

Executive Summary

According to the World Happiness Report 2016¹, Hong Kong has fallen to 75th place in world happiness rankings among the 157 countries and territories surveyed. The city has dropped three places since 2015. In terms of developed economies, Hong Kong has a relatively low ranking. The rankings of other Asian countries, such as Singapore (22nd), Thailand (33rd), Taiwan (35th), Japan (53rd) and Korea (58th), are higher than that of Hong Kong. A survey reveals that Hong Kong has dropped to its lowest position in the past seven years in the Happiness Index². While Hong Kong is a rich city, Hong Kong people, it seems, are not happy.

For months, the city has been bombarded by social conflicts, political issues, and stories about youth discontentment, anxiety and teen suicides, so much so that many people are convinced the sky is falling. It seems unavoidable that young people will struggle with this suffocating social atmosphere and experience feelings of pessimism.

According to academic definitions, optimism and pessimism are relative concepts. From the view of outcome expectancy³, optimism has been found to be strongly and consistently associated with positive outcomes, and vice versa. Personal, family, school, career and social factors can lead to optimism or pessimism.

This study examines the youth's perspective on personal and social development and investigates pessimism among youth. By exploring youth pessimism, the study also examines the reasons why youths may feel pessimistic and how they express their feelings of pessimism, as well as the negative effects of pessimism. The study uses a territory-wide random sample telephone poll, individual interviews and interviews with scholars and other experts to understand the aforementioned questions and puts forward recommendations on the basis of the findings.

¹ *World Happiness Report 2016*. John Helliwell, Richard Layard and Jeffrey Sachs. United Nations. http://worldhappiness.report/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/03/HR-V1_web.pdf

² *Hong Kong Happiness Index 2015*. Centre for Public Policy Studies of Lingnan University. http://www.ln.edu.hk/news/20151130/Happiness_Index_2015

³ With reference to C. S. Carver and M. F. Scheier (2002), S. C. Segerstrom (2001) and C. R. Snyder (2002).

Key Findings

1. The survey respondents tend to be optimistic about their own future, while some of them are pessimistic about Hong Kong's future.

The territory-wide random sample telephone poll, which was conducted in March 2016, yielded 522 responses from young people aged 15 to 34 years old. Of these, 19.1% are pessimistic about Hong Kong's future, while 5.2% are pessimistic about their own future. The average scores are 5.53 and 6.56 respectively, on a scale of 0 to 10. This reveals that the young respondents tend to be optimistic about their own future, while some of them are pessimistic about Hong Kong's future.

From the individual interviews, it is clear that those young people who feel optimistic about their own future have a greater sense of control in life than those who feel pessimistic about their own future. The more optimistic youths set life goals for themselves. However, due to a great deal of life pressure and a lack of career growth opportunities, some young people feel pessimistic.

2. The respondents tend to feel negative about Hong Kong's economic prospects, governance and social issues.

The survey shows that the young respondents gave an average score of 5.61 out of 10 for their confidence in Hong Kong's economic prospects.

In regard to governance, young respondents gave a negative evaluation of governance and the legislative council in Hong Kong. The average scores are 4.59 and 4.28 respectively, on a scale of 0 to 10. The respondents showed dissatisfaction towards the government in regard to "listening to opinions" and "promoting constitutional development". The average scores are 4.35 and 4.83 respectively, on a scale of 0 to 10.

In regard to social issues, the respondents strongly agree that there are high house prices or rents, large wealth gaps, many Hong Kong-Mainland conflicts and a great deal of social differentiation in Hong Kong. The average scores are 8.09, 7.73, 7.36 and 6.73 respectively.

Compared to the aforementioned, the respondents tend to agree less in regard to social upward movement, with an average score of 6.73.

3. More than 20% believe they are unable to influence government policies.

The survey showed that 23.7% of respondents believe they are unable to influence government policies. Meanwhile, 21.2% of the respondents would take various kinds of actions to influence government policies. Among the respondents, 9.5% would pass on their views to the government, 5.7% would take part in a social protest and 3.1% would join consultation groups.

In addition to this, many of the respondents indicated that they choose to be bystanders in two senses. In a positive sense, 45% of the respondents choose to do better. In contrast, 6.6% choose to do nothing.

4. More than 60% indicate they would not consider emigrating, while 15% said they would consider it.

The survey showed that 61.0% of respondents would not consider emigrating, while 15% would. The reasons the respondents would decide to emigrate are as follows: they are “worried about Hong Kong’s prospects” (25.0%), “feel dissatisfied about Hong Kong’s current situation” (23.2%) and believe there is “a better quality of life in places outside Hong Kong” (21.6%).

The respondents in the individual interviews express their love for Hong Kong. They have a strong sense of belonging and regard Hong Kong as their home country. Thus, they would not consider emigrating.

Main Discussion

1. Young people tend to be optimistic about their future, while some of them are pessimistic about Hong Kong’s future. If there is a persistence of pessimism, it could affect young people’s enthusiasm regarding Hong Kong. This is not good for young people’s and Hong Kong’s development.

The findings from the survey show that 19.1% of the young participants are pessimistic about Hong Kong's future, while 5.2% are pessimistic about their own future. From the individual interviews, it is clear that those young people who feel optimistic about their own future have a greater sense of control in life. They set life goals for themselves. However, due to the high levels of pressure and lack of career growth opportunities for young people in Hong Kong, some young people feel pessimistic.

