreign countries. The results hold even after adding in political orientation, the Big Five personality traits, cultural flexibility, as well as collective narcissism as control variables ($R^2 = .443$, $F(13, 155) = 9.468$, $p < .001$). "Yellow" orientation positively predicted propensity to leave Hong Kong for foreign countries ($B = 0.197$, $p = .003$), and so did neuroticism ($B = 0.230$, $p = .038$) as well as cultural flexibility ($B = 0.565$, $p < .001$).

Propensity to leave Hong Kong for Mainland China was also regressed on the 4 styles of attachment to Hong Kong ($R^2 = .080$, $F(4, 164) = 3.551$, $p = .008$, Table 5). Preoccupied attachment to Hong Kong positively predicted propensity to leave Hong Kong for Mainland China ($B = 0.189$, $p = .048$). After adding in political orientation, the Big Five personality variables, cultural flexibility, and collective narcissism as control variables ($R^2 = .409$, $F(13, 155) = 8.247$, $p < .001$), preoccupied attachment became an insignificant predictor. "Blue orientation" ($B = 0.142$, $p = .009$) and collective narcissism ($B = 0.490$, $p < .001$) positively predicted propensity to leave Hong Kong for Mainland China.

**Mediation analysis.** In order to test our hypothesis that the effect of confidence towards the future of Hong Kong on the propensity to leave Hong Kong for foreign countries would be mediated through the 4 attachment styles (Figure 1), we conducted mediation analyses with 1000-sample bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (Table 6). The indirect effects were significant for secure attachment ($b = -0.143$, bootstrap $SE = 0.047$, 95% CI [-0.245, -0.064]),

preoccupied attachment ($b = 0.050$, bootstrap $SE = 0.029$, 95% CI [0.006, 0.126]), and dismissive attachment ($b = -0.066$, bootstrap $SE = 0.032$, 95% CI [-0.155, -0.014]). After controlling for the effects of political orientation, Big Five personality traits, cultural flexibility, and collective narcissism on the DV (Table 7), the indirect effects of secure attachment ($b = -0.112$, bootstrap $SE = 0.048$, 95% CI [-0.218, -0.025]) and dismissive attachment held ($b = -0.056$, bootstrap $SE = 0.031$, 95% CI [-0.146, -0.012]), but the indirect effect of preoccupied attachment became insignificant ($b = 0.033$, bootstrap $SE = 0.030$, 95% CI [-0.006, 0.120]). The results supported our hypotheses that lower confidence towards future of Hong Kong can lead to lower secure attachment and higher dismissive attachment towards Hong Kong, which in turn increases propensity to leave Hong Kong.

We also tested an alternative mediation model with attachment styles as IVs, confidence towards Hong Kong's future as the mediator, and propensity to leave Hong Kong for foreign countries as the DV (Figure 2). The results were shown in Table 8. The indirect effects of secure attachment ($b = -0.162$, bootstrap $SE = 0.048$, 95% CI [-0.288, -0.089]) and dismissive attachment ($b = 0.077$, bootstrap $SE = 0.035$, 95% CI [0.022, 0.166]) were also significant. In other words, it is also possible that secure attachment increased confidence towards Hong Kong's future while dismissive attachment decreased confidence towards Hong Kong's future, and confidence in turn led to lower propensity to leave Hong Kong.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

In terms of contribution to the research on factors that affect people's inclination to stay or leave their home country, this exploratory study primarily examines the role that attachment to home country plays in this. In terms of establishing predictive validity, we have shown that both secure and dismissive attachment styles predicted the propensity to leave for both SG and HK data, Also, for the HK data we showed that the attachment to home country scale can predict propensity to leave over and above other well-established predictors, including political orientation, Big Five personality traits, cultural flexibility, and collective narcissism. This speaks for the incremental validity of the scale.

