

Political Participation, Intentions, Values and Psychological Distress among Youth in Hong Kong Department of Social Work and Social Administration, The University of Hong Kong

1. Political Participation among Youth in Hong Kong in 2019-2020

Since June 2019, relentless discontent about the Hong Kong extradition bill has escalated into a mass political crisis. Youth have participated in various types of activities to express their demands during the on-going social event. Behind these wide range of activities, there is a need to explore youth's political involvement and their values in an in-depth manner. An online survey on "Political Participation and Intentions, Values and Psychological Distress among Youth in Hong Kong" was conducted by Dr. Celia Hoi Yan Chan, Associate Professor, and her research team between January and April 2020. The purpose of the study was to examine the values underlying youth's political intention and involvement, as well as to understand youth's well-being amid emerging social conflicts and tensions.

2. Youth online survey conducted between January and April 2020

The survey aimed to examine the political participation, political intentions, and values among youth in Hong Kong. In order to understand their well-being, the types of stressful events they experienced, their levels of stress, depression and anxiety were also investigated. Using convenient sampling, a total of 712 respondents aged between 15 and 25 years old were recruited via social media, secondary school, university and community networks (Table 1). Among these respondents, 263 (36.9%) had Forms 1-6 secondary school education (hereafter referred as secondary students), and 444 (62.4%) had a Diploma or above tertiary education (hereafter referred as tertiary education students).

3. Frequency and level of political participation of the youth respondents

Types of political activities

Respondents were asked to report the frequency of their involvement in political activities over the past six months. In general, respondents participated in some listed **low risk political activities**. The most frequently participated political activities indicated by both secondary and tertiary education students were: (1) "participating in a discussion about a social or political issue" (73.6%); (2) "signing a petition" (71.9%); and (3) "joined a protest march, meeting or demonstration" (70.2%) (Table 2). **Based on the nature of their participation, respondents tended to respond to activities initiated or organized by others.**

Degree of political involvement

The **overall political participation was considerably higher among tertiary education students than secondary students**. In addition, about 93.5% of tertiary education students and 85.2% of secondary students had participated at least once in the listed political activities in the past six months (Table 2).

4. Political intentions vary among youth respondents

Using Activism and Radicalism Intention Scale (Moskalenko & Mccauley, 2009), the survey explored respondents’ intention to participate in political activities on a rating scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Activism Intention Scale assesses the respondent’s readiness to engage in legal and non-violent political activities; whereas Radicalism Intention Scale assesses the respondent’s readiness to engage in illegal and violent political activities. The survey data showed that **51.1% (n = 364) of the 712 youth respondents tended to be supportive of participating in both legal non-violent political activities** (activism, mean = 4.66, SD= 1.35, median = 5.00) and **44.4% (n = 316) of the respondents were inclined towards participating in illegal violent political activities** (radicalism, mean = 4.52, SD = 1.58, median = 4.75).

Based on the mean scores of their political intentions, respondents were classified into four political groups:

		Activism Intention (Legal and Non-Violent)	
		Low level (Mean < 5)	High level (Mean ≥ 5)
Radicalism Intention (Illegal and Violent)	Low level (Mean < 5)	Dissociates n = 285 (40.0%)	Activists n = 111 (15.6%)
	High level (Mean ≥ 5)	Radicalists n = 63 (8.8%)	Antagonists n = 253 (35.5%)

The survey data showed that 35.5% (n = 253) of the respondents were identified as Antagonists who were supportive of both legal non-violent and illegal violent political activities. On the other hand, 40% of them (n = 285) were identified as Dissociates who were neither supportive of legal non-violent nor illegal violent political activities (Table 3). Comparing the two education level groups, results showed that secondary students were significantly more likely to be classified as Dissociates and Activists; while tertiary education students were significantly more likely to be classified as Radicals and Antagonists.

