



Youth: Getting to Know Them

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I am not young enough to know everything.

Oscar Wilde

In recent years, it is almost striking the extent to which youth are featured and covered in discussions on society. This could not be any closer to the truth than during the course of this eventful year for Singaporeans, in which both the General Elections and Presidential Elections were held. Irrefutably, youth continue to feature and remain a salient subject in many discussions, especially on the shifts and changes felt in our national contexts now described by the proverbial 'new normal'.¹

Recent events and developments locally show that there is no denying the importance of youth in our society, or any society for that matter. This is felt in many ways: in economic terms, where a glaring and chief concern for many policy-makers is the lack of a youthful segment in a population in context of the general ageing of populations in developed countries;² socially and culturally, where youth provide that oft-sought vibrancy deemed essential to attract people to places – Singapore's hosting of the inaugural Youth Olympic Games was no mere coincidence by this measure;³ and even politically, where youth can be cataclysmic agents and movers of tremendous change.⁴

I endeavour to examine some of the roles of youth in Singapore society and glean impressions from this outpouring of attention on the youth. In doing so, I hope to uncover some contrasts between society's expectations of youth with youths' own expectations of themselves, all the while remaining attentive to the



extents to which each of these depictions are accurate. Finally, I also delve into some of the opportunities youth readily recognise as available to them, and some of the challenges they feel confront them. I hope to put across a message to the youth to have ideals, passions and goals, and to continue to remain engaged in society. In doing so, they should also aspire to contribute to their communities and society, with space made available for them. In part, this article also provides a personal reflection of my experiences as a youth in Singapore.

I want to begin by unravelling the label 'youth' that is applied rather loosely and problematically in some instances, to what are, in fact, various, heterogeneous and diverse segments of people in society. We should ask who the youth are; how we can begin to describe them; and most importantly, what excites and engages youth; alternatively, what is it that makes them tick?

In his first speech as Prime Minister, Mr Lee Hsien Loong described Singapore's youth as those belonging to the 'post-65 generation'.⁵ This delineated the psyche of segments within the nation, with reference to those who did not have to endure the throes of its initial struggles upon gaining independence. This categorisation of the youth is too broad and risks 'failing to connect with youth (which is ironically) what the government – the adult world generally – always thinks it needs to do'.⁶ Hence, while youth is marked by shared experiences, it is also a period where individual growth and development is important. Dr Kenneth Paul Tan, Assistant Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, elaborates:

The strategy of connecting with youth is not an easy one to pull off...and failing to connect has been the source of much anxiety and often also resentment that then gets transferred into a vision of youth as inadequate and therefore a common – even national – source of worry and disappointment.⁷

Safe to say, in Singapore the public imagination that was previously dominated by accounts of youth inadequacy and apathy has started to erode. This still begs the question, what explains the behaviour of youth and why do they act in the ways they do? These questions, as posed from the perspective of adults, can be deemed judgmental even as they inquire. They rest on expectations of the 'proper' socialisation of youth in which they are to be made 'fit for' or to 'fit into' the adult world.⁸

The challenge to socialise youth in a particular image has been the cause of much anxiety in the adult world.⁹ As a result, in Singapore and with the labelling of the youth as the post-65 generation, 'conservative opinions often articulate a disproportionate yet deeply embedded lack of faith in the next generation's capacity to sustain the achievements of their predecessors'.¹⁰ There is nothing inherent in this generation of youth, be it in Singapore or elsewhere in the world, that makes it more or less worthy of criticism than the last, or the one before that. It follows that some of the 'current concerns with youth are exaggerated through a historical insensitive comparison with some imagined previous generation where everything and everyone were better'.¹¹

To contrast this, Professor Kishore Mahbubani, Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, attributes much of Asia's recent revival and unprecedented rise to the youth in their respective societies. He emphasises that in order to appreciate the roles of the youth in the burgeoning development of Asian societies, their motivations and aspirations must be framed and evaluated not in terms that are diametrically opposed to some sense of the past that is antagonistic. Rather, it is relative to this past, with its sense of community and national history, with the resources and opportunities that youth now have available to them, that they have been able to find within themselves newfound optimism and confidence. Further, this optimism, confidence and drive to succeed does find its inspiration in the past, but is crucially tuned to current contexts and contains a view of a promising future.¹² Tremendous potential



and opportunities abound for the youth if such positive perceptions gain greater currency and acceptance!

I now discuss some of the expectations of youth of themselves and the challenges and opportunities they perceive. In a recent photo-essay feature on youth for the National Geographic magazine, Mr David Dobbs asserts:

Hard as it is to believe, youth today are more cognisant of the fact we enter a world made by our parents. But we live most of our lives, and prosper (or not) in a world run and remade by our peers.¹³

Many of today's youth also demonstrate zeal to confront the world with foundation-shaking energy and freshness. We need look no further than Mr Mark Zuckerberg, Harvard dropout, but creator of *Facebook*, which revolutionised the ways in which over 800 million people interact.¹⁴

Arguably, youth in Singapore spend much time in 'training for adulthood'. This entails a disciplining process through modern social institutions like the school system and mandatory military service¹⁵ (for male citizens). A corollary of this has been a 'prolonged plasticity of youth-hood'¹⁶ or elongation of the growing up period.¹⁷ This is especially so amidst an increasing speeding up or 'time-space compression' of the world around them.¹⁸ This may frustrate youth bursting with energy to achieve. This point particularly resonates with me. I recall, by my second year in university, I was itching to be done with school and to apply all that I had learnt out in the real world.