Additionally, for the HK dataset, we have demonstrated that there could be a potential brain drain problem in HK due to political instability, and furthermore, we also showed that secure attachment can reduce the propensity to leave. It seems that enhancing secure attachment could be a way to remedy the brain drain problem.

For future research, we recommend scholars conduct longitudinal studies in other cultural contexts as we cannot confirm the causal direction of the mediation model. Unfortunately, we were also not able to conduct a follow-up longitudinal study in Hong Kong because of the uncertainties of data collection owing to the political situation there. Finally, we recommend that follow-up studies manipulate attachment style by using experiments to see if leaving intentions would be reduced. These efforts would help build on the findings of this paper.

**Table 1**. Correlation table of measured variables in Study 1.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Propensity to work overseas | — | | | | | | |
| 2. Secure attachment to Singapore | -.113 ** | — | | | | | |
| 3. Fearful attachment to Singapore | .050 | -.338 *** | — | | | | |
| 4. Dismissive attachment to Singapore | .170 *** | -.118 *** | .382 *** | — | | | |
| 5. Preoccupied attachment to Singapore | -.019 | .336 *** | .078 * | .035 | — | | |
| 6. Openness to experience | .130 *** | .123 *** | -.092 ** | .041 | .075 * | — | |
| 7. Cultural adaptability | .112 *** | .176 *** | -.118 *** | .023 | .003 | .478 *** | — |

*Note.* $* p < .05$, $** p < .01$, $*** p < .001$

**Table 2**. Regression of propensity to work overseas on attachment styles in Study 1.

| Predictor | Without control variables | | | | With control variables | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **B** | **SE** | **t** | **p** | **B** | **SE** | **t** | **p** |
| Intercept | 3.158 | 0.364 | 8.686 | $< .001$ | 1.737 | 0.488 | 3.558 | $< .001$ |
| Secure attachment | -0.158 | 0.054 | -2.941 | 0.003 | -0.188 | 0.054 | -3.488 | $< .001$ |
| Fearful attachment | -0.076 | 0.052 | -1.453 | 0.147 | -0.054 | 0.052 | -1.046 | 0.296 |
| Preoccupied attachment | 0.023 | 0.048 | 0.489 | 0.625 | 0.022 | 0.047 | 0.472 | 0.637 |
| Dismissive attachment | 0.241 | 0.051 | 4.723 | $< .001$ | 0.221 | 0.051 | 4.357 | $< .001$ |
| Openness to experience | | | | | 0.183 | 0.075 | 2.422 | 0.016 |
| Cultural adaptability | | | | | 0.162 | 0.078 | 2.077 | 0.038 |

**Table 3**. Correlation table of measured variables in Study 2.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Propensity to leave for foreign countries | — | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Propensity to leave for Mainland Chain | -.157 * | — | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Secure attachment to Hong Kong | -.368 *** | .187 * | — | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Fearful attachment to Hong Kong | .020 | .043 | -.069 | — | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 5. Preoccupied attachment to Hong Kong | -.093 | .227 ** | .455 *** | .295 *** | — | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 6. Dismissive attachment to Hong Kong | .331 *** | -.148 | -.099 | .144 | -.002 | — | | | | | | | | | | |
| 7. "Yellow" orientation | .431 *** | -.405 *** | -.206 ** | -.065 | -.133 | .221 ** | — | | | | | | | | | |
| 8. "Blue" orientation | -.268 *** | .492 *** | .077 | .057 | .165 * | -.151 | -.585 *** | — | | | | | | | | |