5. Universal value was ranked the most important among youth respondents

Three different types of values were investigated, namely, the “Basic Human Values”, “Universal Values”, and “Collective Values”. As measured by the Schwartz Value Survey, respondents perceived “Self-transcendence Values”, characterized by “Universalism” (i.e. broad-mindedness, beauty of nature and arts, social justice, a world at peace, equality, wisdom, unity with nature, environmental protection) (mean = 6.15) and “Benevolence” (i.e. helpfulness, honesty, forgiveness, loyalty, responsibility) (mean = 5.41) as the most important. “Conservation Values”, characterized by “Tradition” (i.e. respect for tradition, humbleness, accepting one's portion in life, devotion, modesty) (mean = 4.16) and “Self-enhancement Values”, characterized by “power” (i.e. social power, authority, wealth) (mean = 4.31) were rated relatively lower in terms of perceived importance (Figure 1).

Among the list of “Collective Values” and “Universal Values”, **“Freedom of opinion” (mean = 4.54), “Democracy” (mean = 4.33) and “Freedom at any cost” (mean = 4.01) from the “Universal Values” were rated by the respondents as the top three most important values; in contrast, “My country”**

(mean = 2.59) from the “Collective Values” was considered by the respondents as less important (Figure 2).

6. Relationship between Values and Political Intentions

Respondents who were classified as Activists (mean = 13.05), Radicalists (mean = 13.56), and Antagonists (mean = 13.87) perceived “Universal Values” as significantly more important than those who were classified as Dissociates (mean = 11.78). Differences in perceived importance of “Basic human values” among the four political intention groups were observed. Radicalists perceived “Self-transcendence”, “Openness to change” and “Self-enhancement” as significantly more important than their Dissociates counterparts.

7. Linkage between Values and Political Participation

In general, respondents who perceived greater importance of “Universal Values” and “Self-transcendence Values” such as “Benevolence” tended to have significantly more frequent political involvement; while those who perceived greater importance of “Conservation Values” such as “Conformity” and “Security” tended to have significantly less frequent political involvement.

8. Trauma-related symptoms associated with socio-political events were severe

In the survey study, respondents were asked to report a significant stressful event they had experienced. Among them, 36.6% were related to study or internship (36.6%) and 8.8% were related to socio-political events. **Respondents who found socio-political or societal events stressful (mean = 2.18) reported significantly stronger intrusion symptoms than those who found study or internship (mean = 1.59) or work (mean = 1.45) stressful. Similarly, respondents who found socio-political or societal events (mean = 1.81) stressful also reported significantly stronger hyperarousal symptoms than those who found study or internship (mean = 1.27) or work (mean = 1.19) stressful.**

9. More than 20% of the respondents reported experiencing severe to extremely severe depression and anxiety symptoms

Social conflicts and tensions that have lasted for more than a year may trigger various levels of psychological distress and post-traumatic stress symptoms, regardless of an individual’s level of political engagement. **Results showed that more than 10% of the respondents were suffering from severe to extremely severe levels of stress, more than 20% of the respondents were suffering from severe to extremely severe levels of depression, and one-fourth of the respondents were suffering from severe to extremely severe levels of anxiety (see Table 4).**

10. Implications

- 10.1 Youth’s political involvement is closely related to their values. Therefore, realizing and recognizing young people’s values is vital for policy making and socio-political development.
- 10.2 In fostering societal progression, our society could seek opportunities for youth to engage in policy decision-making.

- While encouraging young people to engage in legal political activities, our society could adopt an open-minded attitude to listen and accept suggestions and demands expressed by the youth.
- We recommend establishing channels that enable youth political participation and develop their leadership skills (such as expanding the room for expression within and outside of the government bodies, setting up platforms for youth policy-making and service works). As such, it is a prerequisite to provide young people and young people-led organizations with adequate opportunities, enabling environment and evidence-based programmes and policies.

- 10.3 Results showed that a significant number of youth respondents were facing traumatic distress arising from stressful events related to socio-political and other issues. It is recommended that platforms should be established to provide emotional support and that social networks could be utilized to deliver clinical support for youth who are suffering from severe to extremely severe anxiety and / or depression.
- Our community should employ a multilevel approach with varied delivery platforms and remote delivery strategies (e.g. online counselling / support system) to support youth at risk of psychological distress, especially during class suspension amid the COVID-19, so that they could receive the support service they need.

