

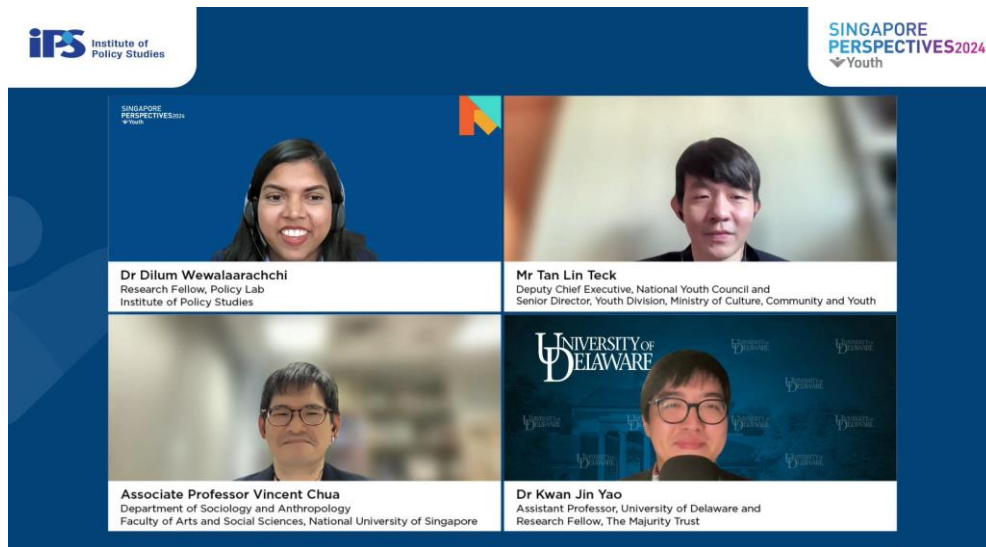


## Singapore Perspectives 2024: Youth What is Being Young Like Today?

By Ezzafatin Aslam

Exploring the various complexities of youth experience, this year's Singapore Perspectives conference was dedicated to the theme of "Youth". The conference serves as a vital platform for addressing issues relevant to Singaporean youth, examining their unique trajectory towards adulthood milestones. Societal shifts particularly salient to youth such as prolonged formal education, delayed transitions into stable employment, and shifting timelines and attitudes towards marriage and parenthood were also key considerations fostering insightful discussions at the conference.

To set the backdrop for other discussions, this panel, titled "What is Being Young Like Today?" featured perspectives from Mr Tan Lin Teck, Senior Director for Youth in the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth and concurrently, Deputy Chief Executive of the National Youth Council; Associate Professor Vincent Chua from the National University of Singapore; and Assistant Professor Kwan Jin Yao from the University of Delaware and Research Fellow with the Majority Trust in Singapore. Dr Dilum Wewalaarachchi, Research Fellow from Policy Lab at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), facilitated and moderated the panel, guiding the discourse, while the panellists drew on research findings to share their views on what growing up is like for today's youth.



*Caption for photo: Discussion among Dr Dilum Wewalaarachchi (top, left), Mr Tan Lin Teck (top, right), Associate Professor Vincent Chua (bottom, left), and Dr Kwan Jin Yao (bottom, right), during Panel 1 of the IPS Singapore Perspectives 2024 Conference.*

### **Youths Are From Mars, Others Are From Venus**

Mr Tan Lin Teck commenced his presentation by highlighting some prevailing views of youth and asking if we should challenge these perceptions. Singapore’s youth, defined as individuals aged 15 to 35, constitutes 25 per cent of the population and faces unique challenges amid an ageing workforce and population, the experience of a global pandemic, and a matured economy. There is also a lot of diversity within the youth demographic, since it spans different age groups and life stages.

The impact of the pandemic on youth can be further characterised by drastic changes in social networks and connections. Amidst a rapidly evolving world marked by economic shifts and technological disruptions, youths are also growing up in a hyper-connected environment. These social forces have formative impact in shaping the outlook of today’s youth.

