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“Hidden Youth”: A Critical Study of Socially Disengaged Young People in Hong Kong and Scotland

Mark Tsun On Wong

**PhD
The University of Edinburgh
2016**

Declaration

I, Mark Tsun On Wong, declare that I have composed this thesis. It is entirely my own work and it has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed:

Date: 11th November 2017

Abstract

There has been growing interest in academic literature about young people who are marginalised and disengaged from society. This thesis focuses on young people in Hong Kong and Scotland who physically shut themselves in the bedroom and do not go outside for months and years on end. They are referred to as “hidden youth” in East Asia, and it has emerged as a topical social issue across the region in the past ten years. Previous research studying “hidden youth” (mainly in Japan and Hong Kong) highlights that there are structural barriers in contemporary society which could lead to young people becoming self-secluded. The young people are described as living reclusive and solitary lives, as they are excluded from participation in the labour market and education and disengaged from interactions with families and other communities, especially friends and peer groups. Hence, they are considered as “withdrawn” from society and disconnected from socialising.

This thesis critically reflects on “hidden” young people’s sense of connectedness and “being social” based on their lived experience. It also draws on recent debates of the construction of the “social”, particularly in digital sociology, to shed light on the processes of socialising in the digital age. This study uncovered that *how* “hidden” young people socialise may in fact be heterogeneous. Variability in how they engage in interactions and participation in society was identified. There were also differences in their levels of solitude and loneliness. Hence, describing how the young people are “being social” could be more nuanced than previously thought. This also makes analysing them as “socially withdrawn” particularly problematic.

This research uses a qualitative exploratory approach, looking comparatively across two contexts; 32 interviews were conducted with “hidden youth” in Hong Kong and Scotland. These two contexts are considered as instrumental examples, where social disengagements are especially prominent but discussed differently. The participants revealed various perceptions of hopelessness and lack of opportunities in work and education on the hand. This significantly affected their motivations to participate in employment and education; they could feel unable to fulfil their aspirations and become de-motivated. On the other hand, they were more interconnected with different groups of people in the digital world, and their interactions could be fluid. The space of the bedroom was highlighted as an important site where interactions could occur. This adds another dimension to consider how “hidden” young people interact, particularly with communities such as peer groups, friends and families. Moreover, digital interactions may also be important to how they socialise and experience a sense of connectedness. This highlights that there may be tensions in how young people’s motivations, as well as the opportunities they have, affect their engagements in digital and physical interactions.

Therefore, this thesis argues that “hidden youth” could feel a sense of *powerlessness* towards hierarchical macro structures and *meaninglessness* towards interactions and participation in society. Conversely, they are relying on emerging digital social structures and networks to seek other forms of “being social”. Their high levels of digital interactions could in fact be a *reaction* to their experiences of un-fulfilment in the labour market and in education. This thesis makes an important contribution to understand “hidden youth” and adds a more nuanced perspective to this emerging debate. In addition, it points to further aspects that should be taken into account in future studies to fully comprehend the sociality of a young person and its complexities in the digital age.

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Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my supervisors, Ingela Naumann and Sotiria Grek, who have provided an exceptional amount of guidance in every step of the journey of this PhD. Their advices and feedback were crucial to the development of this thesis and this study. It has been such a privilege to work with two very supportive, caring and patient supervisors. Thank you for always encouraging me to keep thinking critically and developing my own voice.

Grateful thanks go to the School of Social and Political Science in University of Edinburgh for providing a financial award for the fieldwork conducted in this research.

My thanks also go to the Non-Governmental Organisations and Schools in Hong Kong, Local Councils in Scotland, and YouthLink Scotland, for being willing to help with recruiting participants for this research. I am very grateful for the generosity and dedication shown by the youth work teams and management teams involved.

The young people who took part in the interviews were integral to the insights developed in this study. My sincere gratitude goes to every single young individual who shared and opened up to me about their lives. I have valued and enjoyed most about being able to listen to their perspectives and self-reflections. Their help far exceeded what I had hoped to receive. Thank you for making the challenges of doing this study completely worth it.

I would also like to thank all colleagues and friends in and outside of Edinburgh who had offered their help, intellectually and personally, throughout the course of this PhD.

Finally, my heartfelt thanks go to my family. This work would not have been possible without the unending love and support I had received. Thanks to all of you who believed in me.

Chapter I — Introduction

Nobody sees me anymore...I have been in my room, without playing PS3 or watching TV...Just sitting in the dark, texting my pals and that.

—Gary, 15 years old, Scotland

How long can someone stay in their bedroom and not go outside for? Weeks? Months? How about years? In April 2014, a young person who had shut himself in the bedroom for ten years attempted suicide in Hong Kong. This dominated the news headlines for days and created further public outcry for Hong Kong’s policy-makers and youth services to address the growing issue of “hidden youth” (Apple Daily 2014; Oriental Daily 2014). According to the news reports, the young person was found to live a very lonely, secluded life disengaging from the outside world. He was always in his bedroom and rarely got out of the house. He was also described as barely having any interactions with people, including friends, peers and neighbours. The young person lived with his father, but they had minimal interactions with each other. The father recalled that the way he communicated with his son was by writing and leaving post-it notes on the door, such as “dinner is ready in the fridge”. Nonetheless, the father also described how his son enjoyed being on the computer and playing online games. The newspapers published pictures of his bedroom, which was filled with boxes of computer games and figurines of game characters.

Just days before his son attempted suicide, the father convinced him to take up an opportunity to work as a chef with his father’s friend. This was the first time he went outside in years. On the third day of re-engaging in work, he decided to take his life. His father found and saved him hours before it was too late. The note the young person left that evening revealed that he had felt hugely under pressure and overwhelmed with going back to work. He could no longer cope with facing and “re-integrating” with society. His note ended with a poignant message dedicated to his father’s care and expressed how sorry he was about being the way he was and not being “normal” like other young people.

This highlights a striking account of the life and varied emotions of a “hidden youth”. It typifies how this discussion has emerged in East Asia (Commission on

Poverty 2005). This thesis focuses on understanding “hidden” young people in Hong Kong and Scotland in greater depth. It aims to critically reflect on their lived experiences and their disengagements. Moreover, it questions common interpretations of the young people as “withdrawn” from society, based on assumptions of their seclusion and loneliness in the bedroom (Teo 2010; Wong 2009b; Wong and Ying 2006). This thesis will argue a more nuanced analysis is needed to fully capture the multiplicity of “hidden” young people’s connectedness and engagements with different dimensions of the “social”.

There has been growing interest in youth studies about young people who are marginalised and disengaged from society (Arnett 2000; Antonucci et al. 2014; Brown and Larson 2002; Coles 1995; Furlong and Cartmel 2007; Wallace and Bendit 2009). The discussions revolve around issues such as the impacts of social exclusion (Hills et al. 2002; MacDonald 1997). This was particularly found in the 1990s. More recently, the term “NEET” (Not in Education, Employment and Education) has also gained attention, predominantly in western contexts (Finlay et al. 2010; Yates and Payne 2006). This reflects that there are increased concerns of young people being disconnected and isolated (Barry 2005a; Pole et al. 2005). The importance of social interactions and participation, especially for the younger generation, has been emphasised by several scholars (Erikson 1963; Jenkins 2004, 2006; Williamson 1997).

“Hidden youth” emerges as a particularly interesting extension of this discussion in East Asia (Saito 1998; Teo and Gaw 2010). It observes an increased number of young people shutting themselves in the bedroom and not go outside for a protracted period of time (Furlong 2008). This is suggested to last from months to years on end (Kato et al. 2012). This behaviour was first identified in Japan. It gained high levels of public and media attention. It has been estimated that there are more than one million “hidden” young people (or “hikikomori”) in Japan alone (Saito 1998). The issue quickly gained recognition in other East Asian contexts (Chan and Lo 2014). In Hong Kong, it has become a widely-debated topic among policy-makers and also public and voluntary sectors since the early 2000s (Legislative Council 2010). The latest figures indicate that more than 41,000 young people in Hong Kong are “hidden”, which is 5% of the local youth population (Wong et al. 2015).

As illustrated by Victor Wong (2012), discussions of “hidden youth” developed with much stigma attached to the young people also. They are described as being reclusive and disconnected from society. Moreover, their behaviour is considered as an

“extreme” outcome of social exclusion and marginalisation. Previous research studying “hidden youth” (mainly in Japan and Hong Kong) highlights that there are structural barriers in contemporary society which could lead to young people becoming self-secluded (Chan and Lo 2010; Furlong 2008). Past studies tend to describe the young people as turning to solitary and lonesome ways of living (Wong and Ying 2006). There is also a focus on analysing the young people as “socially withdrawn”. It highlights four main components of the concept of their disengagements from the “social”: being disengaged from participation in the labour market; disengaged from education; disengaged from interactions with families, and; disengaged from other communities, especially friends and peer groups (Wong 2009b).

This thesis aims to critically understand “hidden” young people’s experiences of social connectedness. It puts current understandings about the degree, range and importance of different aspects of their disengagements to test in two different contexts. Hence, this thesis attempts to expand and construct a more nuanced analysis of “hidden youth” in Hong Kong and Scotland. It also raises questions about assumptions which consider the young people as living in solitude and loneliness because of their *physical* seclusion in the bedroom and not going outside (Saito 1998; Wong and Ying 2006). Conversely, this study reveals that there were more varied interpretations of the young people’s sense of “being social”. In particular, digital sociology provides useful arguments to highlight the complexities of this (Lupton 2015; Orton-Johnson and Prior 2013). It is suggested that emerging dimensions of the construction of the “social” in the digital age should also be taken into consideration.

