



## SEARCHING “LIFE JACKETS” FOR FUTURE VULNERABLE YOUNG LEADERS

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### Abstract

The number of youth suicide cases has been rising sharply in Hong Kong. The surging number of tertiary students among the youth who committed suicide is alarming. The objective of this conceptual paper is to explore the association among adolescents' perceived academic performance, peer support and resilience to their suicidal ideation. The Asian culture places much emphasis on youngsters' academic performance. This pressure on students to excel academically results in stress which is expected to adversely affect their mental health and well-being. The advancement in digital technology may have worsened the situation. Adolescents of this generation grow up in a digital world and Internet age. Communication over the Internet and social media allows them to read only things that fit their tastes. In addition, they may “unlike” or “unfriend” things that they do not like. This lack of appreciation of complicated and holistic views leads to a decline in their interpersonal skills and further reduces their resilience to handle stress and failure. The literatures indicate that peer support may act as a protective factor to shield adolescents from risk behaviours such as suicidal ideation. A supportive friendship network may play an important role to substitute for needed support from family. The simultaneous effects of perceived academic performance, peer support and resilience on suicidal ideation are being discussed. This paper fills the gap of the lack of related research focusing on adolescents in tertiary education in Hong Kong and provides an additional perspective to curtail the high suicide rate of students.

**Keywords:** Chinese Students, Hong Kong, Suicide

### 1. Introduction

According to the World Health Organisation, suicide was found to be the second leading cause of death of youth from 15-29 years old globally (World Health Organization, 2012). Hong Kong is no exception. Statistics from The Hong Kong Jockey Club Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention (2016) reflected that in the period from year 2010 to 2012, the Hong Kong suicide rate of youth aged from 15-24 increased for 19% while the overall suicide rate dropped for 8%.

Table1: Suicidal Rates in Hong Kong

| Age Group    | 2010  | 2011  | 2012  | 2013  | 2014 |
|--------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| All ages     | 13.8% | 12.3% | 12.8% | 13.0% | --   |
| 12-24        | 7.0%  | 7.5%  | 8.3%  | 7.5%  | 5.9% |
| Less than 15 | 0.7%  | 0.7%  | 0.4%  | 0.4%  | 0.4% |

Source: Hong Kong Jockey Club Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention, University of Hong Kong.  
<http://csr.p.hku.hk/statistics/>

Table2: Number of Suicide Cases in Hong Kong

| Age Group    | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 |
|--------------|------|------|------|------|------|
| All ages     | 969  | 867  | 917  | 938  | 894  |
| 12-24        | 62   | 66   | 73   | 65   | 49   |
| Less than 15 | 6    | 6    | 3    | 3    | 5    |

Source: Hong Kong Jockey Club Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention, University of Hong Kong.  
<http://csrp.hku.hk/statistics/>

Although the youth suicide rate declined from 2012 to 2014, the number of youth suicide cases surged recently. From September 2015 to March 2016, a total of 22 youth suicide cases were reported, among which 10 were tertiary students comparing to an average of 2 to 3 tertiary student suicides from 2010 to 2014 (Cheung & Chiu, 2016). This stark rise of the number of tertiary student committing suicide was particularly alarming. Although the problem of suicide among adolescents in Western countries has been researched extensively, similar research on Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong is less prevalent, with a special focus on tertiary students being even rarer. The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship of perceived academic performance, peer support and resilience to suicidal ideation of Hong Kong tertiary students.

## 2. Significance of the Study

This conceptual paper is significant because it provides a more comprehensive approach to explore the support for handling students' emotional outcry phrase and pressure of their study. It also draws public attention to the personal and contextual factors that may provide possible "Life Jackets" to shield students from suicidal ideation.

## 3. Discussions of Theoretical Framework

This conceptual paper covers three core elements which may be considered as "Life Jackets" for the youth in Hong Kong. They are perceived academic performance, peer support, and resilience. The details are discussed below.

## 4. The Role of Perceived Academic Performance

Perceived academic performance is a subjective measure of academic achievement (Suldo, Riley & Shaffer, 2006). Research findings showed that students' subjective perception of competence is a more powerful predictor, relative to the objective measures, to their well-being (Huebner, 1991; Huebner & Alderman, 1993; Dew & Huebner, 1994; Leung, McBride-Chang & Lai, 2004).

Review of studies in different countries support the significant relationship between perceived academic performance and suicidal ideation. In a research of suicide-related behaviours among Colombian youth, perceived academic performance was found positively related to reported suicidal thoughts and attempts (Pinzon-Perez & Perez, 2001). In a longitudinal research in Sweden, Rojas (2013) revealed that poor school performance at earlier age is an indicator of suicidal behaviour in adolescence and young adulthood. Another study on Australian school students suggested that perceived academic performance, self-esteem and locus of control are all significantly associated to suicidality, with perceived academic performance being the most influential predictor of suicidality (Martin et al., 2005).