### **Current Trends among Singapore Youth**

Throughout his presentation, Mr Tan referenced research and engagement efforts carried out by the National Youth Council (NYC) and Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY), such as the National Youth Survey and Youth Sentiments Polls, respectively. He noted a significant increase in the number of youths with university degrees, reflecting a growing emphasis on tertiary education and upward mobility. He underscored the necessity for acknowledging and addressing the needs of Singapore’s highly educated, working youth. This is especially pertinent considering Singapore youths work in a highly inter-generational environment.

Positive trends were observed in data from the Youth Study on Transitions and Evolving Pathways in Singapore (Youth STEPS) study by IPS and NYC, such as youths prioritising

meaningful work and showcasing a commitment to reskilling. Mental well-being emerged as a critical concern in NYC's Youth Sentiments Poll, with stressors like finances and job issues affecting older youths, while studies were a primary stressor for younger ones. Youths were also observed to be more liberal in terms of values and attitudes in the 2021 World Values Survey conducted by IPS, though still focused on bread-and-butter issues.

The presentation also examined shifting attitudes towards marriage and parenthood, with financial stability and home ownership taking precedence, reflected in the Youth STEPS data. Youths also demonstrated a strong inclination towards civic engagement, with four in five participating in civic activities in 2022, according to the 2022 National Youth Survey.

In his concluding remarks, Mr Tan portrayed youths as resilient and encouraged empathy and support in approaching this generation.

### **Putting the Spotlight on Youth Mental Health**

Next, Assoc Prof Vincent Chua presented an in-depth examination of the mental well-being of young adults, using data from the Youth STEPS dataset spanning 2017 to 2022. The primary focus was on understanding intricate factors that influence the mental health of this demographic, with a particular spotlight on the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Drawing upon insights from the National Population Health Survey 2022, Assoc Prof Chua highlighted a concerning uptick in poor mental health, rising from 13 per cent in 2020 to 17 per cent in 2022. The data also emphasised a pronounced vulnerability among individuals aged 18 to 29, signalling the profound mental health challenges faced by this specific age group.

### **Factors Shaping Youth Well-Being**

Two pivotal factors — adulthood transitions and external events — were identified to be significant contributors to the mental well-being of young adults. Adulthood transitions encapsulating key life stages like education, work and marriage, play a central role. Simultaneously, the far-reaching effects of the COVID-19 pandemic constituted an external event with substantial impact on mental health outcomes.

The comprehensive regression analysis conducted for the study yielded nuanced findings. Educational mobility emerged as a positive correlation with life satisfaction, suggesting that higher educational attainment positively influenced overall well-being. Transitioning to marriage from singlehood was also associated with smaller declines in life satisfaction, indicating potential psychological benefits tied to marital status. Employment transitions revealed a complex relationship, with the shift from school to unemployment or part-time employment linked to decreased life satisfaction. In contrast, transitioning to full-time employment showed a positive association with life satisfaction. The pandemic particularly amplified the impact of unemployment on life satisfaction, with a threefold increase compared to the pre-pandemic period.

## The Future for Youth Well-Being

Inequalities in well-being were also exacerbated during external shocks, exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic. This underscored the disproportionate impact of crises on different segments of the youth population, particularly concerning employment and education.

Concluding with policy considerations, Assoc Prof Chua emphasised the enduring importance of addressing critical life domains for youths — jobs, education and marriage. This underscored the need for policies that holistically consider the well-being of young adults in navigating these pivotal aspects of life.

Closing on an optimistic note, Assoc Prof Chua also shared a compelling finding from the Youth STEPS data; that while life satisfaction tends to decrease with age, resilience among young individuals increases. This positive aspect suggested that, despite external challenges, youths possess a capacity for personal growth and adaptability.