The Study’s Aim and Research Questions

Using the sites of Hong Kong and Scotland as concrete examples, this study considers the heterogeneity of *how* “hidden” young people engage in the “social”. The working definition of “hidden youth” in this study refers to young people who shut themselves in the bedroom for a protracted period and disengage from “being social” to varying extents. It is useful to think of this as a “spectrum” and place early stages of becoming secluded and detaching from some aspects of the “social” on the one end and, on the other, a more “extreme” observation of full seclusion and being severely disconnected from interactions and social relations. This definition builds on Victor Wong’s (2009b) framework of defining “hidden youth”, which is one of the most comprehensive in the literature. However, the working definition employed in this study

contests Victor Wong's rigid approach to "hidden-ness" by considering a less prescribed configuration. This draws on works such as Chan and Lo's (2010; 2014) studies that take into account the diverse experiences and varying "levels" of seclusion of "hidden" young people. What is considered as being "hidden" will be discussed further in the literature review and findings of the study.

It is also important to examine and address the variety of "hidden" young people's connectedness and sociability. In this thesis, I refer to "being social" as aspects of a complex process through which a person interacts and lives collectively in relation to other people. This is constituted by varied forms of human connections, including personal relationships as well as relations that reinforce interdependencies and organise social order in the "life-in-common" (Couldry and Hepp 2017).

It is also imperative to recognise that the concept of "hidden youth" is contested; the definition and meaning of being "hidden" (or "withdrawn") is unclear and connected to varied interpretations (Furlong 2008). The approach I have adopted is remaining open and giving primacy to young people's voice. My aim is to have a closer examination of what being "hidden" means and involves according to young people's points of view. It is also valuable to compare young people's accounts against assumptions that underpin existing frameworks of the concept, and thereby examine whether they have any real analytic hold on the lived experiences of young people. The contested nature of the concept of "hidden youth" will be a key issue to address and continued to be discussed within this thesis. The notion of "hidden" is employed as a general metaphor that captures varying experiences of avoiding socialising that a young person physically secluded in the bedroom might face.

Hong Kong and Scotland were considered as prime sites to find and investigate differing experiences of being "hidden". Hong Kong was a particularly useful context to identify young people who could be regarded as more "severely hidden" and secluded. Scotland, on the other hand, was a prime choice to find young people who were on the other end of the spectrum and comparatively less disengaged from the "social". These two contexts are considered as instrumental examples, where social disengagements of youth are especially prominent but discussed differently. In the context of Hong Kong, the issue of "hidden youth" is widely recognised and it provides useful site knowledge to draw on. In particular, Chan and Lo (2014) offer initial insights that suggest different levels of disengagement may be observed in this context. Young people who have been "hidden" for longer than a year were more likely to have stronger connections with their

family members. Moreover, they may have interactions with other “hidden” young people online (Chan and Lo 2010). This points to an important indication that “hidden youth” is not necessarily a monolithic group. As will be illustrated later, this study provides further evidence to consider this argument. Variations in the young people’s levels of interactions and participation in society were identified in the interviews.

In the context of Scotland, the topic of “hidden youth” is largely under-researched and discussions of disengaged young people are presented differently. Nonetheless, youth disengagement from the “social” is also a salient and highly contentious issue in this context (Adams 2012). This is debated in relation to various structural barriers, as well as young people’s potential lack of aspirations and motivations (Macdonald 1997; Sandford et al. 2006; Scottish Government 2012a; Sinclair and McKendrick 2012). Recent focus is also placed on the impact of the economic recession and diminished job opportunities on young people’s participation in work and education, particularly after the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 (Antonucci et al. 2014; Finlay et al. 2010; Nudzor 2010). This makes Scotland a particularly useful site to consider. It highlights the controversy and different aspects of “being social” which have been previously neglected. Moreover, it offers to identify and learn about the experiences of “hidden” young people in a context where it has not been studied before.

Therefore, the two contexts chosen were crucial to explore the nuances and diversity of the young people’s engagements in the “social”. It helps to put what we know about “hidden youth” so far to test. This study offers further considerations and enriches the understanding of the young people’s connectedness. Variability in their levels of loneliness and disengagements was considered in both sites (Chan and Lo 2014). By using a qualitative approach and interviews with “hidden” young people, this study turns to focus on the complexities and individual differences of their interactions (Suoranta and Vadén 2008). The following research questions are raised:

- 1) How can “hidden” young people’s sense of “being social” and connectedness be described? What types of interactions does it involve?
- 2) How do the young people interpret and manage how they socialise? In what ways do their engagements in the “social” and interactions with people vary across different dimensions of “being social”?

The study thus hopes to illuminate new dimensions of thinking about “hidden youth” and contests the existing concept of their disengagements with the “social”. The

thesis also argues an analysis of the young people's sense of "being social" at a micro-level could be helpful. It offers an approach to take the young people's motivations, perceptions and individual experiences into account, in addition to looking at how structural barriers could exclude them from "being social" (Rainie and Wellman 2014). Hence, what we should ask is not only what barriers there are in contemporary social structures; we should also look at the individual young person and their lived experiences. How do the young people themselves interpret their sense of connectedness and "being social"? This helps query what engaging in the "social" really means for the young people. It also addresses a viewpoint which is previously overlooked, thereby attempts to expand the existing analysis of their social connectedness.

In doing so, this study reveals tensions in young people's motivations to engage in different aspects of social interactions and participation. As will be illustrated in the findings, the young people were found to have various perceptions of hopelessness and lack of opportunities in work and education. This significantly affected their motivations to participate in employment and education. On the other hand, the participants were more interconnected with different groups of people in the digital world. This thesis draws on recent debates of the construction of the "social" to shed light on the processes and fluidity of socialising in the digital age (Baym 2010; Miller 2011; Papacharissi 2011). This highlights that other dimensions of "being social", which do not necessarily involve physical interactions nor participation in the labour market and education, could also be important to how one experiences a sense of connectedness (Castells 2001; Jamieson 2013; Wynn and Katz 1997). Furthermore, the space of the bedroom was reflected to be an important site where social interactions could occur (Livingstone 2009; Livingstone and Bovill 2001). This adds another dimension to consider how "hidden" young people could interact with various communities and social groups. Hence, describing how the young people are "being social" could be more complex and nuanced than previously thought; this makes analysing them as "socially withdrawn" particularly problematic.

Therefore, based on the new empirical evidence, this study makes an important contribution to understand "hidden youth" and adds a more nuanced perspective to this emerging debate. This thesis argues that the young people could feel a sense of *powerlessness* and *meaninglessness* towards participation in hierarchical macro social structures (Castells 1997; Chan and Lo 2010). They could feel dissociated and pushed to the limit by structural barriers in contemporary labour market and education, and found

solace by engaging in digital forms of interactions inside the bedroom. Hence, “hidden” young people’s high levels of engagements in digital interactions could be a *reaction* to their experiences of un-fulfilment in the labour market and in education. This points to further aspects that should be taken into account in future studies to fully comprehend the sociality of a young person and its complexities in the digital age.

The remaining thesis will continue to illustrate different aspects and the development of this argument. Chapter II considers the existing debates about how one’s sense of “being social” could be developed and reflects on the significance of this to the younger generation. It also provides a more detailed overview of how “hidden youth” and their engagements in the “social” have been studied so far. Chapter III discusses the methodology of this study, and outlines how challenges of studying and interviewing “hidden youth” have been addressed. Chapter IV presents a discussion of the contexts where this research has been conducted. The historical and cultural backgrounds of Hong Kong and Scotland will be explored, particularly in relation to the experience of youth and socialisation. The youth policy context of each site is also discussed. In chapter V, the first part of the empirical findings is presented. It highlights the participants’ perspectives of participation and opportunities in the labour market and education. It also illustrates how young people could become demotivated to engage in work and education in the context of Hong Kong and Scotland. Chapter VI depicts a contrasting picture of the participants’ engagements in the “social”. This is described in relation to detailed accounts of their interactions with families, friends and peer groups through digital media. The interviews also suggested that digital interactions in the bedroom could be important to the young people’s sense of “being social”. Chapter VII serves as a discussion of the empirical and theoretical insights of this study. The chapter will show how the analysis suggests a number of divergences to the existing understanding of “hidden youth’s” engagements in the “social”. It also reflects on why analysing the young people as “socially withdrawn” could be problematic. Moreover, the interplay of structural barriers and young people’s motivations and agency in how they socialise will be addressed. Finally, the last chapter provides a conclusion of the thesis and reiterates the implication of this study to future research of not only “hidden youth” but also young people and an emerging layer of “being social” in the digital age.

Chapter II — Literature Review

The introduction chapter outlined the themes and questions addressed by this thesis, particularly regarding how “hidden youth” socialise. In this chapter, a critical reflection on the relevant literature will be presented.

There has been a long-standing debate about different dimensions of “being social” (Baym 2010; Mead 1934; Miller 2011). This chapter begins by unpacking the classic and digital sociological arguments, particularly the ways through which young people socialise. The meaning and significance of the sense of “being social” will also be discussed. It then turns to review how “hidden youth” and their engagements in the “social” have been studied thus far. It will critically examine what dimensions of the “social” have been taken into account, thereby question how young people are analysed as “socially withdrawn”.

The Contested “Social”

How young people engage in the “social” has been at the centre of discussions of “hidden youth” (Furlong 2008). There is a focus on analysing how they have become “withdrawn” from interactions and participation in society (Wong and Ying 2006). Various scholars raise concerns that young people could lack the sense of being social through self-seclusion and living in isolation in their bedrooms (Chan and Lo 2014; Saito 1998). The act of being social is hence considered as crucial.