Asian culture places strong emphasis on academic performance (Leung, McBride-Chang & Lai, 2004; Suldo, Riley & Shaffer, 2006). Chinese parents judge children's achievements primarily by their academic performance (Stevenson & Lee, 1996; Leung, McBride-Chang & Lai, 2004) because parents generally believe that an outstanding academic attainment paves the way for a better career and a bright future (Leung, Salili & Baber, 1986; Chen, Lee & Stevenson, 1996). As the very limited number of higher education places is highly sought for (Leung, Salili & Baber, 1986; Leung, McBride-Chang & Lai, 2004), the education curriculum in Hong Kong is examination-oriented (Cheung & Chiu, 2016) and students are under constant pressure to perform (Stevenson & Lee, 1996). The negative impact of stress from studying (Cheung & Chiu, 2016) may in turn affect students' subjective well-being (Hu, 1994; Lau, Siu & Chik, 1998;

Leung, McBride-Chang & Lai, 2004). Accordingly, a strong correlation between perceived academic performance and suicidal ideation is generally predicted. However, research results about Hong Kong students are mixed. A study of female Chinese students aged 13-18 reported that academic issues like test anxiety, academic self-concept are significant indicators of adolescent depression and subsequent suicidal ideation (Lee et al., 2006). Steward and colleagues' research (1999) about Hong Kong adolescents also recognised study pressure as a significant indicator of adolescents' depression, which mediates the development of suicidal ideation. On the other hand, Sun and Hui (2007a) found that academic pressure does not significantly predict suicidal ideation.

The above diverse results highlight the complexity of the problem which deserves further investigation in this study. In addition, the lack of related research with Hong Kong tertiary students as the primary focus is another gap to be filled.

### **5. The Role of Peer Support**

Many studies revealed the importance of family support as an effective protective factor against suicidal ideation (e.g. Rudd, 1990). A positive family relationship consistently shields adolescents from several risk behaviors including suicidal thoughts (Blum, Beuhring & Rinehart, 2000). However, The Samaritans, an non-governmental organisation in Hong Kong dedicated to suicide prevention, reported that among the 24 per cent of Hong Kong adolescents who have suicidal thoughts or have attempted suicide, 70 per cent would likely tell their friends, rather than adults, about their feelings before taking any further action (Samaritans, 2014). Sun and Hui's research (2007b) echoes that youth in Hong Kong with severe suicidal ideation seldom seek help from their family because they consider their family unsupportive and unresponsive to their needs. Instead, they would turn to their best friends for emotional comfort in events of frustration. Studies in UK reported the positive impact of supportive social interactions on the mental health and well-beings of youth (Edwards, 2003). This suggests the important role played by a supportive friendship network to substitute for needed support from family.

Many studies supported the predictive power of peer support (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003; Reddy, Rhodes & Mulhall, 2003) and peer acceptance (Steward et al., 1999) to adolescents' depression and self-esteem, which mediate the development of suicidal ideation (Overholster et al., 1995; De Man, 1999). Sun and Hui's (2007a) and Sun, Hui and Watkins's (2006) studies showed similar relationship between peer support and suicidal ideation, with self-esteem and depression as mediators in Hong Kong students studying in high school. On this account, friendship compensates for effect of weak family support on suicidal adolescents' adjustment (Gauze et al., 1996; Kerr, Preuss & King, 2006). Peer support is also negatively related to symptoms of depression (Slavin & Rainer, 1990; Kerr, Preuss & King, 2006). Besides, peer support moderates the relationship between adolescents' distress and suicidal tendencies (Sun, Hui & Watkins, 2006).

However, findings of other studies suggested otherwise. Perkins and Hartless (2002) found that lack of friendship does not significantly associate with suicidal ideation among adolescents. Studies even disclosed that adolescents' suicidal behaviour is related to their friend's suicidal behaviour (Prinstein, Boergers & Spirito, 2001; Kerr, Preuss & King, 2006). Their friendship with deviant peers indirectly predicts their suicidal ideation through the mediation of depression (Prinstein et al., 2000). Rodd (1990) also revealed that low support from family coupled with high support from deviant friends increases the suicidal ideation in times of distress. Given the mixed research findings, Kerr, Preuss and King (2006) have urged for consideration of the dubious nature of the influence of peer support. Accordingly, the predicative power of peer support to suicidal ideation constitutes another area of study in this research.

## **6. The Role of Resilience**

Resilience is the ability to revive in the face of adversity, to adapt to changing environment and to deal with stressor in lives (Abbott-Chapman, Denholm & Wyld, 2008). Connor and Davidson (2003) define resilience as a set of personal characteristic, such as self-efficacy, action-orientation, and adaptability, which allow one to overcome adverse events and experience. Among the many definitions, it is generally agreed that resilience refers to the ability to withstand adversity and to recover from negative experience (Prince-Embury & Saklofske, 2013, 2014; Prince-Embury, 2015).