## Helping Young Singaporeans Feel Less *Sian*

Dr Kwan Jin Yao's presentation offered a rich exploration of three key themes — disparities, diverse pathways, and doing more with less. As a social work researcher and a young Singaporean, Dr Kwan provided valuable insights into the challenges faced by the youth population, drawing from both personal and professional experiences.

### Disparities in the Pandemic's Impact on Youth

Dr Kwan highlighted the impact of the ongoing pandemic on youth, emphasising the disparities that exist among different segments within the demographic, creating a sense of world weariness (*sian*, in the Hokkien dialect). He discussed the challenges faced by low-income youths, delving into the intricate web of issues related to living conditions, learning experiences, work arrangements and social interactions. Dr Kwan's research aimed to understand if low-income youths were more affected by the pandemic, and also how the pandemic exacerbated their existing challenges.

Dr Kwan's preliminary findings highlighted the challenges faced by young Singaporeans in living, learning, working and playing, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Problems include issues related to those living in smaller flats, facing familial conflicts, school disengagement, poor social relationships, economic disadvantage, and reliance on social media. During the pandemic, these challenges were exacerbated, leading to increased isolation, inadequate technological necessities, and heightened stress. To address these issues and help young Singaporeans, there is a need to focus on reducing vulnerabilities and disadvantages in these domains.

### Embracing Diverse Pathways for Life

Dr Kwan's second theme was the concept of diverse pathways to a fulfilling life for young Singaporeans. He emphasised the need to challenge conventional scripts related to education, employment, housing, marriage and parenthood. By questioning the rigid order and timing associated with these life milestones, he prompted a reflection on the potential

variations in individual journeys. The traditional checklist involves obtaining a diploma or degree, securing full-time work, upgrading skills, possibly changing industries, buying a home, getting engaged, marrying, and starting a family. He highlighted the pressure young Singaporeans feel to adhere to this checklist in a specific order and timeframe.

Dr Kwan questioned the implications for those whose lives deviate from this predetermined order or who do not achieve certain milestones. He suggested that the notion that a good life must conform to these three domains (i.e., education, employment, marriage/parenthood) ought to be challenged and encouraged exploration of alternative pathways. This segment focused on encouraging broader perspectives on what constitutes a fulfilling life, and emphasised the importance of personal agency and more open attitudes towards non-conventional journeys.

### **Community and Social Support for Youths**

Dr Kwan also questioned the relentless pursuit of more programmes and interventions, and suggested a better alternative to improve youth well-being was to “do more with less”. Making time and space for individuals to breathe, relax and engage in seemingly frivolous pursuits, was highlighted as crucial in developing youth social support.

Additionally, he emphasised the importance of communal care and shared responsibilities, to ease the burden on individuals squeezed by multiple roles.

### **Question-and-Answer Session**

**Q:** Why are 15- to 35-year-olds considered youth despite the huge age gap and difference in the phases that they’re going through?

**A:** Mr Tan emphasised the absence of a universally accepted definition of youth, citing variations from the United Nation’s 15- to 24-years-old range, with some countries extending it to age 39. He characterised youth as a period marked by transitions, navigating the shift from childhood dependence to adult independence. He highlighted the need for nuanced considerations when designing programmes or policies targeting youth, accounting for the varied experiences within the age range. Assoc Prof Chua suggested a contextualised approach to defining youth, by looking beyond age alone and incorporating the impact of generational differences that are relevant to different cohorts across time.

**Q:** Given that each generation has its own challenges and opportunities, what are the key ones for youths today and how do they fare in comparison (to other generations)?

**A:** Assoc Prof Chua referenced a segment of the Youth STEPS study that compared the impact of unemployment on life satisfaction between Gen Z and millennials. The findings indicated no significant difference, implying that unemployment negatively affects life satisfaction universally, irrespective of generational distinctions. This suggests that certain conditions, such as unemployment, pose similar challenges across various generations, highlighting commonalities in their experiences and well-being.