There has been a long-standing debate on the concept of “social”, in which the nature and meanings of interpersonal connections, human contacts and interactions had been extensively discussed from a range of different perspectives since the 19th century (Mulqueen and Matthews 2015). This area is a particularly prominent subject of debate in sociology and social theory, which offer contentious accounts and definitions of sociality and what constitutes “being social”. Durkheim (1912) argues that human interactions and relational ties are fundamental elements of the construction of society. This is especially based on one’s emotional and cognitive reactions towards one’s own or others’ acts and behaviours that are carried out in association with other people. It has also been argued that “being social” is a basic and essential component of human life, which is organised by placing ‘people into “social” relations with one another’ (Sewell 2005: 329). Our existence as human beings are therefore considered to be built upon living *interdependently*, and our needs are met through experiences of life-in-

common, including through social cooperation and multiple interrelations. From this perspective, the act of “being social” is defined by how one behaves and lives collectively in relation to other people.

Norbert Elias (1939), one of the most acclaimed sociologists of the 20th century, made an important contribution to the theorising of the “social” in his work, particularly in *The Society of Individuals*. Elias’ approach highlights the importance of understanding how networks of human interdependencies emerge and evolve over time (Morrow 2009). The attention is particularly focused on the link between macro social structures and personal choices and motivations at the micro level; an understanding of changes at *both* the structural and individual levels are demanded to explain social actions.

There has been an established interest in modern philosophical debates to examine the foundations of human nature and sociality. Several philosophers in the 19th century, most notably David Hume (1888), associated the human nature of being social with our capacity to sympathise with one another. The notion of sympathy, which is based on similarity or resemblance of sentiments and ideas shared, is considered to be a fundamental basis of sociability. This is particularly important in reinforcing the developments of relational bonds and communications among people (Finlay 2007). James (2015:20) highlights that attitudes and acts that show considerations of other people’s interests and needs are ‘an essential aspect of human nature which underpins our social being’. Sociality, or the tendency to be “social” and associate with others, is thought of as an innate quality of how human beings function. This principle plays an important role in the understanding of humans as social beings in modern philosophy, which ‘admit[s] the impulse to society as natural to man [sic], and his fitness for it, and his propension towards it, *i.e. sociability*, as a requisite for man being destined to society’ (Kant 1914: 204).

Scholars from a range of disciplines in social sciences have also presented profound reflections on what constitutes as “being social”, and the “social” is thought of as a distinctive and contentious domain that demands direct attention of the field (Latour 2005; Miller and Rose 2008). A range of perspectives and imaginings of sociability have been proposed, and they could be broadly characterised as a structural-oriented and an individual-oriented approach.

The Structural View of “Being Social”

The classic structural viewpoint of sociability focuses on the reinforcement of social order through associations of people. The system of social relations serves to construct a particular set of individual obligations with each other. It also defines acts and roles that one ought to perform, which enable society to function collectively. “Being social” is thereby viewed as an instrumental feature of the organisation of society, and it is argued that:

‘... particular architectures of inequality, patterns of relationship and types of conflict [have] come to be marked and recognised as social...there are positions that claim the primacy of some types of social relationships...over others...[This] require[s] the remaking of ways of life, the elaboration of sets of distinctions and relations within a population, and the inclusion of new habits and practices that fit with dominant conception of a “modern people” taking their place in a global world’ (Clarke 2013: 43-53).

According to this perspective, the definition of sociality centres on social bonds that reinforce a person’s position and responsibilities in relation to others. It also emphasises the configuration of relations that classify, organise, and construct boundaries and differentiations of a population. For example, a person who enters employment and ‘encounters for the first time...socialisation in the form of employers...are under conditions where the individual is particularly liable to be shaped, indeed trained, in a certain way [in society]’ (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 154-155). This viewpoint underlines the significance of the fulfilment of an individual’s role in the life-in-common and considers this as an *important* indication of sociability. “Being social” is defined as acts and associations that facilitate social organisation and contributing to society in order for it to function.

Nonetheless, patterns of interdependences among people are not necessarily stable nor homogeneous. There is a need to take into account the instabilities of resources and of the arrangements of infrastructures in the ever-changing social world (Couldry and Hepp 2017). Individuals and social groups should not be assumed as equal, and the interconnections of different types of relations in social life have to be recognised. Hall (2002) reflects the conflicted characteristics of human associations and considers them to be embedded in a contested terrain. The “social” is conceptualised as a site of competing attempts and visions of positions, categorisations and identities. According to Hall, on the one hand, the formation of relations provides a “map”

through which one can “know their place”; on the other hand, the arrangements of this order is not only contingent but also resisted and challenged through people’s relations at the same time. This echoes Elias’ (1939) understanding of “being social” as an on-going and contentious process; issues of interdependencies are embedded in a convoluted system that contains large sets of connections and mutual (but not necessarily equal) obligations constructed based on social positions. This definition of sociability is emphasised in relation to the construction and organisation of institutional arrangements among social actors. This process is, however, far from stable and requires questioning of the re-composition of the “social” (in terms of what relations are formed and among whom) and how social orders are shifted and negotiated (Clarke 2013).

These concerns are reflected in post-modern debates of “governmentality”, which highlight the “social” as a field that can be governed and regulated (Foucault 1980, 2002; Garland 1997; Rose 2007). This view focuses on how the relations and “conduct” of a person or social group are shaped by structural conditions and a range of external institutions, such as schools, universities, religious institutions, the police force, and the justice system. The “social” is regarded as a site where complex structural and political power relations operate, and it is argued that:

‘[There are] organised attempts to govern conduct, in particular but not exclusively the conduct of the poor, proliferated in Britain, Europe and the United States around a variety of different problems, but underpinned by the same socializing rationale...the array of social devices for the government of insecurity, poverty, employment, health, education and so forth would increasingly be connected up and governed (Rose 1999:130-131).

This reinforces the viewpoint that the configurations of the system of associations and social practices can be appropriated through the “governmentality” of various social institutions. It also underscores that how one is “being social” is closely linked to institutional arrangements in a society. One’s sociability can therefore be understood through a structural perspective examining people’s patterns of interconnections, positions, and behaviours in such institutions.

The Individual View of “Being Social”

There is also an individual-oriented view of sociability, which emphasises the everyday experiences of connections and interactions among people (Nancy 2007). This perspective highlights the sense of mutuality and affinity shared by individuals. This

involves developments of personal bonds and social contacts, such as with friends, peers, neighbours, and family. “Being social” in this perspective is considered as engaging in social activities and individual relationships, and Matthews and Mulqueen highlight that:

‘... the refiguring of the social within poststructuralist thought...articulated as “sociality”, “sociability” or “community” attempts to re-imagine it in an explicitly ontological mode...the “social” must be read as a problem—perhaps even *the* problem—of being. With its focus on the ontological...[“being social” refers to] the experience of a social life, common to all: of friends passed and strangers to come, of loved ones as much as the figure of the whomever or whatever with whom any “I” is always already in relation’ (Matthews and Mulqueen 2015: 6).

This underlines a notion of sociability that focuses on everyday personal interactions with a range of individuals. Nancy (2007) reflects the importance of “sense” and materiality of “being social”. The experiential and “creative” aspects of social life as living with others are especially emphasised. The development of social relationships is viewed as a personal on-going configuration of one’s existence as a human social being (Meurs and Devisch 2015). The understanding of sociability is considered to be a sensed and materialistic question regarding one’s actions and formation of individual connections with people.

The concern of people’s interactions and social bonds is also reflected in research on “social capital” (Coleman 1998; Putnam 1993, 2000). It emphasises the importance of individual’s connectedness and conceptualises social networks as a form of resource. “Being social” is considered as beneficial to individuals, particularly for young people (Allan and Catts 2012; Morrow 1999). Marwick (2015) argues that social interactions are particularly significant in early stages of adulthood; young people begin to develop important connections for the future (such as friendships and professional networks) beyond the immediate family circle. Social connection is understood as something that an individual can expand and develop, and sociability a personal attribute that has significant implications in people’s lives.

Sociability in this perspective is also indicated by people sharing a sense of the “common we”, which serves as a basis for collective and common being (Knoblauch 2008). It emphasises the individual experience of “organised situational” actions and

shared meanings within a social group or community (Rheingold 2003). Key to this is the development of a sense of belonging and solidarity among individuals involved. This emphasises the importance of coherence and connectedness of people, and “[“being social”] remains their *meaningful* character for the actors...[and how] they connect and interact with each other’ (Couldry and Hepp 2017:168-216).

It is important that this thesis takes into account both *structural* and *individual* perspectives of “being social”. The seminal work of Berger and Luckmann (1966), *The Social Construction of Reality*, illustrates the need to address both viewpoints to understand fully how people construct connections and interdependencies with others, particularly for young people. It is argued that a young person’s sociability is indicated by “primary” and “secondary socialisation” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 150-151). “Primary socialisation” refers to personal relations that have been significant and developing since childhood, such as with family members, parents and, increasingly, friends and peer groups. Sustaining these interactions and social bonds is considered to be an important aspect of how young people experience social life. On the other hand, as a young person begins to enter the world of independence and employment, new domains of the “social” emerge and grow in importance in their lives. This is what Berger and Luckmann (1966) defines as “secondary socialisation”, in which new sets of relations and orders are introduced in young people’s social world. As highlighted by the structural perspective, participation in social institutions such as work and further education emerges as a crucial form of “being social” in youth. Therefore, the individual perspective highlights the importance of the development of personal connections, and the structural perspective emphasises the meaning of institutional arrangements and reflects that engagements in societal obligations and associations are indications of youth sociability.

Importance of The “Social”: The Classic Perspective

Traditional debates about the concept of “social” particularly emphasise the importance of physical interactions between people (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Blumer 1986). In classic strands of sociology, such as symbolic interactionism and phenomenology, face-to-face interactions are seen as quintessential to how humans socialise (Blumer 1986; Schultz 1932). Physical interactions are also argued as crucial to the constructions of the social “Self”. Mead (1934) argues the meanings of individual

actions and identities are primarily derived from interactions with others in person. He also emphasises such interactions could reinforce one's sense of security in their individual identity and agency. This suggests repeated interactions which involve the embodied "Self" could provide a means of ontological security (Giddens 1991). Moreover, according to Mead (1934), the act of being social could be important to how individuals feel unified and aligned with the normative order of the social world.

