

Report on Young Singaporeans Conference 2022: Uncharted

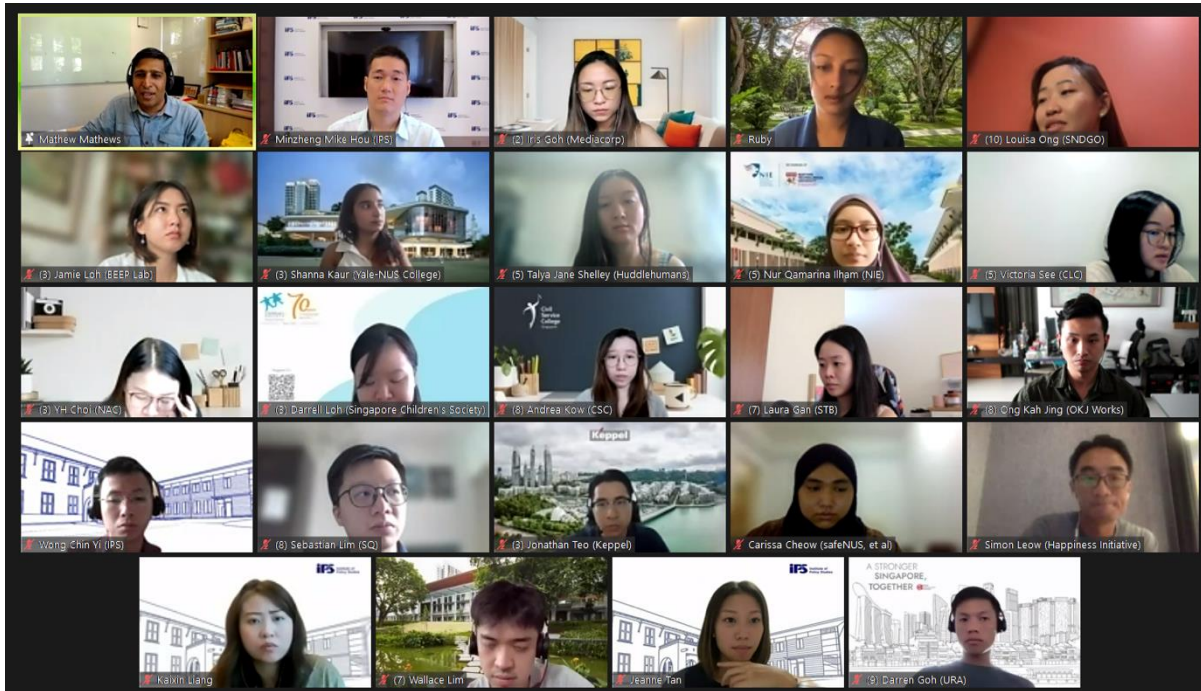
By Wong Chin Yi and Clara Lee

The Young Singaporeans Conference (YSC) is a marquee biennial event of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) that gathers young Singaporeans who have demonstrated leadership or excellence in their respective fields to discuss issues of national interest and public policy. The two-day conference was held on 5 and 7 September 2022, taking on a hybrid format with the first day being fully online and the second being fully in-person.

As shared by Dr Mike Hou, Associate Director of IPS Social Lab and the lead planner for YSC 2022, the theme for the conference was “Uncharted”, reflecting the uncertain path that lies ahead for today’s youths, which may bring both turbulence and a wealth of new opportunities. Held in support of the Forward Singapore movement, YSC 2022 served as a platform for youths to convey their concerns and aspirations about the broader society and collectively commit to building the Singapore they envision. Four broad areas were explored: (1) diversity, inclusivity, and well-being, (2) social media and the online space, (3) climate change and sustainability, and (4) life priorities and values.

Thematic Session 1: Diversity, Inclusivity, and Well-Being

Facilitated by Dr Mathew Mathews, Head of Social Lab and Principal Research Fellow at IPS, the first session of YSC 2022 was titled “Diversity, Inclusivity and Well-Being — Taking care of one another, taking care of our communities”. Three guests shared about youth mental health and well-being through the lenses of their differing roles within the community. The speakers for the session were Ms Carissa Cheow, co-founder of Students for a Safer NUS (National University of Singapore); Mr Simon Leow, co-founder of the Happiness Initiative; and Associate Professor Swapna Verma, Chairman of the Medical Board and Programme Director of the Community Health Assessment Team (CHAT) at the Institute of Mental Health (IMH), who served as the domain leader for the session.