**Q:** It seems that employment has a large impact on youth. How can corporations better help youth as they step into the workforce?

**A:** Assoc Prof Chua emphasised the importance of continuous reskilling for the youth, highlighting that individuals should not let daily challenges hinder them from upgrading their skills. He stressed the need for corporations to invest in retraining and upskilling programmes, urging them to provide employees with the time and resources necessary for these initiatives. Chua also encouraged a proactive approach to workforce development.

**Q:** What are some implications for action that we can think about from the data that you shared today?

**A:** Dr Kwan suggested an intervention aimed at broadening the notion of a fulfilling life for young Singaporeans. He proposed a need to help youth visualise and understand alternative trajectories, assuring them that missing certain steps in the conventional order does not diminish their potential for a fulfilling life. While acknowledging the need for detailed implications, he outlined some pointers to reimagine and visualise diverse life pathways.

Mr Tan emphasised the changing priorities of youths, highlighting the shift in questions during job interviews from training opportunities to mental well-being support systems. Mr Tan encouraged businesses to consider the “two Ms” — mental well-being and mentoring — as essential components for supporting and retaining the best talent. He acknowledged the challenges youths face in transitioning to the workplace and suggested that corporations play a pivotal role in providing the necessary support structures.

**Q:** Why were some transitions for youths particularly challenging during COVID-19?

**A:** Assoc Prof Chua suggested that the notion of precarity succinctly encapsulates the challenges faced by youths during COVID-19. He explained that the pandemic brought about a heightened sense of job insecurity, making adulthood transitions more difficult. The global uncertainties, including trade wars, further compounded the challenges that were already present before 2020.

Dr Kwan emphasised the broader macro environment’s impact on youth transitions, pointing out challenges beyond COVID-19, such as the global financial crisis, climate change and geopolitical issues. He highlighted the heightened anxieties these factors bring, affecting various transitions, including the shift from school to work and the threat of automation. Dr Kwan stressed that these macro-environmental factors may seem beyond one’s control and noted that the limitations of earlier generations’ insights limitations due to unprecedented levels of global instability and uncertainty.

**Q:** Certain things such as burnout and work-life balance seem to be a key stressor among the groups you looked at in Mr Tan’s presentation. Do you have any further thoughts about the reasons why?

**A:** Mr Tan highlighted the importance of addressing mental well-being challenges faced by youth, emphasising the persistent issue of stigma. He discussed the significance of starting conversations about mental health and combating stigma to encourage early intervention. Mr

Tan also proposed building a community of peer supporters in schools, workplaces and communities to provide a vital line of defence and support for youth facing mental well-being issues. By fostering meaningful conversations and training individuals in supportive dialogue, the aim is to create a powerful early intervention that can have a significant impact on improving mental health without resorting to clinical or medical interventions. Additionally, Mr Tan emphasised the focus on helping youth build resilience, acknowledging the positive trend of increasing resilience over time.

Dr Kwan built upon Mr Tan's response, commending the government's efforts in shifting from awareness to action in addressing mental health challenges. He emphasised the importance of examining why specific groups of youth might experience anxiety, depression and life dissatisfaction, suggesting a need to address these challenges upstream. Dr Kwan highlighted how factors such as living conditions, school difficulties, part-time work and social disengagement affect youths disparately, asserting the necessity of addressing these issues before implementing treatment interventions. From a social worker's perspective, he emphasised the significance of tackling the social disparities that contribute to youth well-being challenges.

Assoc Prof Chua delved into two interconnected questions: why burnout occurs and why it affects individuals at such a young age. He speculated that burnout among young people could be attributed to the overprogramming and hyper-competition prevalent in schools, shaping a singular definition of success. Despite acknowledging the importance of diversity in pathways, he pointed out the challenge arising from hierarchical ranking perpetuating disparities. To address burnout and promote well-being, he advocated for a shift away from hyper-competition towards a more community-oriented approach focusing on contributions over winning. He emphasised the need to celebrate diversity and attenuate hierarchies. Assoc Prof Chua suggested that this mindset could aid youth find fulfilment beyond hierarchical concerns.