Those who feel pessimistic about Hong Kong's future are also worried about Hong Kong's economy, politics and social development. At the same time, they believe they are unable to influence the society in which they live. Regardless of whether young people feel pessimistic about personal development or social development, if there is a persistence of pessimism among them, it is not good for young people's and Hong Kong's development in the long term.

- 2. For some young people, the main causes of pessimism are the politicized social atmosphere, intensified competition, low social mobility and a distrust of the governance that exist in Hong Kong. To avoid the spread of pessimism, the government should show their determination to solve these problems.**

According to experts' views, the main causes of youth pessimism in Hong Kong are the politicized social atmosphere, which leads to social conflicts; intensified competition, which causes pressure; low social mobility, which makes young people feel worried about their prospects; and a distrust of Hong Kong's governance. The government ignores public opinions and does not deal with social issues, which has made the social problems that exist within Hong Kong become more serious.

In addition to this, some young respondents report that they could not see any changes in society. They feel powerless. To avoid the spread of pessimism, the government should understand as well as face up to the situation in which young people find themselves, and review existing policies in order to tackle the problems they face step by step.

3. Young people pay attention to social values, while their pursuit of value does not match the reality. Young people are not confident in upholding the core values of Hong Kong.

From the research, it is clear that young people most uphold the values of social stability, rule of law and freedom. Additionally, young people are not confident in upholding the core values of Hong Kong. Nowadays, young people grow up wealthy and affluent. They are preoccupied with becoming highly marketable commodities. Unlike the previous generation, young people today are no longer seeking simply to survive. Some young people would like to pursue higher values and meaning in life. They expect social development to uphold the principles of freedom, democracy and the rule of law. However, there is a discrepancy between their pursuit of value and the reality. Young people may feel disappointed and thus experience negative feelings.

4. The ways in which young people express pessimism tend to polarize, involving both withdrawal and engagement in social struggles.

According to experts' views, the ways in which young people express pessimism tend to polarize, involving both withdrawal and engagement in social struggles. When young people cannot face pessimism, some of them withdraw, giving up and losing enthusiasm for life. Other young people take action, such as expressing their feelings on social media. While some young people voice their opinions within the legal system, they tend to express their views in radical ways that are outside the system (such as protests and social movements) when there is a lack of response from the government.

In a more positive sense, people who withdraw can find the respite necessary to rearrange their thoughts. Engagement with social struggles can help push society forward; however, when pessimism continues to accumulate, the ways in which young people express pessimism may tend to polarize. They may even choose to self-harm or engage in violent protests. This is not only harmful to the individuals involved, but also threatens the society in which they live.

5. Though some young people feel negatively about Hong Kong's future,

the majority of them consider Hong Kong as home and are willing to contribute to positive changes to society. The society should treasure this.

From the research, it is clear that more than 60% of young respondents would not consider emigrating; only 15% indicated they would consider emigrating. Though some young people feel negatively about Hong Kong's future, the individual interviewees indicated they would not consider emigrating. They consider Hong Kong as home and they are willing to contribute to positive changes to society. In fact, the majority of the local youth have a strong sense of belonging to Hong Kong. They are a motivational force through which to promote social progress. The government and society in which they live should treasure this.

Young people are the hope for the future. Young people's thoughts and willingness to commit are significant to the development of society. If youth pessimism can be turned into a positive force, it is believed that it can have positive impacts on society. The government should consider how to unite the power of youth, so that they can better contribute to Hong Kong and work together to build a better society.

6. Optimism and pessimism is a state of mind on the choice. It is worth considering how the government can make young people feel optimistic and rebuild their confidence in the future of Hong Kong,

Youth pessimism cannot be resolved in a short period of time. In regard to social issues, such as the Express Rail Link project, the North East New Territories New Development Areas project, the initiation of the Moral and National Education Subject and the promotion of political reform, it is acknowledged that local youth feel dissatisfied about the society in which they live. On the other hand, these issues reveal complicated social problems that warrant further investigation.

Optimism and pessimism are relative concepts. It is hard to stay positive when society is filled with pessimism. In contrast, it is not as easy to realize negative emotions when society is filled with optimism. Thus, community members should make an effort to enhance optimism

by instilling positive energy in society. It is worth considering how the government can make young people feel optimistic and rebuild their confidence in the future of Hong Kong.

Recommendations

This study offers the following recommendations based on the above findings and discussion:

- 1. The government should develop health indicators and release them periodically.**

It is recommended that the government develop health indicators in regard to health, education, the state of the environment and so forth, and release them periodically. This would help to increase public awareness of well-being, separate to economic performance.

- 2. Community members should be encouraged to instil positive energy in society, in order to turn youth pessimism into a positive force.**

It is recommended that community members use creativity and other resources to instil positive energy in society. For example, they should speak words of encouragement, inspirational stories and so forth. This could help turn youth pessimism into a positive force.

- 3. The government should improve governance and tackle social problems, as well as build trust.**

Urgent action needs to be taken to improve governance and tackle social problems, as well as build trust. The government should value views from different people, such as scholars, professionals and youth, when implementing future policies, in order to make the policies better fit the needs of young people.