Similarly, Berger and Luckmann (1966) suggest interactions which are proximate, sustained and stable play a vital role in the ways people connect. They argue interactions between people who are physically co-resident or frequently co-present are more emotionally charged, and thereby more significant to people's social lives. This is defined as interactions with "significant others", which typically include one's family members and close friends (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Conversely, socialising with people who one shares less physical co-presence are argued as relegated to the "background chorus". This distinction typifies the traditional way of thinking about what it means to be "social"; social interactions in face-to-face contexts, especially those which are sustained over time, are considered particularly key.

Stone (1995) argues that being social should also be defined as engaging in social structures which reinforce a sense of collectivity based on historical continuity and sameness. This draws attention to the significance of long-standing structures in society—such as the labour market, education, families and local communities. According to Stone (1995), it is through participation in such structures that individuals construct a sense of being social and being part of a collective entity. Furthermore, traditional social structures could play an instrumental role in shaping social behaviours (Hall 1997). Being engaged in macro social structures can reinforce developments of shared meanings as well as connectedness among social actors (Woodward 1997). This process enables diffusions of shared norms and practices within society. Moreover, individuals could develop associations with different social groups based on personal attributes, such as class, race, gender, religion, occupation, education and socio-economic status (Du Gay et al. 2000; Hall 1992). Therefore, the importance of being social is emphasised in relation to physical and traditional collective processes in the classic perspective. The construction of the social is shown as linked to long-established forms of interactions and participation in society.

Youth and The Social

In youth studies, there has also been a salient concern in the ways that young people socialise and participate in society (Brown and Larson 2002; Furlong and Cartmel 2007; MacDonald and Marsh 2005; Mannion 2005). Youth is seen as an important transitional stage in the life-course that sits between childhood and adulthood (Barry 2005a). It is conceptualised as a phase of “semi-independency”, in which young people are expected to turn from being a dependent child into a fully independent and autonomous adult (Coles 1995). In this transition, being engaged in key forms of interactions and participation in society are seen as crucial. Coles (1995) argues three types of transitions are involved in youth:

- i) School-to-work transition: which refers to transitioning from being in education to being engaged in the labour market and employment;
- ii) Domestic transition: from being attached to the biological family they are born into to forming their own family, and;
- iii) Housing transition: leaving their parental home, or equivalent, and live in their own independent housing.

This further illustrates how a range of youth interactions with others and social participation are critical to their transitions. Being actively engaged in said ways are particularly important for young people to be regarded as full members of society and seen as fully entering adulthood (Pole et al. 2005). Their options in connecting with society could have an impact on the fulfilments of their rights and inclusion in society. In particular, engaging in the labour market is highlighted as an especially important aspect (Williamson 1997, 2005). Recent literature emphasises entering employment after leaving education is crucial for young people to gain social recognition and independence (Antonucci et al. 2014; Brown and Larson 2002; Roulstone and Prideaux 2012). Conversely, young people who lack participation in society are placed in a liminal position; James (1986: 156) describes how they could be considered as “adolescent nobodies”. Qvortrup et al. (1994) similarly argue they could be regarded as “human-becomings” in society—rather than “human-beings”—as they fall short in fulfilling their roles and social expectations.

Therefore, young people who are socially disengaged could experience a rise of tension between responsibilities being expected and inclusions being denied (Barry 2005a). Such situation also amplifies the ambiguities of being in youth itself and not yet

transitioned into adulthood (Aitken 2001). Until being regarded as fully participating in society, young people could be ‘sometimes constructed and represented as “innocent children” in need of protection...at other times represented as articulating adult[s]’ (Valentine 2004: 6).

The definition of youth is thus reflected to be not always precise but conflicted. Youth could not necessarily be determined by age range *per se* but culturally and sociologically dependent (Prout and James 1997). As argued in Jones and Bell’s (2000) work, when youth begins and ends could be specific to different life domains and could widely vary in different contexts. The boundaries of youth could hence be fluid and dynamic.

Youth Transitions

The beginning and end of youth, and the process of achieving adulthood, is particularly discussed in literature exploring youth transitions. The traditional concept has been a linear process in which achievements such as employment, family, and housing indicate progression to adulthood (Coles 1995). This is being challenged with the emergence of less predictable, flexible transitions with more choices alongside more risks in the late-modern era (Furlong et al. 2005). Wyn and Dwyer (1999: 9) describe that:

‘The distinction is one between the traditional understanding of life-course and the transition through various determined and sequential stages of development...[and] a possibly more problematic sequence of the choice biography which involves negotiation of a diversity of options’.

As social life in late modernity becomes increasingly individualised, the transition process is considered to be characterised by risks and uncertainties (Beck 1992). The experience and the model of future prospects of contemporary youth has become more diversified and complex than their predecessors (Fenton and Dermott 2006). The choice and contingency in youth experiences has also increased, and no longer necessarily follow a singular and uninterrupted “pathway” (Looker and Dwyer 1998). On the contrary, there are growing demands on young people to negotiate their own routes and trajectories into adult life. This process reinforces more pressures and tensions on young people, and there are increased “trial and error” in transition choices.

The scope of negotiation suggests both “success” and “failure” in the experience of youth transitions. One tension of the “choice biography” involves “false starts” and

the need to adjust as circumstances change (Looker and Dwyer 1998). The opportunity exists for young people to navigate these choices successfully, and:

'...such flexibility favours those who want to keep their options open and have the resources to recover when the choices they make work out badly. It also leaves open the possibility of second chances for those who drop out early.'
(Bynner 2001: 8).

However, multiple, flexible pathways also create the potential to isolate those who are "squeezed out" and unable to start making initial choices, and end up on no pathway at all (Coles 2000). This reflects that there are increased tensions of blending transition aspects such as working and studying. There is also substantial "back-tracking" in young people's experiences, and it is recognised that:

'Young people's lives do not always move forward in an uncomplicated way...[they can be] back to the parental home following higher education, back to unemployment following training schemes, back to education following experiences in the labour market. If they are not stepping back, young people may be marking time—in training schemes and educational programmes'
(Roberts 2007: 265).

This viewpoint underlines critiques towards assumptions of a linear progression that is constituted by distinct statuses in youth and adulthood. Cohen and Ainley (2000: 80) emphasise that there is a 'limited research paradigm [in youth research] focused on "transition" as a rite of passage...complemented by a sociological transition narrowly restricted to (vocational) maturity and (nuclear) family formation'. Hence, youth should not be considered as "non-full-adults" nor simply a developmental phase between immaturity to maturity (Bendit 2006). Instead, there needs to be a non-linear conception of youth and more recognition of the contingencies and diversity of transition experiences.

Wyn and Woodman (2006) highlight that studying youth as simply a transitional stage or a "phase" towards adulthood has the potential to miss the significance of socio-economic changes at a particular time in history. It is suggested that "generation" offers a different perspective to consider how certain conditions specific to a moment in time shape the definition and experience of youth, rather than how it merely affects "transitions". This helps foreground discussions of social, cultural, and economic processes and their enduring effects in framing the experience of a

generation. It also emphasises the distinct meaning of youth and how this may have shifted over time. By thinking about youth experience in this perspective, youth is not solely about age; age becomes only one of the relevant factors, and more considerations are given to the socio-political context that this process is embedded in. This approach is useful to move away from a prescriptive and normative view of youth based on circumstances and policies that are attached to previous generations, which may no longer be applicable. Bynner (2001: 19) highlights that the conditions of youth transitions must include consideration of "socio-historical terms", and argues that youth 'has to be seen...as part of a process through which one set of cultural assumptions needs to be transformed into another. The new generation is in competition with the old over what those assumptions should be'. This emphasises the usefulness of linking concepts of youth and social change in recent discussions. They question the experiences and choices of young people being judged against a "standard timeline" and assumptions of what "ought to be" in subsequent generations (Dwyer et al. 2003: 23).

Nonetheless, whether the concept of "transition" ought to be abandoned and replaced by "generation" remains debatable (Roberts 2007). Roberts illustrates that young people's life-goals and family and career aspirations are not necessarily greatly divergent nor separated from that of the older generations (such as having good careers, families, and acceptance of consumerist cultures that developed in the "baby-boomer" generation). This reflects that historical continuities can exist, especially between immediately successive generations, such as the present-day youth and their parents. Halsey and Young (1997) highlight that young people and their parents recognise the differences of the youth experiences they had, and they may also develop shared values between generations. Hence, while each generation may live in different sets of circumstances and environment, the exchanges and mutual influences between generations should not be neglected. It is, however, useful to move beyond a static and linear understanding of "growing up", as argued by the "generation" viewpoint. It should be recognised that the experience of youth is embedded in the context of the changes that took place throughout history (Cohen 1997; Du-Bois Reymond 1998). There are traditional values and divisions (such as class and gender) that continue to impact and shape the experience of contemporary youth (Furlong and Cartmel 2007).

Youth studies scholars observe that there are increased constraints in the transition experiences in late modernity. Rudd and Evans (1998) illuminate a nuance in which the range of transition pathways create a conflicting perception of having free-

choice compared to the structural constraints that continue to influence youth. This view helps consider the growing difficulties and fragmentations of the transition process. Bynner (2001) highlights that young people's choices are shaped by changing economic situations. More young people are seeking to stay in education in order to find jobs in the growing service and technology sectors in the labour market. However, a substantial minority of contemporary youth 'not only fail to get jobs when they leave school at the minimum age, but also reject opportunities for continuing education or vocational training, which in theory is available to all school leavers' (*ibid*: 17). The shift towards a deregulated labour market and more flexible employment conditions also has significant implications on the outcomes of post-secondary schooling. Wyn and Dwyer (1999) argue that the transition process, particularly into full-time and long-term employment, is becoming less immediate and less straightforward. Structural barriers and social divisions including class and gender remain significant constraints that shape young people's future careers and transition experiences as society continues to hold to traditional cultural norms (Roberts et al. 1994). Environmental influences and conditions can introduce obstacles in the path of young people's life-goals and prospects. This is reinforced by growing globalisation and technological transformations, in which:

'Opportunities for the unqualified and unskilled are more limited. They face the prospect of "patchwork careers" characterized by part-time and casualised jobs interspersed with periods of unemployment... [young people face] increasing premium placed by employers on qualifications and the greater uncertainty about the future that this implies' (Bynner 2005: 377-380).