Mr Tan further highlighted the pivotal role of defining success in determining the stressors faced by youth. He acknowledged the challenge in altering this definition through government intervention, emphasising that its definition is shaped by various influences, including parental expectations and societal norms. He underscored the importance of conversations at different levels, encouraging open dialogues about success and its trade-offs. Mr Tan concluded his response by stressing the need for collective discussions among corporate organisations, parents, society, and schools to help youth navigate their unique paths and challenges, fostering a supportive environment that can mitigate feelings of unease.

**Q:** What suggestions do all the panellists have for policymakers, to encourage Singaporeans to embrace alternative visions of a good life? What ideas do you have for how we as a society might encourage people to “do less to create more”? Any implications and suggestions for policy change?

**A:** Dr Kwan emphasised the need for individuals to unlearn the competitive mindset ingrained in them through educational systems. He suggested that interpersonal, person-to-person conversations play a crucial role in shaping perspectives and passing on values, creating a foundation for a healthier approach to life.

Assoc Prof Chua then responded by encouraging young people to move away from conforming to external expectations and to focus on embracing their gifts and talents. He suggested that success should be defined by individuals doing what they are naturally gifted to do, and that this would ultimately reduce burnout rates. He emphasised the need to deconstruct external pressures to fully embrace one's authentic self.

Mr Tan emphasised the importance of having conversations with youth about trade-offs and helping them understand that life is not linear. He suggested engaging in discussions about different pathways to success and the associated upsides and downsides. Mr Tan stressed the need to challenge the traditional Singaporean dream and encourage individuals to prioritise what matters most to them. He acknowledged the difficulty of reaching a large youth population individually. However, he also highlighted the significance of providing guidance and mentorship to help youths navigate their priorities and redefine success on a more personal level.

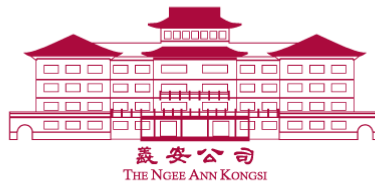
Assoc Prof Chua concluded the panel by emphasising the need to reconsider notions of worth beyond productivity, earnings and material success. He encouraged a shift towards defining worth based on a person's humanity, decency, and contribution to making other people's lives better. Assoc Prof Chua acknowledged the importance of productivity but cautioned against solely tying a person's worth to singular definitions. He highlighted the ongoing national conversation about moving away from traditional measures like the "five Cs" (i.e., cash, car, credit card, condominium and country club membership) and towards a more holistic understanding of social contribution.

[Ezzafatin Aslam](#) is a Research Assistant at the Institute of Policy Studies' Social Lab.

\*\*\*\*\*



IPS is grateful to the following organisations for their support of IPS and Singapore Perspectives 2024:



BlackRock  
Chevron Singapore  
City Developments Limited  
DBS Bank  
DP Architects  
EnGro Corporation Limited  
Housing & Development Board  
Institute of Technical Education  
JTC  
Keppel Ltd.  
Khong Guan Biscuit Factory (S) Pte Ltd

Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore  
Nanyang Polytechnic  
National University of Singapore  
Republic Polytechnic  
Singapore Institute of Technology  
Singapore Polytechnic  
Singapore Telecommunications Limited  
Singapore University of Social Sciences  
Tan Ean Kiam Foundation  
UOB  
Wilmar International Limited

If you have comments or feedback, please email [ips.update@nus.edu.sg](mailto:ips.update@nus.edu.sg)



© Copyright 2024 National University of Singapore. All Rights Reserved.  
You are welcome to reproduce this material for non-commercial purposes and please ensure you cite the source when doing so.