11. Commissioning Organization

Wing Kwong Pentecostal Holiness Church

12. Enquiry

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Appendices

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 712)

Characteristics (N = 712)	N (%)
Age	
15-17	15-17
18-22	18-22
23-25	23-25
Gender	
Male	220 (30.9%)
Female	492 (69.1%)
Education level	
Forms 1-6	263 (36.9%)
Diploma or above	444 (62.4%)
Others	5 (0.7%)
Employment status	
Full-time student	491 (68.9%)
Full-time employee	141 (19.8%)
Part-time employee	36 (5.1%)
Job seekers/Unemployed	24 (3.4%)
Freelancer	11 (1.5%)
Others	9 (1.3%)
Religion	
No religion	436 (61.2%)
Christianity	197 (27.7%)
Catholicism	35 (4.9%)
Buddhism	16 (2.2%)
Traditional folk religion	5 (0.7%)
Daoism	4 (0.6%)
Muslim	3 (0.4%)
Others	16 (2.2%)
Birthplace	
Hong Kong	623 (87.5%)
Mainland China	69 (9.7%)
Australia	5 (0.7%)
USA	4 (0.6%)
Macau	3 (0.4%)
Taiwan	2 (0.3%)
United Kingdom	2 (0.3%)
Canada	1 (0.1%)
Others	3 (0.4%)

Characteristics (n = 712)	N (%)
Parental marital status	
Married	510 (71.6%)
Separated/Divorced	101 (14.2%)
One of the parents is widowed	31 (4.4%)
Both parents are deceased	4 (0.6%)
Cohabited	5 (0.7%)
Re-married	55 (7.7%)
Others	6 (0.8%)
Monthly household income	
No Income	35 (4.9%)
On Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme	25 (3.5%)
< HKD 10,000	36 (5.1%)
HKD 10,000-19,999	102 (14.3%)
HKD 20,000-29,999	99 (13.9%)
HKD 30,000-39,999	103 (14.5%)
HKD 40,000-49,999	54 (7.6%)
HKD 50,000-59,999	43 (6.0%)
HKD 60,000-69,999	34 (4.8%)
HKD 70,000-79,999	13 (1.8%)
HKD 80,000-89,999	17 (2.4%)
HKD 90,000-99,999	8 (1.1%)
> HKD 100,000	36 (5.1%)
I don't know	107 (15.0%)
Type of housing	
Public housing	264 (37.1%)
Self-owned housing	194 (27.2%)
Home Ownership Scheme Housing	115 (16.2%)
Rented housing	90 (12.6%)
Dormitory	25 (3.5%)
Subdivided flat	6 (0.8%)
Others	18 (2.5%)
District of living	
Hong Kong Island	145 (20.4%)
Kowloon	229 (32.2%)
New Territories	330 (46.3%)
Others	8 (1.1%)

Table 2. Frequency of Political Activities Involvement over the Past 6 Months (N = 712)