Despite growing individualisation in the "risk society", the pathways and choices of youth transitions continue to be restricted by various structural forces and socio-cultural traditions that endured through history (Côté 2002; Evans 2002; Stephen and Squires 2003). Nonetheless, the indicators of youth transitions may change over time as social norms along with employment, education and training opportunities transform. There can be incoherence between the current situation youth face in transitions to adulthood, the delay between policy and the realisation of the intended effect, and the expectations of older populations who went through the transition in greatly varying circumstances (Bynner 2005).

In view of the increased difficulties and constraints in the transition process, it is argued that adulthood gets "pushed back" and a new status of "post-adolescence" emerges (Ball et al. 2000; Bendit 2006). It is useful to reflect on late-modern youth

experiences as being “over-aged young adults” (Du Bois-Reymond 1998). This perspective emphasises that young people’s entry into adulthood, particularly participation in working life and leaving education, is being delayed and becoming more complicated. The timing and pathway of transitions are also argued to be dependent on one’s ability to mitigate the barriers encountered, such as through family support (Bynner 2005; Morrow 1999). Coleman (1998) underlines the importance of family relations in “facilitating” young people’s achievement in educational and occupational careers. It is argued that family backgrounds and resources available (such as human and cultural capital) are crucial to young people’s capacity to progress and endure the extension of transition processes (Côté 1996, 2002; Côté and Levine 2002).

In short, the “stop-start”, changeable, and flexible experiences of youth transitions are recognised and lead to the extended duration in which a young person may go through this period. This implicates questioning of the definition and usefulness of “transition” as a concept, and at what point adulthood is considered achieved (Roberts 2007; Wyn and Woodman 2006). Scepticism about whether adulthood is still a relevant “end point” of youth is also raised. The view of understanding youth as an active and dynamic process is particularly relevant to this thesis. The critique that a structured and ordered pathway is rapidly eroding is also important to consider. This underlines a context that young people’s ‘agency is increasingly important in establishing patterns for themselves which give *positive meaning* to their lives.’ (Wyn and Dwyer 1999: 14). The role of personal autonomy and choices is intensified in contemporary youth experiences, and thereby increases the extent of fluidity and unpredictability of their transition pathways. Hence, a young person’s entry into adulthood may be erratic and involve movements across various routes and entry points, depending on the circumstances and conditions they are situated in. It is argued that youth research should recognise:

‘... the degree of choice or agency evident in such processes and there have been few attempts to explain the apparent incompatibility between young people’s perceived feelings of autonomy and control and the alleged over-arching often unmediated, influence of “deterministic” social structures on their lives’ (Rudd and Evans 1998: 60-61).

To address this gap, instead of focusing on achievements of “success” and positive outcomes of a prescriptive pathway of transition to adulthood, Looker and Dwyer (1998) calls for the need to explore the realities of experiences and choices that

contemporary youth face. This thesis will undertake this perspective and recognises the importance of young people's agency and conflicted senses of control amidst structural constraints and changing social conditions in transition processes, which are increasingly non-linear and problematic.

Socially Disengaged Youth and Structural Exclusions

Since the 1990s, there have been growing concerns in the literature about young people who are disengaged from society (MacDonald 1997; Williamson 2005). Erikson (1963) argues non-participation in traditional social structures could produce a sense of "crisis" in young people's constructions of social identity. Their lack of socialising could lead to lasting negative impacts on their positions in society and connections with others (Jenkins 2004, 2006). Henderson et al. (2004) highlight social interactions are crucial for young people to find meanings to their lives. Haw (2010) also claims the lack of social interactions and relationships in local communities could affect young people's abilities to mitigate risks and adversities.

Issues related to social disengagement are therefore seen as especially significant and relevant for the younger generation (Coles 1995; MacDonald and Marsh 2005). Nonetheless, there is also an underlying assumption in this perspective; the ways of being social are primarily defined by traditional norms of interactions and participation (Hall 1997). The focus is hence placed on orthodox constructions of the social and roles that they are "expected to become" in long-standing structures of society, and not necessarily who they have "come to be" as an individual (Wright 1982).

Later discussions on disengaged youth have focused on the impacts of structural environments (Hills and Stewart 2005; Sandford et al. 2006). Analysing structures in the social system and how they could exclude and marginalise young people are particularly emphasised. This is most clearly illustrated in the social exclusion literature (Hills et al. 2002). It underlines the influences that poverty can have on multiple domains of social life, including work, education, housing, health, family and social relationships (Burchardt et al. 2002). According to Levitas et al. (2007), living in poverty could impose multiple long-term barriers on one's participation in society:

'Social exclusion is a complex and multi-dimensional process. It involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas. It

affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole' (Levitas et al. 2007: 25).

Macdonald (1997) argues young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds could thus be systematically disadvantaged and excluded. They could be denied the rights and resources to fully participate in society, thereby become disengaged. The emphasis of the literature has been largely placed on young people being disengaged from work and education (Mannion 2005; Nudzor 2010). Williamson (2005) highlights young people could be trapped in lasting poverty due to structural inequalities and barriers in the labour market and education system.

Social Exclusion

The concept of “social exclusion” has been central to recent debates of social disengagements, particularly concerning disengaged youth (Finlay et al. 2010; MacDonald 1998; Williamson 2005). The definition of social exclusion emphasises:

'...how multifaceted aspects of disadvantages cluster together...The concept implies *processes*...[and] detailed explorations of the way that social structural constraints interact with individual agency *over time* to create exclusionary transitions. Finally, the social exclusion paradigm recognises the importance of locality' (MacDonald and Marsh 2001: 375-376).

This approach focuses on the impacts of unequal opportunity structures, particularly on the working class, as a result of de-industrialisation in the late modernity (Roberts 2009). Macmillan (2011) describes this as the "deprivation story", which reflects structural disadvantages becoming concentrated in specific neighbourhoods and affecting people's life opportunities over decades.

The concerns about exclusion of youth and neighbourhood poverty are linked to and stemmed from debates of the “underclass” in the early 1990s (Murray 1990; Wilkinson 1995). Disengaged young people were considered to be a new “dangerous” class, which emerged due to the socio-economic changes in this period (Murray 1994). A key tenet of this perspective is that young people in impoverished neighbourhoods are assumed to be increasingly disconnected from mainstream society. Conversely, many are unemployed or have limited participation in work, excluded or left school early, involved in crime and delinquent behaviours, encountering issues of drugs and substance abuse, and taking part in gang activities (Wilkinson and Mulgan 1995). These claims underscore concerns that young people living in poverty could be becoming anti-

social and welfare dependent. They are also considered to be surviving at the expenses of the rest of society and becoming a "lost generation" (MacDonald 1997). Williamson (1997) emphasises that underprivileged young people who are disengaged from work and education are viewed as "status zero". They not only assume a low social status but are also ascribed negative assumptions and stigma about their willingness and initiative to participate in social activities, particularly regarding work. Nonetheless, the "underclass" theory encountered several critiques and scepticism, especially due to its political undertone in relation to class issues (Bagguley & Mann 1992; Morris 1994). By the late 1990s, the notion of an "underclass" became less popular and the term "social exclusion" was preferred; yet concerns underpinning the "underclass" viewpoint remained, particularly across the United Kingdom (UK).

The establishment of the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) by the UK Labour government in 1997 reflected the heightened debates about exclusion and social disengagements (Welshman 2007). The New Labour policies strengthened state commitments to address economic inequality and improving the life chances of youth in poor neighbourhoods (SEU 1998). The recognition of the complex process of social exclusion, particularly in relation to the risk factors of poverty being interconnected, was crucial to this strategy; the SEU addressed social exclusion as:

‘... a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas face a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown. These problems are linked and mutually reinforcing so that they can create a vicious cycle in people’s lives’ (Social Exclusion Unit 2004: 3).

This approach captures a dominant perspective of thinking about disengaged youth as excluded from various mainstream social activities due to poverty. There have also been growing concerns on its associations with experiences of marginalisation and isolation since the late 1990s (Hills et al. 2002; Lindsay 2009; Lupton and Power 2005). It is argued that disadvantaged young people are denied access and lack resources, and thereby become excluded from participation in society (MacDonald 1997). There were also discussions focused on the increase of teenage and single-parenthood, youth delinquency, violence, anti-social behaviours (especially street-based activities), and long-term unemployment (Roberts 2005; Williamson 2005). The latter remained to be a prominent policy issue in the late 2000s and 2010s.

Heated debates about youth disengagements continued to grow, and concerns linked to inter-generational “worklessness” gained particular attention from policy-makers and media commentators (MacDonald et al. 2013). This underscores controversial claims about the prevalence of households that have two or three generations who have never worked. It is argued that a culture of “worklessness” is being passed down subsequent generations, and a “distaste” for seeking employment and hard work inculcated to the younger generation in poor families (MacDonald and Marsh 2001). Byrne (1999) highlights that the effects of social exclusion on young people are the most drastic in areas where deindustrialisation had been the most detrimental. There is a concentration of worklessness in most deprived neighbourhoods and clusters of long-term unemployment and poverty in certain geographical areas. However, MacDonald and colleagues (2013) underline that there is a lack of empirical evidence to support claims about multiple generations having never worked in poor households. Assumptions about welfare dependency and benefits being a “lifestyle choice” among people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods are also being challenged (Renwick 2017). Discussions portraying disengaged youth as “benefit scroungers” and “skivers” living on public support, as highlighted by Renwick, are plentiful but not necessarily empirically founded.