Caption for photo: Main Session for Thematic Session 1

Dr Mathew kickstarted the session by demonstrating the significance of these issues through current research trends. Recent IPS studies have shown that mental health and well-being amongst youths and young adults in particular have been declining over the course of the pandemic, reflecting both increased awareness of mental health issues amongst young Singaporeans, and the proliferation of stressors faced by these youths. Dr Mathew also emphasised the imperative need to tap on diversity to destigmatise traditionally-marginalised identities and to create safe spaces for all Singaporeans in improving mental health and well-being.

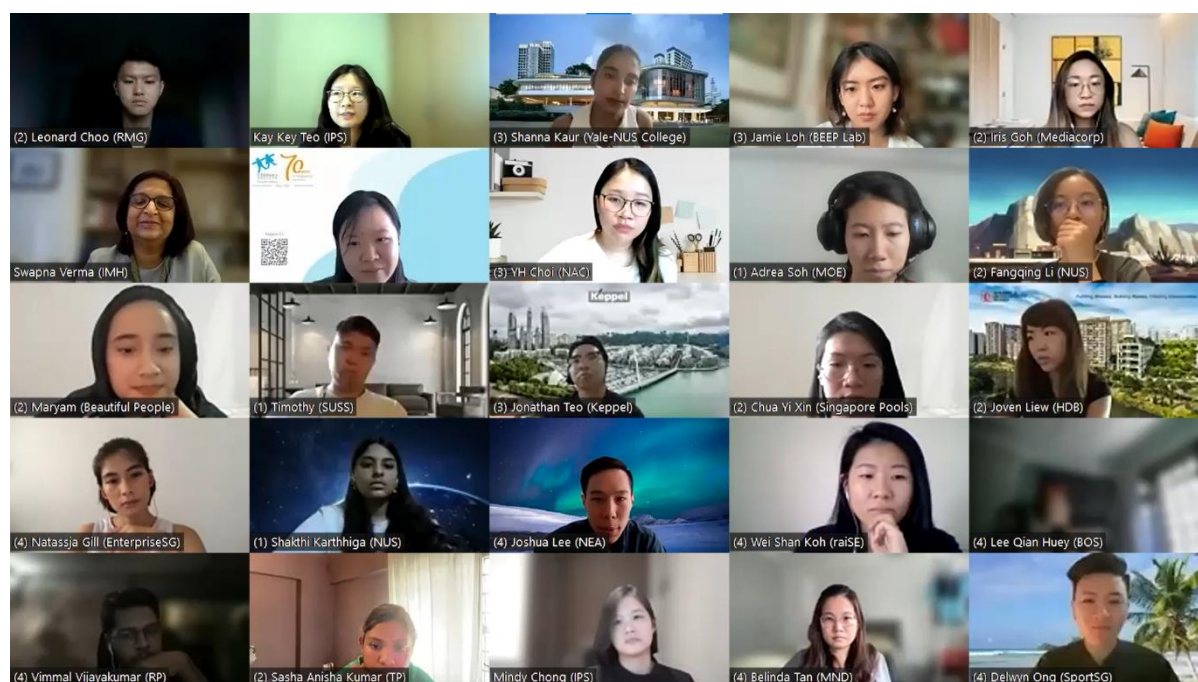
Ms Cheow introduced participants to safeNUS, a student-led and student-run organisation that aims to make NUS a safe space for all students. Ms Cheow brought up the point that while issues like threats and harassment might appear as a distant concept to many, these are not standalone issues that are only relevant to specific minority groups; if left unassuaged, they can pervade every level of society. Ms Cheow emphasised the importance of building up individual capacities to tackle these issues, to facilitate a bottom-up approach to action and change.

Building on the importance of individual well-being, Mr Leow ignited a discussion about the '3Ps': three concepts found to be the most significant predictors of individual happiness, based on studies by the Happiness Initiative. The '3Ps' referred to 'purpose', 'perseverance' and 'people', where individuals with higher sense of purpose, stronger perseverance, and adequate social support were more likely to be happier in times of need. Mr Leow also shared that the Happiness Initiative discovered another set of phrases while carrying out community programmes — the '3Ws' — that increased individual well-being: well-being skills that can be

made quantifiable and teachable; well-being outcomes, where teaching well-being skills leads to positive outcomes; and well-being circles, which bring people together in groups to provide mutual social support, and to give individuals time to reflect on and internalise well-being skills.