	Secondary Students (N = 263)			Tertiary Education Students (N = 444)		
	Never (%)	Once to a few times (%)	A fair bit to a lot (%)	Never (%)	Once to a few times (%)	A fair bit to a lot (%)
1. Participated in a political party, club or organization.	204 (77.6%)	45 (17.1%)	14 (5.3%)	324 (73.0%)	93 (20.9%)	27 (6.1%)
2. Signed a petition.	102 (38.8%)	100 (38.1%)	61 (23.2%)	97 (21.8%)	164 (36.9%)	183 (41.3%)
3. Collected signatures for a petition.	207 (78.7%)	40 (15.2%)	16 (6.1%)	341 (76.8%)	71 (16.0%)	32 (7.2%)
4. Contacted a public official by phone or mail to tell him/her how you felt about a particular issue.	202 (76.8%)	44 (16.7%)	17 (6.4%)	317 (71.4%)	103 (23.2%)	24 (5.5%)
5. Joined in a protest march, meeting or demonstration.	111 (42.2%)	103 (39.2%)	49 (18.6%)	100 (22.5%)	153 (34.4%)	191 (43.0%)
6. Worked on a political campaign.	210 (79.8%)	42 (16.0%)	11 (4.2%)	310 (69.8%)	101 (22.7%)	33 (7.5%)
7. Participated in a discussion about a social or political issue.	86 (32.7%)	102 (38.8%)	75 (28.5%)	101 (22.7%)	165 (37.2%)	178 (40.1%)
8. Provided professional advice and support on social or political issues (e.g., legal, first aid, psychological counseling, etc.).	204 (77.6%)	51 (19.4%)	8 (3.1%)	317 (71.4%)	96 (21.6%)	31 (7.0%)

Table 3. Activism and Radicalism Intentions by Education Level (N = 712)

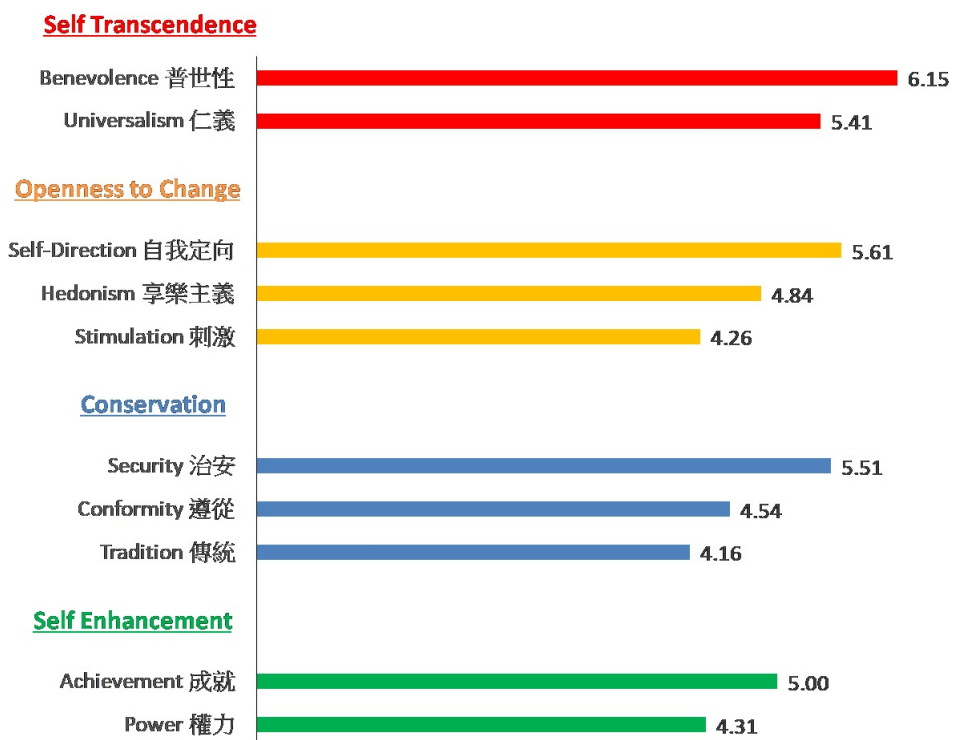
	Dissociates	Activists	Radicalists	Antagonists
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Secondary Students (N = 263)	128 (48.7%)	48 (18.3%)	13 (4.9%)	74 (28.1%)
Tertiary Education Students (N = 444)	155 (34.9%)	62 (14.0%)	49 (11.0%)	178 (40.1%)
Not specified (N = 5)	2 (40.0%)	1 (20.0%)	1 (20.0%)	1 (20.0%)
Overall (N = 712)	285 (40.0%)	111 (15.6%)	63 (8.8%)	253 (35.5%)

Table 4. Participants' Severity Level of Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Severity (N = 712)

