

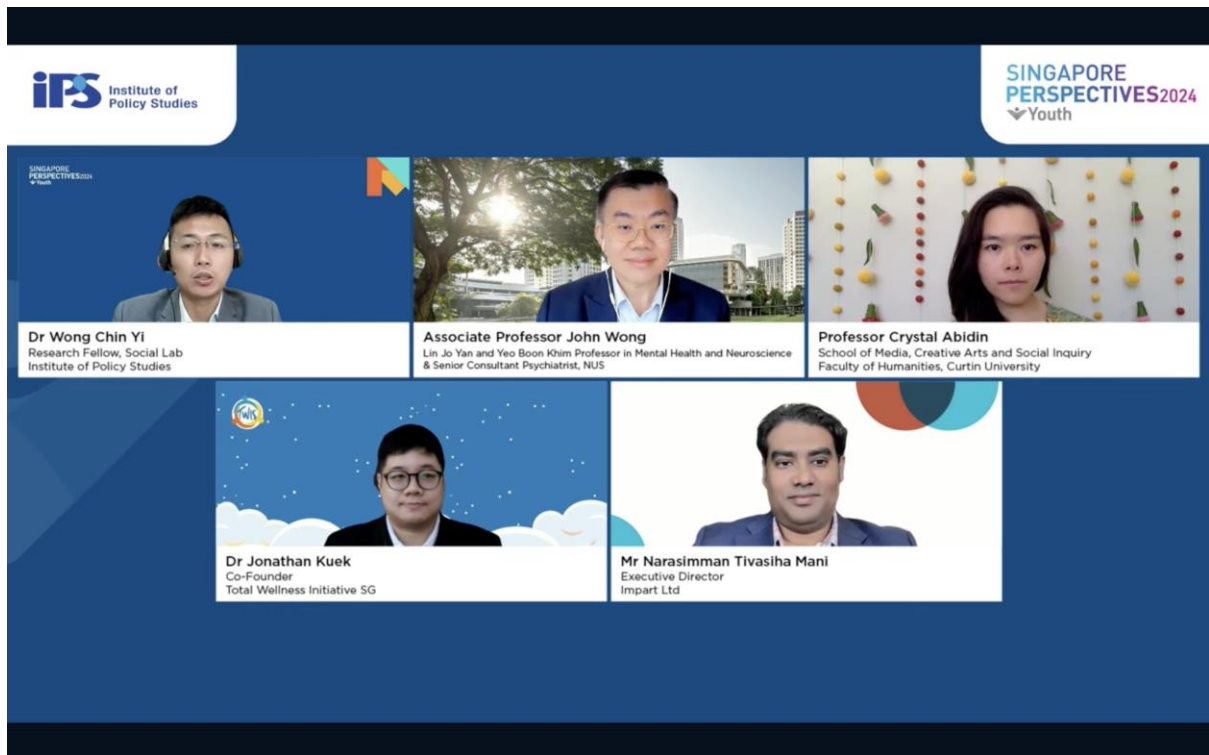
Singapore Perspectives 2024: Youth The Centrality of Well-Being

Francesca Lee

The Singapore Perspectives conference seeks each year to engage thinking Singaporeans in a lively debate on the country's policy challenges. The theme of this year's conference is "Youth". The conference examined the spectrum of challenges confronting young Singaporeans today. This included examining how youths would integrate into Singapore's ageing society, adapt to evolving work expectations, and navigate shifts in family norms as more young individuals choose to delay or forgo marriage and parenthood altogether.

The panel, titled "The Centrality of Well-Being", featured Associate Professor John Wong, who is Lin Jo Yan and Yeo Boon Khim Professor in Mental Health and Neuroscience & Senior Consultant Psychiatrist at the Department of Psychological Medicine, Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore; Professor Crystal Abidin from School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry, Faculty of Humanities at Curtin University; Dr Jonathan Kuek, Co-Founder of Total Wellness Initiative SG; and Mr Narasimman Tivasaha Mani, Executive Director of Impart Ltd. The panel was moderated by Dr Wong Chin Yi, Research Fellow, Social Lab, Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

Well-being plays a decisive role in shaping one's ability to contribute to society. These issues came to the fore during the pandemic, especially for youths as the crisis interrupted key transition points in their lives. This panel addressed issues of youth well-being.