Expounding on the topic of youth mental health and well-being, A/P Verma explained the unique vulnerability of youths to challenges and ascribed this vulnerability to two factors: the many transitions that youths undergo, and the changes that their brains undergo before reaching adulthood. In the face of these risk factors, A/P Verma found that youths face three main barriers to seeking help: failing to understand that mental health issues are constantly evolving and can develop due to a wide range of factors; preferring to speak to friends and peers instead of seeking professional help due to the stigma surrounding mental health issues; and choosing to learn more about mental health from the Internet, where they are susceptible to both too much information and misinformation. To address these barriers, CHAT was established in 2009 to provide accessible and affordable outreach, assessment, and training for mental health issues.

The three guest speakers were then invited into separate Zoom breakout rooms, to facilitate more in-depth discussions with participants, pertaining to the content they shared as well as their different roles and experiences.



Caption for photo: Participants convened in break-out rooms with guest speakers for more candid and open sharing on each speaker's specific areas of expertise

Thematic Session 2: Social Media and the Online Space

The second thematic session, “Social Media and the Online Space – Surviving and thriving in the digital world”, was facilitated by Dr Carol Soon, Head of Society and Culture Department and Senior Research Fellow at IPS, and featured three panellists: Ms Clara Koh, Head of Public Policy for Singapore and ASEAN at Meta; Mr Teo Kai Xiang, Co-founder of Singapore Internet Watch; and Dr Natalie Pang, Senior Lecturer and Deputy Head of the Department of Communications and New Media at NUS, who also served as the domain leader for this session.



Caption for photo: *The Multifaceted Online Space*

The discussion began with speakers acknowledging that there is no single solution to the various issues that plague the internet and social media such as digital inequality, online harm, fake news, disinformation, and internet and data governance, due to the many stakeholders involved, as well as varied values and attitudes. Thus, there was consensus among the speakers that everyone plays an important role in combating these issues, with limits to both legislation and technological solutions.

The speakers also discussed the importance of data which has become central to the flourishing of social media platforms and a useful tool for researchers and journalists. The lack of access to data can be construed as a form of censorship as there is a scarcity of data on wide-ranging issues like LGBTQ in Singapore, single parents, and climate change.

Although the discourse surrounding social media is usually negative, the speakers noted that social media has been a force for good as well. Examples mentioned included first-time voters using social media to educate their peers on politics during the last General Election, social media being used to rally citizens for relief during natural disasters, and the sharing of resources in urban farming.



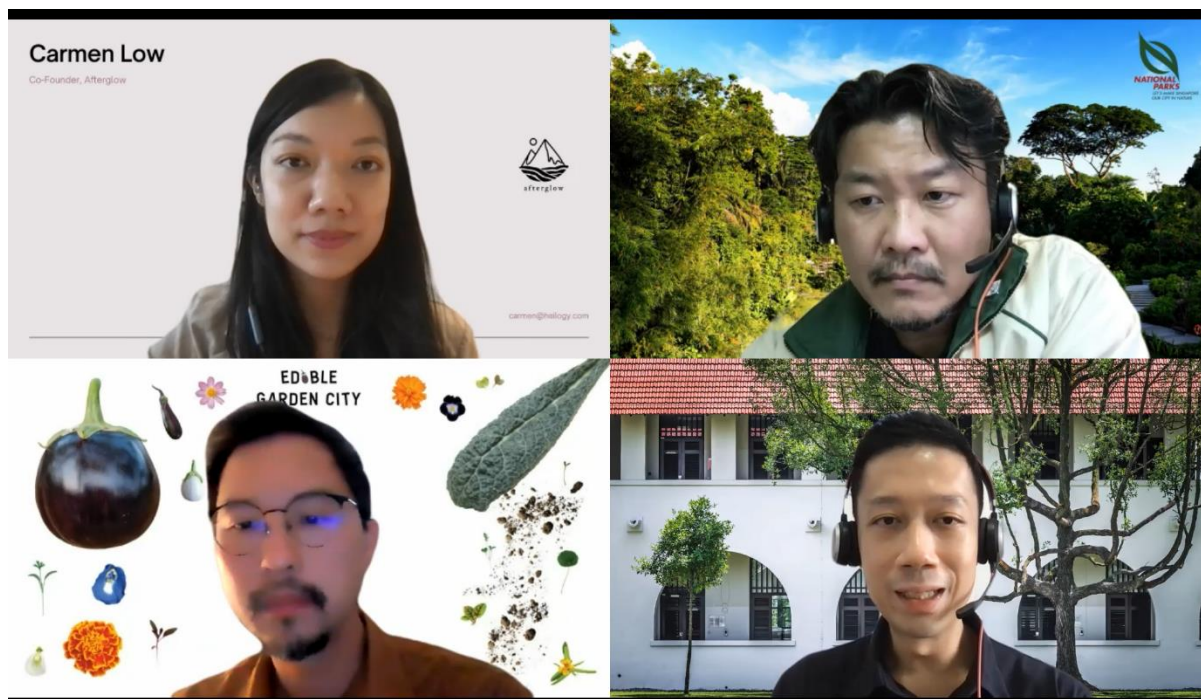
In Philippines, social media users use Facebook to rally citizens for relief during disasters (Source: Associated Press)