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 9. Confidence towards Hong Kong's future | -.491*** | .442*** | .441*** | -.077 | .261*** | -.220** | -.578*** | .498*** | — | | | | | | | |
| 10. Agreeableness | .070 | -.030 | .189* | -.261*** | .028 | .105 | .119 | -.139 | -.048 | — | | | | | | |
| 11. Extraversion | .056 | -.016 | .009 | -.088 | -.009 | -.114 | .012 | .014 | -.007 | .222** | — | | | | | |
| 12. Conscientiousness | -.183* | .051 | .152* | -.078 | .107 | .133 | -.061 | .085 | .197* | .164* | .086 | — | | | | |
| 13. Neuroticism | .221* | -.176* | -.110 | .120 | .040 | .065 | .086 | -.176* | -.267*** | .087 | -.186* | -.270*** | — | | | |
| 14. Openness to experience | .075 | .009 | -.026 | -.152* | -.063 | -.009 | .019 | -.060 | .011 | .268*** | .343*** | .253*** | -.121 | — | | |
| 15. Cultural flexibility | .457*** | -.103 | -.251** | -.040 | -.081 | .265*** | .285*** | -.185* | *.325 | .166*** | .195* | .061 | -.030 | .310*** | — | |
| 16. Collective narcissism | -.383*** | .581*** | .448*** | .078 | .469*** | -.261*** | -.557*** | .550*** | .615*** | -.141 | -.016 | .093 | -.154* | -.120 | -.320*** | — |

*Note.* $* p < .05$, $** p < .01$, $*** p < .001$

**Table 4**. Regression of propensity to leave Hong Kong for foreign countries on attachment styles in Study 2.

| Predictor | Without control variables | | | | With control variables | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | B | SE | t | p | B | SE | t | p |
| Intercept | 3.479 | 0.542 | 6.417 | <.001 | 0.173 | 1.052 | 0.165 | 0.869 |
| Secure attachment to Hong Kong | -0.463 | 0.093 | -4.981 | <.001 | -0.276 | 0.092 | -2.999 | 0.003 |
| Fearful attachment to Hong Kong | -0.103 | 0.090 | -1.138 | 0.257 | -0.061 | 0.083 | -0.729 | 0.467 |
| Dismissive attachment to Hong Kong | 0.146 | 0.108 | 1.360 | 0.176 | 0.129 | 0.103 | 1.245 | 0.215 |
| Preoccupied attachment to Hong Kong | 0.361 | 0.082 | 4.393 | <.001 | 0.245 | 0.080 | 3.072 | 0.003 |
| "Yellow" orientation | | | | | 0.197 | 0.065 | 3.003 | 0.003 |
| "Blue" orientation | | | | | 0.002 | 0.065 | 0.026 | 0.979 |
| Agreeableness | | | | | -0.000 | 0.134 | -0.007 | 0.994 |
| Extraversion | | | | | 0.084 | 0.103 | 0.818 | 0.415 |
| Conscientiousness | | | | | -0.299 | 0.122 | -2.442 | 0.016 |
| Neuroticism | | | | | 0.230 | 0.110 | 2.092 | 0.038 |
| Openness to experience | | | | | 0.027 | 0.105 | 0.259 | 0.796 |
| Cultural flexibility | | | | | 0.565 | 0.144 | 3.921 | <.001 |
| Collective narcissism | | | | | -0.003 | 0.115 | -0.029 | 0.977 |

**Table 5**. Regression of propensity to leave Hong Kong for Mainland China on attachment styles in Study 2.

| Predictor | Without control variables | | | | With control variables | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **B** | **SE** | **t** | **p** | **B** | **SE** | **t** | **p** |
| Intercept | 1.275 | 0.480 | 2.658 | 0.009 | 0.874 | 0.874 | 0.131 | 0.896 |
| Secure attachment to Hong Kong | 0.087 | 0.082 | 1.064 | 0.289 | 0.076 | 0.076 | -0.643 | 0.521 |
| Fearful attachment to Hong Kong | 0.016 | 0.080 | 0.205 | 0.838 | 0.069 | 0.069 | 0.446 | 0.656 |
| Dismissive attachment to Hong Kong | 0.189 | 0.095 | 1.989 | 0.048 | 0.086 | 0.086 | -0.231 | 0.818 |
| Preoccupied attachment to Hong Kong | -0.135 | 0.073 | -1.854 | 0.065 | 0.066 | 0.066 | -0.165 | 0.869 |
| "Yellow" orientation | | | | | 0.054 | 0.054 | -0.398 | 0.691 |
| "Blue" orientation | | | | | 0.054 | 0.054 | 2.631 | 0.009 |
| Agreeableness | | | | | 0.111 | 0.111 | 1.403 | 0.162 |
| Extraversion | | | | | 0.086 | 0.086 | -1.187 | 0.237 |
| Conscientiousness | | | | | 0.102 | 0.102 | -0.871 | 0.385 |
| Neuroticism | | | | | 0.091 | 0.091 | -1.378 | 0.170 |
| Openness to experience | | | | | 0.088 | 0.088 | 0.920 | 0.359 |
| Cultural flexibility | | | | | 0.120 | 0.120 | 1.074 | 0.284 |
| Collective narcissism | | | | | 0.096 | 0.096 | 5.128 | <.001 |