Nonetheless, the persistent impacts of social exclusion and structural barriers on disadvantaged youth’s life chances are important to recognise. Macdonald and Marsh (2001: 386) emphasise the “churn” that young people experience, in which they become entangled in cycles of impoverishment and lacking opportunities, it is argued that:

'... [underprivileged young people become] what we describe as the economically marginal. Their school to work careers were characterized by the cyclical movement around various permutations of government schemes and college courses, low-paid, low-skill and often temporary jobs (e.g. in food processing and textile factories, fast-food outlets, garages, shops, hairdressing salons, offices, construction sites and bars), recurrent unemployment (with and without benefits)...All were included in these insecure, unstable and marginal careers' (Macdonald and Marsh 2001: 386).

It is useful to recognise the instability and transient experiences of “being social” among disengaged youth, especially concerning participation in work and education. Experiences of flexible work patterns, such as insecure career paths, short-term engagements in employment or training, and constant job searches, can reinforce a

“discouraged worker effect” (Ashton 1986; Jahoda 1982; Lindsay and McQuaid 2004; Webster et al. 2004). This creates a sense of pessimism and fatalism, and thereby a depressed view of the future for young people who are excluded.

There are, however, critiques of the effectiveness of the term “social exclusion”, which is considered to be stretched widely in meaning and turning into a “catch-all” notion that refers to an amalgamation of causes and outcomes related to poverty (Atkinson 1998; Cars et al. 1998). Levitas (1998) makes a convincing argument about the contradictory political ethos proposed by policies focused on social exclusion, particularly according to the New Labour’s approach. On the one hand, while concerns about social exclusion are underpinned by issues of integration of economically marginalised groups and their engagements in the “social”; on the other hand, Levitas highlights that there is a lack of attention to address the removal of structural barriers and exclusionary social organisation. For example, this is illustrated by the lack of policies aiming towards redistribution in the UK. There are underlying assumptions that the responsibility and blame is rested on the individual. Like the “underclass” debate, disengaged young people are assumed to be accountable *morally* and *culturally* for the predicaments and exclusions they experience, and there is a heavy emphasis on encouraging individual involvement in participation-focused policy initiatives (Davis 2007).

Despite the plurality and complex processes of poverty reflected by the notion of social exclusion, the “solution” proposed by policies is largely singular and focused on promoting employment (Benn 2000). This is particularly emphasised in relation to “welfare to work” policies and the drive for active labour market policies in the UK and other European countries (Clasen and Clegg 2006; Holden 1999). Enhancement of employability and skills of disadvantaged young people has been considered the prime approach to reduce social exclusion (Mannion 2005). It is argued that young people require support to reinforce values of seeking employment and education and thereby navigate their circumstances (Williamson 2005). There is also an emphasis on increasing social inclusion and solidarity as an anti-poverty measure in Scotland (Sinclair and McKendrick 2012). Nonetheless, the approach to address social exclusion remain individual-oriented, as opposed to structural-oriented (Bynner 2001).

There are also recent concerns that young people in poor neighbourhoods have low aspirations and struggle to enter employment, education and training (Bynner and Parsons 2002; Nudzor 2010). Finlay and colleagues (2010) challenge this assumption

and show that there is a clustering of weak expectations of prospects among disadvantaged young people. They could observe the negative experiences and lack of opportunities of finding work among others in their neighbourhoods, and thereby young people internalised weak expectations for their own success in employment. This highlights that disadvantaged young people can:

‘...feel isolated and lack control over their lives, resulting in alienation from authority and community that tends to further marginalise these young people... Poverty is a significant issue...limiting their engagement in social [activities]’ (Thompson et al. 2014: 63-69).

The discussions of social exclusion are therefore useful to underline that disengaged youth could be marginalised from mainstream opportunities, living standards and outlooks.

Changing Social Conditions

The discussion has also been focused on the changing conditions of contemporary social structures (Bauman 2004; 2007). Furlong and Cartmel (2007) argue young people’s participation in society have become increasingly uncertain. This is linked to increased individualisation of the late modernity, and:

‘while structures of inequality remain deeply entrenched...[young] people’s life chances remain highly structured at the same time as they increasingly seek solutions on an individual, rather than a collective basis’ (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 5).

New and old structural barriers (such as class, race and gender) are therefore emphasised to be at play at the same time. Moreover, construction of the social has become more fluid and fragile (Bauman 2001). The traditional sense of being social incited by collectivity based on sameness and historical continuity is argued to be weakened in contemporary social settings. Bauman (2007) characterises their fragmented and evolving nature as the “liquid times”. His work underlines that the rigidity and boundaries of traditional social structures are dissolving. Contemporary youth are hence under intense pressures to depend on their own efforts and attributes to engage in a “risk society” (Beck 1992). New insecurities and challenges are being imposed on young people’s engagements in the “social” due to changing socio-economic conditions (Barry 2005b; Beck 2000).

The recent increase of “non-standard” forms of employment, such as short-term contracts, self-employment, and part-time work, are considered as making the labour market more unstable (Clasen and Clegg 2011). The “precarious” and “de-standardised” characteristics can exacerbate the insecurities of young people’s involvements in employment (Davies and Freedland 2007; Hinrichs and Jessoula 2012). A large number of young people, despite their academic credentials, fall short of opportunities and increasingly become disengaged from work (Roberts 2005). Similarly, economic uncertainties have been attributed to young people becoming disengaged (MacDonald and Marsh 2005). Especially since the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 and the weakening of the global economy, young people face increased difficulties and fragmentation in various areas of the “social”, such as school, housing, families and communities (Antonucci et al. 2014; McKee 2012).

These observations emphasise that youth in contemporary social contexts are particularly fragile. Arnett (2000; 2014) highlights contemporary youth can be filled with exploring and re-making choices in life constantly. It should not be conceptualised as a linear and stable transition. An expansion of multiple experiences and pathways of connecting to society and negotiating their social positions has been witnessed (Jenkins 1983). This also highlights the growing challenges in the range and options of how young people can be social (Brown and Larson 2002; Lister et al. 2005). Thus, it is evident that the increasing changes in structural environments and barriers may lead to various limitations in youth being social.

New Dimensions of the Social: A Digital Sociological Perspective

The literature reviewed thus far has predominantly focused on classic conceptions of “being social” and the barriers that can be presented to young people’s options of socialising. However, with the digital world becoming an increasing topic for research in many disciplines (Bell et al. 2015; Castells 1996; Jenkins 2006; Knoel and Lankshear 2010; Livingstone and Bovill 2001; Lupton 2015), a new layer of understanding is emerging that adds a further consideration towards youth and sociality.

The Digital Perspectives of “Being Social”

Digital sociology provides a useful viewpoint to reflect on the role of digital media in human sociability and interpersonal connections (Baym 2010; White 2014). According to Jamieson (2013), digital interactions have to be considered as an emerging

and important layer of the construction of the “social”. The work of acclaimed sociologist Castells (1996) highlights the convergence and globalising influences of ICT in people’s social lives; he argues for re-imagining the organisation of the social world through the notion of “network society”. This concept reflects the prevalence and significance of networks maintained by information and communication technology (ICT).

Socialising and connecting with people is argued to be less constrained by geographical boundaries and orthodox hierarchical macro structures than in the past (Barney 2004). Hence, the influences of cultural backgrounds, nations states and geographical locations are weakened. Instead, “being social” is increasingly shaped by globalising, dominant social norms and practices diffused by technologies and digital networks—a situation also encapsulated by what Castells (2009) calls the “global digital age”. This process highlights the global connectivity as an important force of social organisation, and it is argued that ‘in a world of global flows of wealth, power and images, the search for [one’s sociability]...collective or individual, ascribed or constructed, becomes the fundamental source of social meaning’ (Castells 1996: 3). In this context, technological infrastructure and digital networks are believed to be increasingly important to how people connect and associate with each other. Individuals are considered to be embedded in networks galvanised by ICT, and “being social” through these networks is increasingly fluid, unstable and constantly shifting (Wellman et al. 2006).

Science and Technology Studies (STS) suggest an ontological shift of the structure and organisation of social interactions (Law 1992). This is highlighted by discussions of the “sociotechnical”, which considers technologies as an active and increasingly crucial dimension of the “social” (Law and Hassard 1999). Wajcman (2002) argues that what “social” means, as well as how the “social” is constructed, has undergone significant transformations from the late 20th century. Information and communication technological infrastructures (from telephone and television networks to the Internet) have become more intertwined in how people connect and interact. As underlined by Mackenzie and Wajcman (1999), society and technology cannot be separated; they have to be conceptualised as “mutually constitutive” spheres. Bijker and Law (1992) emphasise that technology is inherently shaped socially and also *socially shaping*. This sheds light on the concept of technologies as not merely “tools”. Conversely, it could play a key role in shaping young people’s actions and interactions:

'We are not talking of the purely "technological"—that no such beast exists. Rather we are saying that the *technological is social*. Already, then, we find that we need to blur the boundaries of categories that are normally kept apart. There is no real way of distinguishing between a world of engineering on the one hand and a world of the social in the other' (Bijker and Law 1992: 4; emphasis self-added).

Technological infrastructures can create new material arrangements in society which affect how people engage in the “social” (Savage et al. 2010). The landscape of the young people’s social lives has thus inevitably transformed in the digital age (Orton-Johnson and Prior 2013). Woolgar (1991) describes this as technologies “configuring” the users and re-organising the social structures they are embedded in. Therefore, the sociotechnical viewpoint implies that digital technologies could 'overlap and enmeshed with imaginings of sociality, individual identity, community, collectivity, [and] organisation' (Mackenzie 2006:4).