Masten and Coatsworth (1998) argued that resilience will only be recognised through one's response to stressful life events. In a study of homeless youth who are characterised by a high rate of suicidal ideation due to their highly exposure to physical and mental health risk, resilience was negatively related to suicidal ideation and psychological distress (Cleverley & Kidd, 2011). Even in a study not particularly targeted on high risk young people, results still showed the negatively association between personal resiliency and risk behaviour including suicidal thoughts, intentions, and plans. (Prince-Embury, 2015).

Some researchers advocate the multidimensional nature of resilience. In other words, an adolescent, especially the high risk one, may exhibit resilience in some areas but show problems in other domains (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000). In a study of children suffering from maltreatment, Kaufman and colleagues (Kaufman et al., 1994) found that approximately two-thirds of the children were academically resilient, but only about one-fifth showed resilience in social relationship. Nevertheless, other studies showed that resilience can manifest over a wide range of areas. Perkins and Jones (2004) reported that when resilience draws on supportive peer group characteristics, positive school climate, religiosity, other adult support, family support, view of the future and involvement with extra-curricular activities, it is an effective protector against seven domains of risk behaviours, including suicidal ideation, alcohol use, tobacco use, drug use, sexual activity, antisocial behaviour and delinquency, and purging.

What makes the issue more complicated is the advancement in digital technology. Adolescents of this generation grow up in a digital world and Internet age. They are able to access massive local and global information and have voices to show "like" or "unlike" feelings explicitly in Internet and social media channels. However, although they are more connected with others through the Internet, they read only things that fit their tastes. Adolescents in Hong Kong are no exception. This lack of appreciation of complicated and different views may result in a decline in their interpersonal skills and resilience to handle stress (Cheung & Chiu, 2016). Decline in resilience to handle stress coupled with the remarkably stressful studying environment enveloping the Hong Kong students (Stevenson & Lee, 1996) may make them more prone to risk behaviours. Therefore, the association of Hong Kong adolescents' resilience to their suicidal ideation deserves further investigation.

In response to the alarming signal of the surging number of tertiary student committing suicide, this study aims to shed light on the research problem of how perceived academic performance, peer support and resilience influence adolescent suicidal ideation.

## **7. Data Collection Methods**

This is a conceptual paper which is mainly developed through comprehensive secondary research in terms of reviewing past literatures, online materials, newspaper articles, reference books and relevant statistics. There are several information sources used for data collection. Firstly, online literature downloaded from The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and College of Professional and Continuing Education (CPCE) libraries. Secondly, key word search through Google search engine such as "Hong Kong student's suicide rate" and "study pressure of Hong Kong students" etc. In addition, online statistics are collected from both global and local organisations such as World Health Organisation, Hong Kong Jockey Club Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention, University of Hong Kong. Thirdly, online database covering different



disciplines are used for collecting relevant information for this study, for instance, sociology, business and management and education.

### **8. Key Findings from Literature**

After conducting comprehensive review of past literatures and relevant online statistics and references about student suicide, three potential key factors are explored in this paper. They are perceived academic performance, peer support and resilience. These factors may be considered as “Life Jackets” to prevent students from committing suicide.

People do not grow up in isolation, but through the interaction with their physical and social environment. The massive information provided online and the freedom to “like”, “unlike” or delete information or messages in social media facilitate the youth to become more self-centred and less receptive to opposite views or things that they don’t like. Furthermore, it may create confusion to the adolescents in terms of their values, future direction and meaning of life. Accordingly, adolescents’ development is closely related to their surroundings (Sun, Hui & Watkins, 2006). This study explores contextual factors and personal factors simultaneously in examining adolescent suicidal ideation. Taking into consideration the salient factors relevant to Hong Kong adolescents, the contextual factors identified at the adolescents’ immediate environment include perceived academic performance in school and peer support. For the personal factors, it covers the psychological factor of resilience relating to suicidal ideation. The findings of this study support the arguments that the effective management of these three core elements may provide “Life Jackets” to shield students from suicidal ideation when encountering emotional outcry and unexpected failure situations.

### **Conclusions**

The surging number of tertiary students committing suicide in Hong Kong serves as a wakeup call for a better understanding and more effective intervention measures to promote students’ mental health and well-being. This conceptual paper explores the impacts of both the contextual and personal factors on adolescents’ suicidal ideation. It contributes to the literature regarding the effects of perceived academic performance, peer support and resilience as the “Lift Jackets” to curtain suicidal ideation. It also fills the gap of the lack of related research with tertiary students in Hong Kong as the focal point of study. Furthermore, future studies relating to the impacts of contextual and personal factors on Chinese students’ suicidal ideation are recommended.

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