Caption for photo: Mobilising Citizens for Relief Efforts During Natural Disasters Using Social Media

Following the discussion, the speakers were asked for their thoughts on data sharing by the government and technology platforms. The speakers were also asked about the balance between freedom of speech and online harm on issues like doxxing. Closing the session, Dr Soon noted the need for more collaboration between government, companies, and society but emphasised that citizens and people need to also play their part to make the internet and social media a better space.

Thematic Session 3: Climate Change and Sustainability

The third thematic session, titled “Climate Change and Sustainability – Facing our changing environment head-on”, introduced examples of both government policies and ground-up initiatives in stimulating youths to respond to climate change and to think about sustainability-related issues. This session was facilitated by IPS Senior Research Fellow Dr Woo Jun Jie, with speakers from public and private organisations working on environmental issues in Singapore: Dr Adrian Loo, Group Director of the Wildlife Management Division and Senior Director of Community Projects at the National Parks Board (NParks); Mr Bjorn Low, Executive Director and Co-Founder of Edible Garden City; and Ms Carmen Low, Co-Founder of Afterglow Concepts Pte Ltd and Getai Group. Dr Loo also served as the domain leader of this session.



Caption for photo: Speakers for Thematic Session 3

Dr Woo began the session by highlighting that rising greenhouse gas emissions carry important implications on numerous aspects of everyday life, including health, access to housing, and food production. Young people, in particular, will have to bear the brunt of climate change in the decades to come.

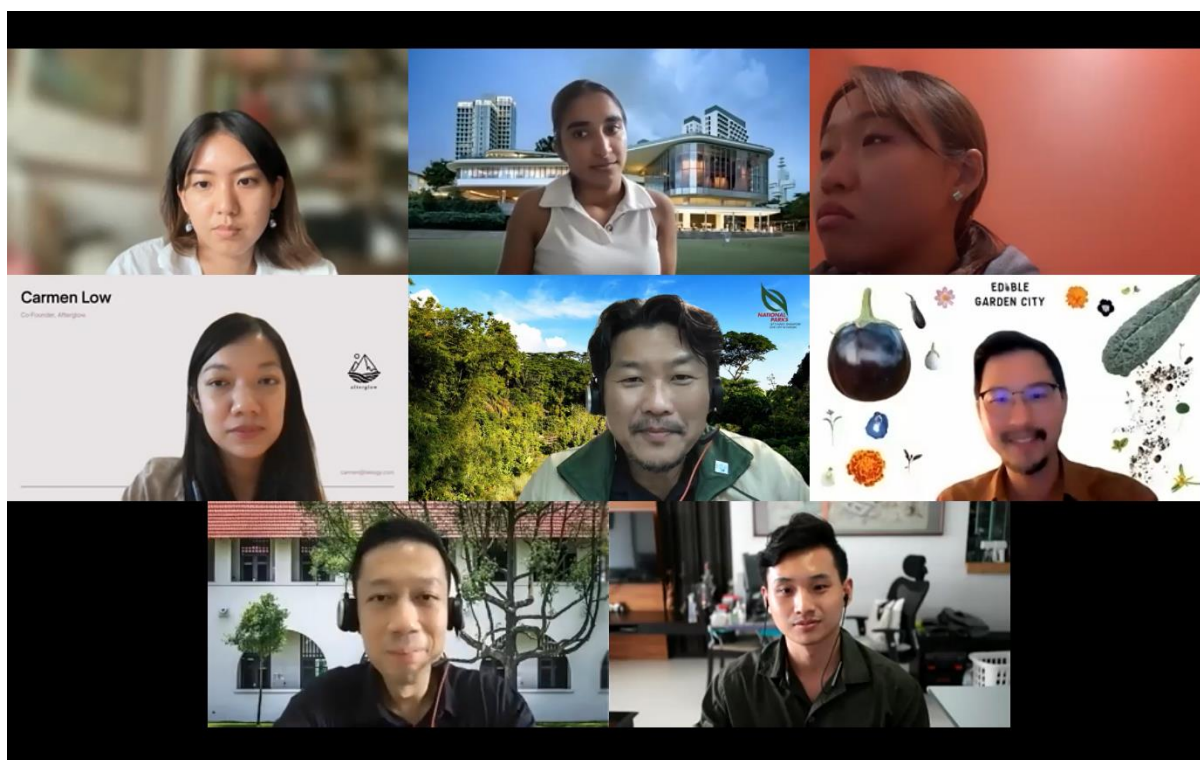
Following these opening remarks, Dr Loo from NParks gave a short presentation on one of the initiatives developed to transform Singapore into a ‘City in Nature’. Known as ‘OneMillionTrees’, the initiative began in April 2020 with the goal of planting one million trees across the country over the next decade. The benefits of planting a million trees include increased shade, decreased urban heat island effect, increased ecological connectivity, and carbon sequestration. Dr Loo also highlighted the mood-lifting effects that greenery has on people in times of adversity and stress, citing his observation of long queues at nature reserves during the early days of COVID-19. The ‘City in Nature’ vision was also elaborated upon. In line with the broader ‘Singapore Green Plan 2030’, the current vision aims to extend natural capital, intensify nature in gardens and parks, restore nature in the urban landscape, and strengthen connectivity between green spaces.