**Table 6.** Effect of confidence on propensity to leave Hong Kong for foreign countries, mediated through the 4 attachment styles (Study 2).

| Attachment style | Confidence towards Hong Kong's future → Attachment style (a) | Attachment style → Propensity to leave Hong Kong for foreign countries (b) | Indirect effect (a × b) | 95% CI |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Secure | 0.473 *** | -0.301 *** | **-0.143** | **[-0.245, -0.064]** |
| Fearful | -0.080 | -0.129 | 0.010 | [-0.011, 0.061] |
| Preoccupied | 0.251 ** | 0.200 * | **0.050** | **[0.006, 0.126]** |
| Dismissive | -0.234 * | 0.284 *** | **-0.066** | **[-0.155, -0.014]** |

*Note*. The path coefficients are unstandardized betas. Significant indirect effects are in bold. CI = confidence interval.

* *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01. *** *p* < .001.

**Table 7.** Effect of confidence on propensity to leave Hong Kong for foreign countries, mediated through the 4 attachment styles, with covariates included (Study 2).

| Attachment style/ control variable | Confidence towards Hong Kong's future → Attachment style (a) | Attachment style/ control variable → Propensity to leave Hong Kong for foreign countries (b) | Indirect effect (a × b) | 95% CI |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Secure | 0.473 *** | -0.236 * | **-0.112** | **[-0.218, -0.025]** |
| Fearful | -0.080 | -0.078 | 0.006 | [-0.007, 0.059] |
| Preoccupied | 0.251 ** | 0.133 | 0.033 | [-0.006, 0.120] |
| Dismissive | -0.234 * | 0.241 ** | **-0.056** | **[-0.146, -0.012]** |
| "Yellow" orientation | | 0.161 * | | |
| "Blue" orientation | | 0.021 | | |
| Agreeableness | | -0.005 | | |
| Extraversion | | 0.074 | | |
| Conscientiousness | | -0.279 * | | |
| Neuroticism | | 0.195 | | |
| Openness to experience | | 0.042 | | |
| Cultural flexibility | | 0.529 ** | | |
| Collective narcissism | | 0.039 | | |

*Note.* The path coefficients are unstandardized betas. Significant indirect effects are in bold. CI = confidence interval.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

**Table 8.** Results of alternative mediation model in Study 2.

| Attachment style | Attachment style → Confidence towards Hong Kong's future (a) | Confidence towards Hong Kong's future → Propensity to leave Hong Kong for foreign countries (b) | Indirect effect (a × b) | 95% CI |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Secure | 0.345 *** | | **-0.162** | **[-0.288, -0.089]** |
| Fearful | -0.057 | | 0.027 | [-0.053, 0.109] |
| Preoccupied | 0.113 | -0.469 *** | -0.053 | [-0.150, 0.033] |
| Dismissive | -0.165 ** | | **0.077** | **[0.022, 0.166]** |

*Note*. The path coefficients are unstandardized betas. Significant indirect effects are in bold. CI = confidence interval.