	Depression	Anxiety	Stress
	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)
Normal	293 (41.2%)	286 (40.2%)	356 (50.0%)
Mild	104 (14.6%)	77 (10.8%)	138 (19.4%)
Moderate	163 (22.9%)	171 (24.0%)	129 (18.1%)
Severe	87 (12.2%)	68 (9.6%)	71 (10.0%)
Extremely severe	65 (9.1%)	110 (15.4%)	18 (2.5%)

Remarks: Measured by the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales, DASS (Antony, 1995)

Figure 1. Perceived Importance of Basic Human Values as Measured by Short Schwartz’s Values Survey

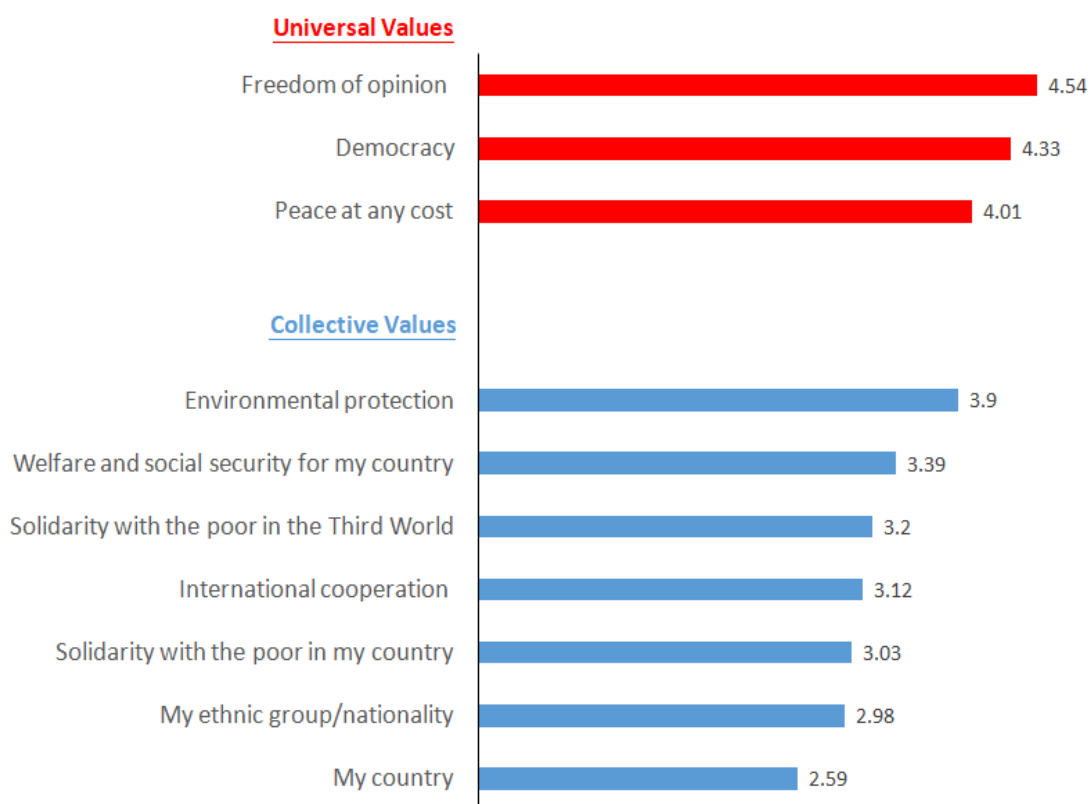


Remarks:

¹ Measured by the Schwartz Value Survey (Schwartz, 1992)

² Scoring keys: 0 indicates that the value is opposed to your principles, 1 indicates that the value is not important to you, and 8 indicates that the value is of supreme importance to you

Figure 2. Perceived Importance of Universal and Collective Values among Youth Participants



Remarks:

³ Measured by items adapted from Angvik and Von Borries’s study (1997)

⁴ Scoring keys: 1 indicates that the value is very unimportant, 5 indicates that the value is very important