In the advent of the “digital age”, the process of socialising is also argued to be increasingly individualised (Bruns 2008; Wellman 1997). Agency and motivation become particularly important aspects of socialising as the choices and range of interactions diversify (Giddens 1991, 1992). Agency is described as an individual’s ability to consciously choose, influence and configure their actions to attain a desired goal and based on personal motivations (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Gecas 2003). Furthermore, individual agency could be exercised in a socially interdependent context, as it is developed within shared practices and interactions with others (Bandura 2001). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) reflect that “being social” is increasingly determined by individual agency and dominated by a “do-it-yourself” characteristic. This has important implications to how one’s sociability is understood and examined. According to Rainie and Wellman (2014: 11), the concept of “networked individualism” captures the 'shift [in] people's social lives away from densely knit family, neighbourhood and group relationships toward more far-flung, less tight, more diverse personal networks'. This is especially prominent as digital interactions and online communities become increasingly common. Couldry and Hepp (2017) argue to understand this as a “deep mediatisation” of the nature of the “social”, and underline that:

‘... the role of “media” in the social construction of reality becomes not just partial, or even pervasive, but “deep”: that is, crucial to the elements and processes *out of which* the social world and its everyday reality is formed and

sustained...[this illustrates] a phase of *deep* mediatisation, when the nature and dynamics of interdependencies (and so of the social world) *themselves become dependent* upon media contents and media infrastructure, to a significant degree' (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 213-215)

This perspective helps reflect the increased importance of a range of human interactions that are *interwoven* with digital media, such as texting, emailing, online chat streams, video calls, blogging and video blogging (vlogging), and sharing of pictures and multimedia content through smartphone apps (Isin and Ruppert 2015). The integration of mediatised platforms represents a significant change in the construction of individual sociability in what Giddens and Sutton (2017) call the “digital revolution”. Particularly for the younger generation, technological platforms are recognised as a predominant space to “hang out” and communicate as a group (Buckingham and Kehily 2014; Hepp and Hasebrink 2014). The online world is argued to be a crucial space that allows young people to engage ‘in unregulated publics while located in adult-regulated physical spaces such as homes and schools...[and] seek access to adult society. Their participation is deeply rooted in their desire to engage publicly’ (Boyd 2008:136-137). The “digital” is therefore an integral aspect of one’s experience of “being social”, particularly for young people, and digital interaction an important indication of sociability.

Youth Engaging in The “Social” in The Digital Age

Since the early 2000s, the use of digital media for socialising (such as social networking sites) has been widely-spread particularly among the younger generation (Creeber and Martin 2009; Turkle 2011). There has been growing integration of technologies in youth culture, exemplified by the increased prominence of instant-messaging services, online blogs, social media, and digital music sharing platforms (Bennett and Robards 2014). Gardner and Davis (2013) also argue contemporary youth can be considered as the “app generation”. This characterises the increased use of smartphones and their ever growing collection of “applications” (apps) for a variety of social interactions. For example, these are used in order to interact with peers, communicate with people, make friends, share information and seek advice from online communities. Therefore, digital media are considered as increasingly significant to the construction of the “social” especially for young people (Livingstone et al. 2001).

Technological platforms such as personal webpages could be an important space where young people find a sense of belonging, solidarity and connectedness with society

(Papacharissi 2002). Similarly, Schroeder (2010) illustrates how large-scale multi-user virtual worlds such as “Second Life”¹—through digitally simulated avatars and virtual environments—could create a sense of collectivity and being social among users. Hence, newly developing technologies, such as augmented and virtual reality, wearable technologies, artificial intelligence and “Internet of Things”², are argued to be increasingly important to the sociality of the younger and future generations (White 2014). This shift is marked by the rise of the “digital age”.

The “digital age” is defined as an era of rapid technological innovations, in which uses and diffusions of technologies have grown in many aspects of everyday life (Lupton 2015). It is ‘constituted by a series of historical conjunctures of long and slow waves of social, economical, political and cultural changes intersecting with the more surface-level ripples of technological developments’ (Loveless and Williamson 2013: 22). Hence, the advent of the digital age has had important implications to socialising. The means for individuals to connect and participate in society are thought to have diversified (Orton-Johnson and Prior 2013). The digital world is recognised as an emerging dimension in *how* people are being social.

Jamieson (2013) argues digital interactions facilitated by technologies have to be considered hand-in-hand with traditional physical forms of social interactions. The significance of this digital dimension on the social has grown, as:

‘Increasing numbers of personal relationships are initiated by digital technologies, some remain within the digital and the proportion of key face-to-face personal relationships entirely unmediated by digital technologies is shrinking...[This is] emergent from lives as lived in interaction with technologies’ (Jamieson 2013: 29).

Digitalisation of everyday life therefore constitutes an important aspect of how digital sociologists think about the processes of socialising (Baym 2010). Interactions and participations in society do not only involve traditional, long-standing social structures;

¹ “Second Life” is a large-scale online virtual world which provides a digital space for users to create simulated avatars based on an image of themselves. Users can socialise, connect and communicate with other users in the virtual world. The platform allows users to conduct voice and text communication with a ‘large population of people represented by avatars’ (Schroeder 2010: 141).

² “Internet of Things” refers to machines or devices which are connected in a network and could communicate with each other through the Internet. For instance, “smart” devices including smart TVs and smart electricity and gas metres are common household examples.

individuals can also develop a sense of being social through social structures in the digital world (Jurgenson 2012; Wellman 1997; Wynn and Katz 1997). For example, new social networks formed through online platforms (such as Internet forums and social networking sites) do not require individuals to be geographically proximate nor to be in the same space simultaneously (Walther 2006). Interactions may also involve exchanges of multimedia content, such as texts, images, videos, and do not necessarily entail face-to-face, physical interactions (Chan 2000; Schau and Gilly 2003; Walker 2000). Therefore, there could be various other means of socialising which are important to the construction of the social. Digital and non-traditional interactions are recognised as an added integral part.

Complexities of The Social "Self"

Digital sociologists argue to think of the social "Self" in the digital age as more fluid and interconnected (Miller 2011). Papacharissi (2011) highlights this by the notion of the "networked Self". Papacharissi argues to approach the process of how an individual socialise, particularly in the "digital age", as embedded in intersecting planes and networks of interactions. Individuals are considered as interacting with people in more diverse, multiple social contexts. The social "Self" is thus imagined as positioned and attached to a constellation of networks, and not necessarily fixed to a single, local environment (Castells 1997).

Individuals are also increasingly connected with different social groups in different ways (Baym 2010). There is more fluidity in the "Self" and how one socialises (Gross 2004). Digital age individuals are 'no longer the autonomous subject of the enlightenment, but rather a heteronomous postmodern chameleon and nomad, rearranging him- or herself and his or her [sociality]...according to the situation' (Suoranta and Vadén 2008: 34-35). One's connectedness and interactions could thus be more diverse across various social contexts. Moreover, individuals could engage with wide-ranging networks of people for a variety of purposes. Rainie and Wellman (2014) argue individual social networks are expanded. People are now more likely to engage in multiple, loosely knit social networks that are organised around various activities such as leisure, advice, information and interests. This highlights the importance of analysing engagements in the "social" at the micro-level (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). There is a growing individualisation and diversity in the construction of the social (Bruns 2008; Knobel and Lankshear 2010). Hence, complexities of the social "Self" could be reflected

by the fluid and subjective processes of being social (Boyd 2008; Giddens 1991, 1992; Weber and Mitchell 2008)

There is also growing fluidity in the structure of social networks, particularly in online social networks (Castells 2001). Social networks which are in digital platforms only could be especially unstable and changeable (Wellman et al. 2006). The interactions between online chatroom users are a clear example (Henderson and Gilding 2004). Networks may be formed around a specific thread of messages and replies or around various discussion topics. Nonetheless, ephemeral and temporary interactions in such networks, could also be significant to how one is social. Schroeder (2010) shows individuals could gain a sense of collectivity by being part of a large online social network, despite it being more fluid and transient than traditional social networks. For example, there could be more flexibility to enter and exit interactions in online networks. Individuals could also not necessarily be a close group nor frequently interact with each other. Hence, various forms of social interactions are becoming more commonplace in the experience of being social. The social “Self” is becoming more connected to a set of interwoven networks and wide-ranging means of socialising.

This also has important implications to the analysis of one’s sociality. The process of how one socialises could be ‘understood as invented, assembled and composed of various operative elements rather than as something that is intrinsic to the body, mind or agency’ (Loveless and Williamson 2013:13). Hence, to describe and define the social interactions of an individual is now more complex. It could entail a range of components which could be conflicted and point to different descriptions of the social “Self”; therefore, capturing *how* one is being social is not so clear cut anymore.

Debates in the Analysis of Digital Interactions

Differences between physical and digital means of socialising have been widely debated in digital sociology (Buckingham 2008). Early studies have a tendency to focus on the disconnections between the social in the digital and physical world. Turkle (1995: 12) argues 'MUDs [meaning Multi-User Domains, such as Internet forums] make possible the creation of an identity so fluid and multiple that it strains the limits of the notion'. Online representations of the social “Self” are argued to be more easily adapted, and sometimes fabricated, particularly with the predominance of text-based communications (Bolter and Grusin 2000; Poster 1995; Rheingold 1993). This is emphasised in relation to early Internet studies and studies of “cyberspace” in the 1990s

(Bailey 2001; Gauntlett and Horsley 2004; Wallace 1999; Zhai 1998). Digital forms of interactions are regarded as largely detached from physical social spaces. This led to doubts over emerging digital means of being social and fearful predictions that the digital could gradually replace traditional, face-to-face human connections (Greenfield 2014; Turkle 2001, 2005). Moreover, socialising digitally is considered as less “authentic” and not as genuine as traditional face-to-face interactions (Turkle 2011). The quality of online interactions has been argued as limited by the prevalence of disembodied, “half-real” representations of social selves (Boon and Sinclair 2009; Stone 1995; Peng and Zhu 2011). According to this perspective, digital interactions are assumed as insubstantial to the construction of the social and potentially detrimental to one’s sense of being social.