The second speaker, Mr Low, delved into the evolution of food systems from a sustainability perspective. To make food production more sustainable, Mr Low put forth three alternate systems. The first system is regenerative production, which differs from extractive production in that a variety of crops can be grown using naturally available resources. The second system of decentralisation seeks to spread production capabilities out to smaller-scale organic farms to minimise the knock-on effects of natural disasters on centralised food supply chains. The third production system is one that involves the community—a point also highlighted by Dr

Loo. Due to bio-contamination worries, food production in an industrialised system is typically isolated from the community. This, however, reduces the opportunities for people to interact with the agricultural system and the environment. A community-centric approach, which is incidentally a vital part of decentralisation, can help to mitigate this issue.

The third speaker, Ms Low, similarly spoke about food and its relation to the wider environment. Interestingly, she noted that there has been a rise in processed plant-based foods in the last five years and contended that this rise is perplexing and contradictory because large amounts of energy are usually required to produce processed plant-based foods. This highly-intensive production method then goes against the potential of a plant-based food system in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and mitigating climate change. Ms Low thus called on people to consider eating more whole foods instead, and brought up different approaches in making 'healthy eating' more palatable in food-obsessed Singapore.

A lively Q&A session ensued, with participants curious to find out more about the interplay between environmental and human needs amid growing urbanisation and technological advances, such as whether the sharing of living spaces between wildlife and humans constituted a zero-sum game with more BTO flats being built even amidst the 'City in Nature' vision. This highlighted the thorough consideration required in minimising any impact of urban planning on ecological connectivity. Other aspects related to food sustainability, such as safety concerns, waste management and innovative production methods, were also discussed.



Caption for photo: Main Session for Thematic Session 3

Thematic Session 4: Life Priorities and Values

The fourth and final session for the day, titled ‘Life Priorities and Values – (Re)defining “success”’, was facilitated by Mr Shamil Zainuddin, Research Associate at IPS and he was joined by Mr Darren Tan, Director of Invictus Law Corporation; Mr Shane Pereira, Research Associate at Social Lab, IPS; Ms Lim Si Hui, Group Sponsorships at Glyph; and Mr Thomas Lim, Associate Artistic Director for Youth & Education at Wild Rice Ltd.

Mr Zainuddin opened the session by introducing the background behind the theme and added that the speakers will be sharing their own life experiences and lessons around the purpose of work. “Do we work to live, or live to work?”

Mr Tan started the conversation by reflecting on his long working hours in recent weeks and added that his current life priorities revolve around both his family and his work, priorities that he describes as “very mundane” and having “a very low bar of success”. He proceeded to share three life lessons that he learned from his incarceration and his journey to becoming a lawyer: (1) life is a matter of perspective, (2) our life is made up of the time we have on earth, and (3) human nature and the transient nature of life. Mr Tan also shared that the finiteness of life and time was a guiding principle for his actions at work and at home, advocating the need to balance and make the most of his time.