Caption for photo: Discussion among Dr Wong Chin Yi (top left), Assoc Prof John Wong (first row, centre), Professor Crystal Abidin (top right), Dr Jonathan Kuek (bottom left) and Mr Narasimman Tivasiha Mani (bottom right).

Understanding Key Trends and Definitions for Youth and Mental Wellness

To kickstart the panel, Assoc Prof John Wong offered a broad overview of population demographics and established the framework for his discussion by defining key concepts such as youth and mental wellness.

In 2023, Singapore population statistics revealed that 13.3 percent of the population, amounting to 0.791 million people, fell within the 0 to 19 years old age bracket. This trend, compared to statistics in 2013, revealed a reduction in the 10–20 age bracket. This trend is a result of lower birth rates and the effects of an ageing population.

Youth can be defined as “a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to the independence of adulthood”, emphasising a psychosocial perspective. According to Erik Erikson’s seminal research on development stages, youths undergo a phase marked by the struggle between “identity vs role confusion” and “intimacy vs isolation”.

Mental wellness empowers individuals to govern their thoughts, emotions and behaviour. It plays a significant role in fostering resilience, building robust relationships and allowing individuals to derive enjoyment from life. Achieving mental wellness involves individuals paying attention to their own needs and feelings, setting and achieving goals, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, and cultivating strong relationships.

Findings from the National Youth Epidemiology and Resilience (YEAR) Study

The National Youth Epidemiology and Resilience (YEAR) study, conducted from 2020 to 2023, emphasised the importance of identity development and resilience in understanding mental health and well-being issues among youths. The study underscores the importance of approaching well-being for youths beyond just the absence of negative psychological states, but also the role of identity development and resilience. The findings from this study can aid mental health providers in designing interventions to enhance the psychosocial adjustment of youths.

The study administered the Youth Self Report (YSR) scale to 3,336 youths aged 10 to 18. Among them, 41.7 per cent reported clinical anxiety problem scores while 15.0 per cent of youths reported clinical affective problem scores. In addition, 12.9 per cent of youths reported *both* clinical anxiety and affective problem scores. These show that the prevalence of mental health issues among youths centre around mood and anxiety problems.

Among youths aged 10 to 18, the study found that those aged 15 to 16 were more likely to be at risk of clinical affective problems, compared to those between 11 to 12. Females have a higher risk of developing anxiety symptoms. Youths from single-parent families have a higher risk of developing mood disorders.

Furthermore, 12 per cent of youths met full diagnostic criteria for having at least one current disorder. That said, 6 per cent of adolescents had previously met criteria for at least one disorder over a year ago, and are no longer meeting the criteria, suggesting that their conditions may have improved.

Despite the alarming scores of anxiety and affective problems reported, findings suggest that the prevalence of mental health disorders found in the YEAR study is similar to that prior to the pandemic and other countries.

Well-Being and Identity Negotiated Through the Online Space

The second panellist, Professor Crystal Abidin, shared an anthropological approach to the understanding of how well-being may be negotiated by youths through online space and culture.

Social media is not a homogeneous space. It varies along with the variety of social media platforms and different platforms carry different norms and values. Social media platforms structure the way we communicate and in turn, affects the way we view ourselves.

On social media platforms, people build and are a part of communities via “thin ties” — people are bonded together without conventional self-introductions and widely accept that they are known to others “thinly” in the same community.

Well-being is negotiated online in a variety of ways — from the recorded vlogs of life as a small business owner, the consumers of live sales, to parasocial relationships with online influencers and celebrities. Users of these spaces and their audiences feel heard and have a sense of

community, albeit this “connection” can be monetised and does not exist outside the online space.

Social media is instrumental in nurturing community ties and shaping identity. These platforms enable individuals to establish bonds in the online space and bring these social realities into physical spaces. Through social media, people can engage with and navigate social realities, empowering them to negotiate their identity on their own terms.

There is a dynamic shift in online culture and norms across different generational period. The online space requires users to be “attuned to time, temporalities and sensitivity”.

Dimensions of Wellness and Wellness Planning

The third panellist, Dr Jonathan Kuek, shared about his work with Total Wellness Initiative Singapore. He began by sharing the ten dimensions of wellness that Total Wellness Initiative Singapore has adopted as their guiding model. These include: psychological, occupational, environmental, intellectual, financial, social, spiritual, digital, creative and physical as key wellness dimensions.