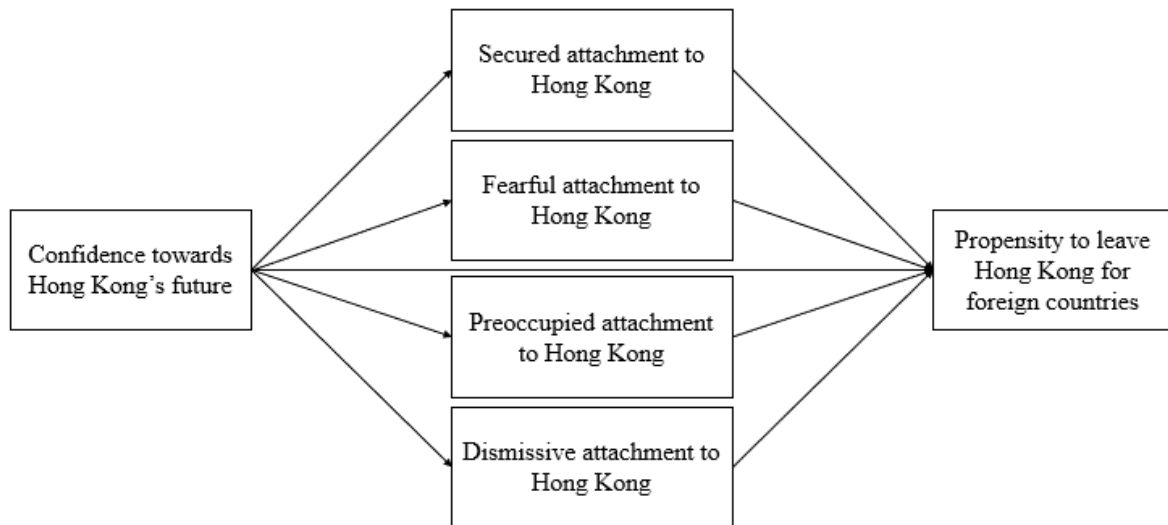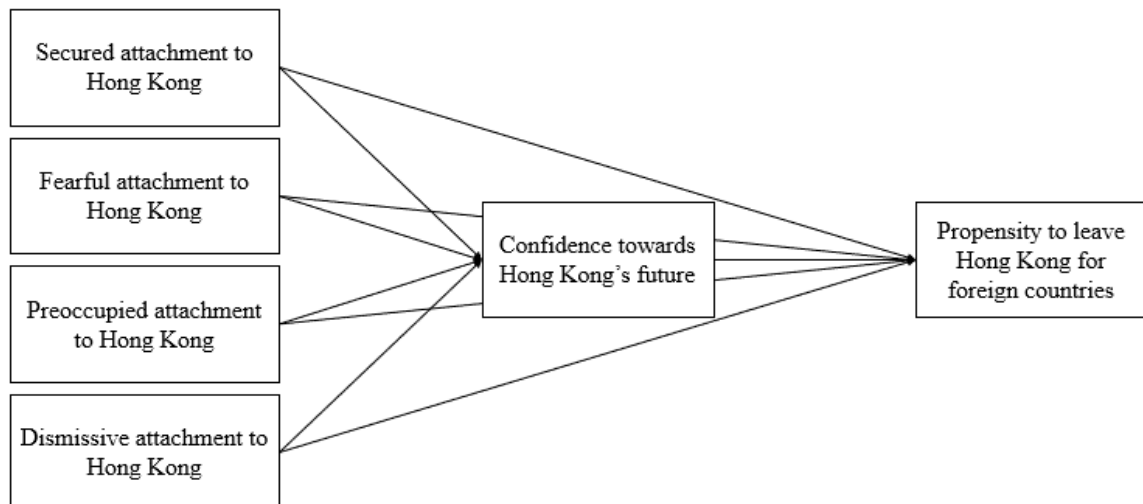* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

**Figure 1.**



**Figure 2.**

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