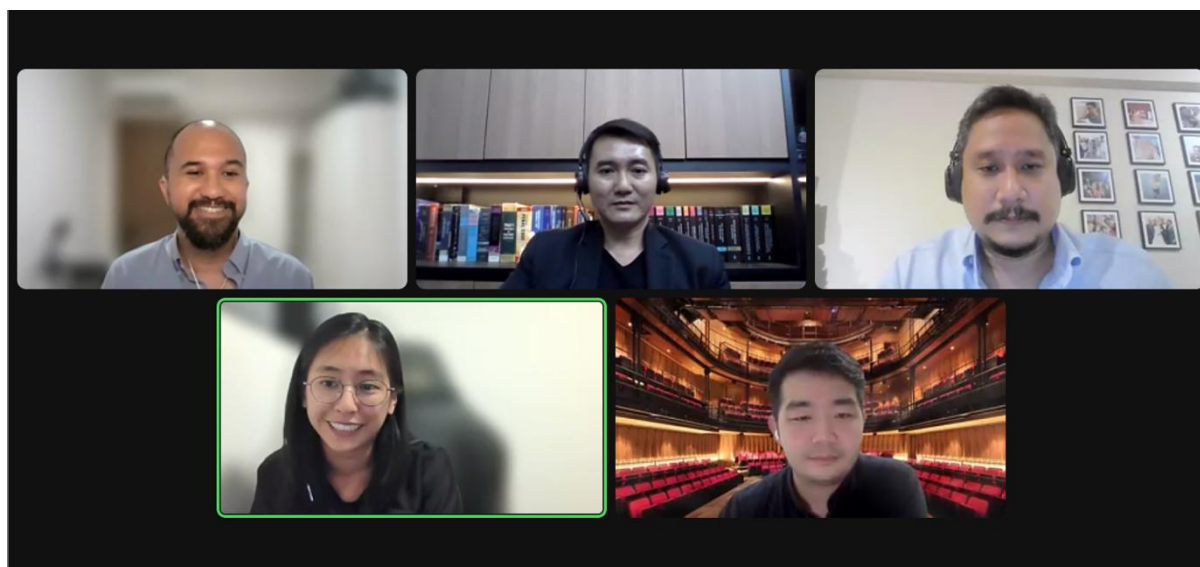
Drawing on both his personal experiences in gig work and the F&B industry as well as his ethnographic research at IPS Social Lab, Mr Pereira invited participants to rethink their perceptions of gig work and F&B work as jobs that are low wage, low status, interim, and a stop-gap measure. Mr Pereira also highlighted the ironic and unintended outcome of flexible work, where it eventually becomes sticky and hard to exit (and therefore not as flexible as it initially appears to be).

Ms Lim explored the topic of “why do we work” and began by sharing how she left NUS in 2018 to help low-income and vulnerable communities with Glyph. She traced her journey with the non-profit charity, starting in 2017 when she was a first-year student looking to do an internship. Interning with Glyph over her summer break made her realise that this was what she wanted to do. She explained that while her parents were disappointed and her friends did not understand her decision, she did not regret leaving school midway through her tertiary education.

Drawing on his personal experience of working in theatre, Mr Lim discussed the relationship between work and life, and shared that most people have a perception that for an artist, work is not work and does not feel like work. He asserted that for him personally, there is a very clear separation between work and life. He feels that work and life are not dichotomously opposed to each other but rather they are in a symbiotic relationship. He shared that a lot of his plays are inspired by his own experiences and his observations of society, adding that this is part and parcel of being an artist—that is to live and examine his life in close detail.

The speakers’ sharing session was followed by breakout room discussions, where participants had the opportunity to move between rooms hosted by each speaker. Many insightful

questions from a wide range of topics, such as personal values, research methodology, the role of arts, and definitions of success, were posed.



Caption for photo: Speakers for Thematic Session 4

The session concluded with each speaker sharing some parting words with the participants. Mr Tan reminded the audience of the finiteness of time and one's youth and encouraged the audience to pursue their dreams. Mr Pereira posed a challenge to policymakers and society to stop asking gig workers about their lack of aspirations, but rather to think about how we can value gig workers. Ms Lim encouraged everyone to be adventurous yet steadfast in pursuing their goals, while Mr Lim ended with an invitation for everyone to support the arts scene in Singapore.