Total Wellness Initiative Singapore introduces a wellness plan (i.e., through a personalised guidebook for youths to monitor their lives). This is designed to help youths proactively identify potential solutions for challenges they face. Having a wellness plan help youths become more aware and develop insights into relationship between their actions and emotions. It also helps to cultivate more intentional living. In line with the wellness plan, Total Wellness Initiative Singapore also introduce youths to a Wellness Activity Wheel to help identify neglecting dimensions of wellness.

The Importance of Community for Well-Being

The fourth and last panellist, Mr Narasimman Tivasiha Mani, shared how charities like Impart approach challenges faced by youths in their pursuit of well-being. Impart aims to provide educational, mental health care and community support to youths-facing-adversities. They have observed such youths to be vulnerable to social isolation, discrimination and risk-taking behaviours. Their organisation has identified youth-facing-adversities in particular to lack effective and accessible growth opportunities

Youths facing adversities require urgent academic intervention, financial literacy support, and career opportunities. In addition, Impart finds such youths lack engagement through their interests; they are often disengaged from healthy communities and lack guidance towards their future selves. Impart believes that youths need future orientation for their well-being. Mental healthcare services may not be as accessible to youths facing adversities as they are often institutionalised.

While well-being is commonly approached individualistically, the best approach to well-being occurs within a community context. In communities, individuals are recognised as connected beings with a larger purpose, extending beyond immediate needs. Impart views youths-facing-adversities as a collective challenge rather than an individual problem. They highlight the importance of genuine well-being rooted in connections within a collective community. The

collaborative and diverse efforts shape a narrative of resilience, understanding and collective growth.

Question-and-Answer Session

Q: What are the main reasons for social isolation to be more prevalent among youths today and what can be done to support youths?

A: Mr Narasimman shared how social isolation is a systemic problem involving families of youths facing social isolation. It is further exacerbated post-pandemic, where youths have struggled to reintegrate back into communities having found solace in being alone and through online communities.

Dr Kuek shared about the transience of relationships and difficulty in finding authentic connection. He also mentioned the difficulty in identifying if youths are *socially* isolated or *physically* isolated today.

Professor Crystal reminds the audience that being alone does not necessarily equate to being lonely. She talked about the increasing trend of documenting being or living alone online.

Assoc Prof Wong presented research indicating the existence of a subgroup of young individuals who, due to their inherent temperament and personality traits, prefer solitude. In addition to this subgroup, there is another contingent facing pre-existing mental health challenges. A recent study has highlighted a rise in the number of youths grappling with social anxiety. Assoc Prof Wong concurred with Professor Crystal's viewpoint, emphasising that not all solitary youths experience distress.

Q: Self-diagnosing and romanticisation of mental health seem prevalent among youths. What are the panellists' thoughts on these observed trends on social media?

A: Professor Crystal shared youths' experience with processing grief through social media. She shared their negative experience of the involvement from those who are not close to the deceased, but also positive experiences gleaned from group chats where support is found. Beyond a concern towards the accuracy of self-diagnosis through online information on mental health, Professor Crystal shared that youths are happy that there is conversation from others who share similar experiences. This reflects youths increased usage of online communities for validation.

Assoc Prof Wong shared his perspective as a clinician when patients come with knowledge of signs and symptoms of mental problems. It represents to clinicians a sign of greater awareness and mental health literacy. However, the gap lies in helping youths be aware of clinical thresholds that warrant clinical attention. He reminded youths to shift awareness into action and being aware of the dangers of social media such as the monetising of mental health issues.

Q: How can we better address the vulnerability of LGBTQ+ youths?

A: Professor Crystal reminded how the internet can be an important resource for youths to find support and resources. Mr Narasimman shared how Impart encounters LGBTQ+ youths and dispatches volunteers to provide non-judgemental support.

Q: Any final thoughts on the best or overlooked ways we can help youths improve mental well-being?

A: Assoc Prof Wong shared about the importance of resilience and possibility for programmes to address key domains of resilience, e.g., the lack of optimism/the lack of positive self-image, sense of personal control, social support and ability to regulate emotions. He emphasised the significance of peer support, suggesting a redefinition that focuses on shared life experiences rather than a similar demographic. Mr Narasimman reiterated the importance of community for youths' well-being.

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