A second point on youth's expectations is that youth value rewards more than consequences.¹⁹ Through current scientific and social scientific research,²⁰ youth are seen to display greater tendencies to see incentives in what they consider to be direct gains. These can include material benefits and also intangibles that are significant to them such as social acceptance among peers. Hence, an eagerness to be employed, or even active participation in social causes seem perfectly justified to youth regardless of trade-offs.

In retrospect, what I have come to realise is that youth (me included) need to manage these expectations. Youth need to realise and appreciate that many of these modern social institutions also serve as 'living laboratories'. As microcosms of broader society, these institutions present crucial stages for youth to immerse themselves in, learn, and truly grow.²¹ They add to the repository of tools and enriching experiences that can make youth more



complete, resilient and successful in their later adult lives.²²

Seen in another perspective, the eagerness to get into the real world and make viable contributions by applying all that is available to them is yet another function of the success of Singapore. Singaporeans have worked hard to gain and have now grown accustomed to this success. Striving for success plays a role in Singapore's national identity from which youth are not exempt.²³ However, success cannot be viewed in static terms: what it means to succeed can take on new definitions.

In this article, I have canvassed some of the concerns and issues surrounding the youth in local contexts. I hope it adds to our understanding of youth, and will, in time, foster greater dialogue between youth and other segments in society. I implore all youth to seize as many opportunities as available to them - there has never been a better time for them to strive and meet their aspirations! Also, they should have the resolve to overcome challenges that come their way. As Hamilton Wright Mabie once said:

Don't be afraid of opposition.
Remember, a kite rises against,
not with the wind.

The views presented in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of Young Sikh Association (Singapore).

1 Notable activities by youth, their aspirations, expectations, and their role in redefining and building upon the success Singapore has achieved thus far, were raised as points for discussion by many Members of Parliament, including the President and Prime Minister, during the opening of the first session of the 12th Parliament (10 October 2011), and debates on the President's Address (17-21 October 2011). Speeches by the President and Prime Minister available from: <http://www.istana.gov.sg>, and, <http://www.pmo.gov.sg>, respectively).

2 See Fishman T C (2010), *Shock of Grey: The aging of the world's population and how it pits young against old, child against parent, worker against boss, company against rival, and nation against nation*, SCRIBNER: New York.

3 See then Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports Vivian Balakrishnan's blog entry, 'Why the Youth Olympic Games in Singapore was a Success', at: <http://vivian.balakrishnan.sg/why-the-youth-olympic-games-in-singapore-was>.

4 Kishore Mahbubani, Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (National University of Singapore), attributes much of Asia's recent unprecedented rise to youth in these societies. See 'Chapter 2: Why Asia is Rising Now' in Mahbubani K (2008), *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East*, Public Affairs: New York.

5 In his first speech as Singapore's third prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong (12 August 2004), called upon Singapore's youth - the 'post-65 generation' - to come forward with new ideas and contributions as citizens and possibly even future political leaders. (Speech available from <http://www.pmo.gov.sg>). 1965 was the year that gained political independence.

6 Tan, K P (2007), 'Youth: Every generation's moral panic', in Tan K P (ed.), *Renaissance Singapore?*, NUS Press: Singapore, pp219-230.

7 *Ibid.*

8 For interesting scientific perspectives on behavioural trends in youth, see Dobbs D (2011), *Beautiful Brains: The New Science of the Teenage Brain*, in National Geographic Vol. 220, No. 4, Oct. 2011.

9 *Ibid.*

10 The gist of such conservative opinion, according to Kenneth Paul Tan, is, "A pronounced claim that today's youth are too comfortable in their material affluence and they have not experienced real hardship or struggle of any kind that could implant the drive to succeed." Tan, K.P. (2007), 'Youth: Every generation's moral panic', in Tan K P (ed.), *Renaissance Singapore?*, NUS Press: Singapore, pp219-230.

11 *Ibid.*

12 See 'Chapter 2: Why Asia is Rising Now' in Mahbubani K (2008), *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East*, Public Affairs: New York.

13 Dobbs D. (2011), *Beautiful Brains: The new science of the teenage brain*, in National Geographic Vol. 220, No. 4, October 2011

14 For a fascinating account of the 'facebook story' and Mark Zuckerberg, see Kirkpatrick D. (2011), *The Facebook Effect: The Inside Story of the Company that is Connecting the World*, Simon & Schuster: New York.

15 Tan, K P (2007), 'Youth: Every generation's moral panic', in Tan K P (ed.), *Renaissance Singapore?*, NUS Press: Singapore, pp219-230.

16 Dobbs D (2011), *Beautiful Brains: The new science of the teenage brain*, in National Geographic Vol. 220, No. 4, October 2011.

17 Henig, R.M. (2010), *What is it about 20-Somethings?*, available from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/22/magazine/22Adulthood-t.html?pagewanted=all>

18 Massey, D (1995), *Spatial Divisions of Labour: Social structures and the geography of production*, (2nd edition) Macmillan: London.

19 These are the results of Neuroscientist B J Casey cited in Dobbs D. (2011), *Beautiful Brains: The New Science of the Teenage Brain*, in National Geographic Vol. 220, No. 4, October 2011.

20 This includes psychiatry, among other cross-disciplinary research. An extension of this train of thought is that behavioural tendencies displayed by youth are increasingly considered part of the evolutionary and adaptive processes of our species. In other words, such behaviour is considered and expected to make youth smarter in their later adult lives! *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*

23 Chong T (2010), 'The Role of Success in Singapore's National Identity', in Chong T. (ed.), *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited*, ISEAS: Singapore, pp.1-20.