Team Discussions

On the second day of YSC 2022 where participants met in person, they were divided into 11 teams, with each group having the opportunity to pose a question to another on one of the four themes covered in this conference. Thereafter, each team brainstormed and worked through the question presented to them and subsequently showcased their ideas in an interactive Exhibition and Exchange session. They also had the chance to share their thoughts with Guests of Honour Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong and Senior Minister of State Dr Janil Puthuchery during a Lightning Session.

Diversity, Inclusivity, and Well-being

Caption for photo: Presentation to DPM and SMS on Increasing Awareness of LGBT Issues during Lightning Session

One group was tasked to ponder how Singapore can accommodate the aspirations of different groups in reference to the anticipated repeal of Section 377A of the Penal Code. The group proposed to increase awareness through various forms of media (e.g., free-to-air channels, print, alternative media, social media) with subtle inclusion of LGBT-friendly themes to spark open conversations about inclusivity. The possibility of civil unions was also suggested, where legal partnerships between same-sex couples would grant them, among other things, access to public housing and recognition of next-of-kin status.

Examining how we can better protect the mental well-being of youths, the next group touched on the importance of raising awareness, providing accessible channels for help, and building the necessary infrastructure to safeguard the mental health and welfare of young Singaporeans in the long run. Examples ranged from traditional counselling sessions to non-traditional therapy (involving art, dance, and/or games) and peer support networks to anonymous chatbots.



Caption for photo: Exhibition and Exchange on Removing Hindrances to Women's Career Progression

The final group that worked on the theme of Diversity, Inclusivity, and Well-being deliberated the ways by which hindrances to women's advancement in workplaces can be removed. Advocating a multipronged approach, the group believed that corporations, government, and community all have roles to play in facilitating the career progression of women.

Social Media and the Online Space



Caption for photo: Exhibition and Exchange on the Responsible use of Social Media and the Online Space

With the increasing use of social media, one group examined how we could help Singaporeans use the online space more responsibly and safely. Recognising that misinformation and fake news abound and that instances of cyberbullying, doxxing, and the distribution of obscene material are increasingly common in the online space, the group set out to identify the roles that different entities can play. They argued that the careful sharing of accurate and quality information can make the online space safer for everyone, given that users of social media are not merely passive consumers of online content.

The next group looked into moving local businesses online as more companies and consumers shift towards exchanging goods and services in the online space. They explained that this would help local enterprises build resilience as they expand their consumer base in an increasingly competitive business environment, while digital adoption would also close the digital divide among both businesses and Singaporeans seeking variety and convenience.

Shifting the focus away from managing the online space, the final group explored ways to help Singaporeans disconnect from social media and be fully present in the 'real world'. Acknowledging the importance of social media in providing information, maintaining social connections, and offering validation, the group suggested alternatives that would help

Singaporeans achieve the same goals in both their personal and professional lives. For example, subscribing to bite-size news alerts and joining peer interest groups allow them to obtain the information they need and build meaningful connections without the clutter of social media.

Climate Change and Sustainability

Recognising that discourse surrounding sustainability and sustainable living is often jargon-heavy and inaccessible to laypersons, one group set out to explore the ways through which Singapore can make sustainability an accessible way of life for various stakeholders. Some suggestions include introducing sustainability practices in schools to expose children to sustainable living from a young age and utilising social media campaigns to make sustainability more desirable and gradually change the behaviours and norms of Singaporeans towards sustainable living.

Tackling the problem of food waste, another group probed the practical steps that individuals, supermarkets, and the government can take to reduce such wastage in Singapore. Households could be encouraged to donate their unused non-perishable food items with this behaviour being incentivised via rebates and credits that can be used to purchase other food items at lower prices. The group also recommended that supermarkets actively profile reduced-to-clear food products, selling items close to expiry at a discount. Lastly, the government can educate businesses and consumers and build platforms to support donations.

The final group reviewed ways to ensure a fairer distribution of the costs of policy measures put in place to mitigate climate change, focusing on the carbon tax introduced in Singapore through the Carbon Pricing Act. Noticing how the costs of the carbon tax have been passed on to consumers in the ride-hailing industry, the group proposed both short-term and longer-term solutions to promote a more equitable distribution of costs. They explained that revenue from the carbon tax can be used to fund green investments either in more sustainable business practices or alternative energy sources, reducing the reliance on carbon and thereby the costs associated with it. Improved carbon reporting for both companies and consumers would also enhance the transparency of carbon consumption, enabling taxing in proportion to an individual or entity's carbon footprint.

Life Priorities and Values

On life priorities and values, one group considered what governments and corporations can do to help young Singaporeans achieve professional success while having sufficient time and resources to raise a family as well as step out of their comfort zones to pursue other passions. Facilitating opportunities for youths to reflect and to discover their *ikigai* (a Japanese concept referring to something that gives them a sense of purpose), removing the stigma associated with failing, and fostering more open mindsets are some proposals offered to encourage greater risk-taking.

Converging on a similar idea, the next group reflected on how Singaporeans can remain competitive at their workplaces while achieving work-life balance. They are of the view that competitiveness does not equate to spending more hours at work, distinguishing between

work output (i.e., time spent in the office) and work outcome (i.e., work deliverables). The synergistic integration of one's education, skillset, and industry experience would be critical in ensuring that Singaporeans remain relevant in today's workforce. Finally, corporations would need to embrace an organisational culture that respects the autonomy and time of their employees.

Dialogue Session

YSC 2022 concluded with a dialogue session with distinguished guests Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong and Senior Minister of State Dr Janil Puthucheary. Dr Teo Kay Key, Research Fellow at IPS Social Lab, served as the moderator.



Caption for photo: Dialogue Session with Guests of Honour Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong and Senior Minister of State Dr Janil Puthucheary

Mr Wong began by summarising his takeaways from the Lightning Session, reflecting on the importance of (1) providing opportunities for everyone, (2) greater assurance that everyone can achieve the life they want in Singapore, (3) living sustainably, and (4) strengthening solidarity. Observing that underpinning these themes is a shared sense of responsibility, he added that all Singaporeans have to do their part and understand our duties and obligations to one another to achieve our shared goals.

Dr Puthuchearry noted a strong sense of social justice and commended the passion of the participants, calling on them not to give up despite the time and effort needed to address the many pressing issues in society. He further emphasised the importance of finding a balance between different stakeholders and considering the wants and needs of everyone in society, and not just youths.

During the Q&A, Mr Wong emphasised that Forward Singapore is not a political exercise; instead, it aims to engage Singaporeans who have understandably diverse views and opinions. Addressing the question of political diversity more broadly, he added that Singaporeans will decide at every election the extent of political diversity and the degree of checks and balances they desire. Dr Puthuchearry also noted that while there is diversity across political parties, there is likewise a diversity of views within the People's Action Party (PAP).

With reference to Singapore's aim in achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2050, a participant asked about the process needed to convince people to start taking steps toward energy security. Both Mr Wong and Dr Puthuchearry stressed the need to balance risks and payoffs in achieving carbon neutrality and in making it a fair and equitable transition for everyone. Highlighting how there is no easy solution, Mr Wong added that making the right decisions is always about timing and listening to experts, involving a process similar to that of other pertinent issue areas such as food shortages and vaccines procurement.

One participant touched on the government's intention to repeal Section 377A of the Penal Code and was curious about the viability of civil unions between same-sex partners in the future. Reminding participants that the repeal has yet to happen as it has to be debated in Parliament first, Mr Wong emphasised that the primary focus now should be to ensure "that people with strong views on both sides can understand what we are trying to do", and to "find common ground and accept this new balance in our society".

On how Singaporeans can be encouraged to be risk takers, Dr Puthuchearry stressed that Singaporeans are already constantly taking risks, from starting up businesses to relocating overseas. He instead proposed that we should prime our young to be more adventurous and encourage them to get out of their comfort zones.

Speaking about potential trade-offs between competitiveness and achieving work-life balance, a participant questioned whether Singaporeans needed to aim for competitiveness all the time. Mr Wong saw this as placing a negative connotation on competitiveness and proposed that it be reframed as a pursuit of excellence in the field or profession of one's choice.

Noting that society's view of success tends to be narrow and limited to a few preferred jobs, Mr Wong explained that a sense of dignity, pride, and respect could be accorded to all who pursue excellence across different fields if society broadens its view on success. While it may be unrealistic to expect equal pay across all jobs, this may at least close the income gap across professions.

When asked about the notion of being content with mediocrity, Mr Wong responded that it is an individual decision. While mediocrity may be satisfactory to some who have yet to find their

calling, he concluded that a version of happiness that is others-centred could also exist, which focuses on our contributions towards the community or nation.

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