Conversely, more recent studies show digital forms of socialising could be as significant as physical connections (Boyd and Heer 2006; Jurgenson 2012; Livingstone and Brake 2010). The qualities and practices of digital interactions are in many ways similar to traditional social interactions. Baym (2000) argues traditional groups norms could also be present in digital forms of socialising. For example, honesty is identified as being important. Henderson and Gilding’s (2004) study of online chatrooms illustrate how users could exchange truthful, genuine self-disclosures in digital interactions. Similarly, people’s social behaviours and communications in online newsgroup mirror practices in traditional interactions in person (Rutter and Smith 1999). This reflects ‘the ideals that are important in traditional relationships, such as trust...and commitment, are equally important online’ (Whitty and Gavin 2001: 630).

The practices in online gaming worlds also provide an illuminating example. Building trusts is highlighted as an important process in users’ interactions, as it is crucial in the gameplay of many online games (Ducheneaut and Moore 2004). According to Krzywinska’s (2007) ethnographic study, building networks and gaining respect and social recognition among large groups of users could also be vital in online gaming. Moreover, learning interpersonal and teamwork skills could be emphasised in quest-oriented game designs (Boellstorff 2008; Chee et al. 2006). Engaging in gaming worlds is therefore not necessarily only for leisure, but it could also be an important form of socialising (Wolfendale 2007).

Hence, people could potentially be social in a similar way in the digital world compared to the physical world. Wynn and Katz’s (1997) work mostly clearly

demonstrates this argument and openly critiques Turkle's (1995) view. They argue interactions online are inevitably linked to how a person is social in physical contexts:

'[Individuals do] pull together a cohesive presentation of [the "Self"]... across eclectic social contexts in which individuals participate. Rather than live as "fragmented selves"...[digital interaction] is part of the ongoing social process of contextualization' (Wynn and Katz 1997: 324).

According to this perspective, digital social interactions could be extrinsically-shaped and influenced by one's physical interactions also (Holmes 2010; Finkenauer et al. 2002; Zhao et al. 2008). How people socialise digitally are connected to how they socialise in the physical world. This argument is underlined in connection with Goffman's (1959) concept of the "performance" of the "Self" in different social contexts. Nonetheless, the boundaries between the public and private spheres are now regarded as increasingly blurred (Boyd 2011). With the prominence and convenience of digital interactions through mobile devices, the public and the private are becoming more intertwined (Papacharissi 2011). This is most clearly illustrated in the changing concept of the bedroom as a social space, particularly for young people. It has been highlighted:

'such private space within the home may be transformed as the media-rich bedroom increasingly becomes the focus of peer activity, and as the media themselves, through their contents, bring the outside world indoors' (Bovill and Livingstone 2001: 17).

Boyd (2011) argues to imagine socialising as taking place in the "networked publics", where the public and private spheres are synthesised with each other. This underlines digital interactions are 'far from free-floating' and are integrated with physical interactions in people's social lives (Baym 2010: 110).

Furthermore, there is lack of empirical evidence to support the prevalence of "identity play" (such as change of gender, age or personal character) in online interactions (Baym 2002; Slater 2002). Curtis (1997) illustrates the majority of Internet users are not necessarily deceptive about who they are and do not alter how they engage with people. The quality of digital interactions is thus not necessarily compromised by the increased interconnectedness and fluidity of the social "Self". Although the "audiences" of one's social interactions may be "multiplied" in online social platforms (such as in social networking sites and other multi-users digital environments), the authenticity of the interactions could be unaffected compared to traditional interactions

(Couldry 2000; Couldry and McCarthy 2004). Miller (2011) underlines how genuineness and truthfulness of the social “Self” could be particularly important online, as the audience could be an amalgamation of families, peers, acquaintances, and sometimes strangers, from varied times of one’s life into one social space. Therefore, digital interactions could be considered equally significant to create one’s sense of being social. It could be an emerging and important dimension of the construction of the social, as technologies continue to diffuse into many parts of social life.

“Hidden Youth” and Social Withdrawal

Studies which look at “hidden youth” are situated at an interesting place in the debates of the construction of the social. Various scholars highlight concerns that the young people could lack engagements in the “social”, and hence could be analysed as being “socially withdrawn” (Wong 2009b; Furlong 2008). They are argued to be secluded and living in social isolation (Chan and Lo 2010).

Two main approaches have been identified in this topic. The first is the psychological approach, which emerged in Japan in the late 1990s (Saito 1998). Appearing in the mid-2000s, the sociological approach critiqued the psychological explanations (Wong and Ying 2006). It suggests young people reject social interactions and “hide” in the bedroom as a result of socio-economic barriers and structural exclusions. Reviewing the literature provides a useful resource to reflect on how the construction of the “social” of this group of young people has been studied so far.

The Psychological Approach

In the psychological approach, there is a focus on young people’s mental response to the heightened pressures in engaging in traditional social structures. Saito Tamaki’s (1998) *Social Withdrawal: Adolescence Without End* has been widely recognised as the most influential work in this topic, and it was the first research to study this group of young people in Japan. He argues young people could become psychologically distressed when they fail to overcome increased tensions in participating in society. For example, “failure” to keep up with pressures to excel in their education could be a key factor in the Japanese context (Inui and Hosogane 1995). This could trigger a crisis in self-confidence and potential traumatic experiences which have a detrimental effect on young people’s mental health. Hence, they become self-secluded in their bedrooms for months and years on end to avoid socialising. Saito (1998) calls this “hikikomori” and argues more than one million young people in Japan suffer from this new form of

psychological disorder. The young people were also described as living in “adolescence without end” due to their extended dependence on family support, in terms of housing and material provision, and lack of social and economic participation (*ibid*: 28).

Other work, such as Teo and Gaw (2010), builds on this approach and continues to understand “hikikomori” as an issue of clinical and psychiatric concern. The young people are regarded as distressed by external environments, thereby require help from interventions such as psychiatrists and health services (Ogino 2004). Teo (2010) describes “hikikomori” as a “silent epidemic” which is spreading in contemporary societies. The young people are framed as being in lack of key social interactions and participation, he argues:

‘[the] patients are mostly adolescent[s]...who become recluse in their parents’ home for months or years. They withdraw from contact with family, rarely have friends, and do not attend school or hold a job’ (Teo 2010: 178).

The focus of this approach has thus largely been placed on traditional forms of engaging with the social. This specifically includes participation in the labour market, education, and interactions with family and communities such as friends and peers. There is an assumption that young people lack a sense of being social due to being physically self-isolated in the bedroom. They could lack important forms of socialising in person.

Recent work from Teo et al. (2015) continues to develop the analysis based on this framework and creates a standardised “assessment model” for clinical settings. The framework was developed based on an empirical study in India, Japan, Korea and the United States. Similar endeavours have been made by Sakamoto et al. (2005) studying “hikikomori” in the context of Oman; Garcia-Campayo et al. (2007) in the context of Spain; Figueiredo et al. (2011) comparing the cases of France and Japan. The scholars consistently support that young people become reclusive due to experiences of mental distress and traumas in engaging in society. The research here also reinforced a primary concern on young people’s disengagements from the labour market, school, and family and community ties.

Kato et al. (2012) made an important distinction and characterised the psychological approach as being two-fold. Their argument conveys a more critical reflection on the links between “hidden youth” and mental health issues. They argue that self-isolation caused by other underlying mental disorders (such as depression and schizophrenia) should not be considered as a “true” form of disengagement from being

social. It could only be “secondary social withdrawal”. Conversely, young people who have no prior diagnosis of mental illnesses are in “true” and “primary social withdrawal”. It emphasises the young people consciously reject and “cut off” from society (Saito 1998). Kato et al. (2012) thus argue that researcher’s attention ought to focus on the latter group, whose disengagement from socialising raises more pressing concerns.

The Sociological Approach

In the mid-2000s, a different approach in studies of “hidden” young people began to emerge from the social sciences. It emphasises on analysing the structural factors which limit young people’s sociality. It is however important to note the sociological approach is still newly emerging; there are only a small number of authors who have written from this stance. The following section outlines this body of work and demonstrates how the sociological approach begins to address the apparent weaknesses of the psychological arguments. Nonetheless, it also highlights unchanged and unchallenged assumptions about orthodox forms of socialising in this approach.

Furlong (2008) calls for the rejection of understanding social withdrawal as a psychological malaise. Rapid changes in social structures are crucial to explain the sudden surge of young people withdrawing from being social in the late 20th century. Changes in opportunity structures and post-industrialism are hence emphasised as most important to be analysed. According to Furlong, there is a breakdown of traditional norms of socialising. Historical signposts and older generations’ precedence and support became inapplicable, as:

‘traditional and deep-rooted norms are undermined and young people [are] forced to find new ways of navigating transitions within a highly pressured and rigid system...they struggle to make sense of a set of unfamiliar social and economic structures’ (Furlong 2008: 309-322).

The focus here is placed on analysing contemporary social structures. Furlong argues its changing conditions could account for the younger generation feeling lost and confused in society; hence, social participation becomes an “anomaly” to them. Young people facing uncertainties in their opportunities and position in society could struggle to establish a sense of direction and self-identity (Barry 2005a). Therefore, they could experience an “acute” form of disengagement and enter a state of ‘shutting out the world’ (Furlong 2008: 316). Their bedrooms are argued to be a “cocoon” for them to

hide away from society. Moreover, further research focusing on the sociological perspective is called for, especially in contexts outside of East Asia and in the Western world.

A social exclusion perspective of “hidden youth”

The work of Victor Wong (2009a) also made an important contribution and developed an analytical stance which elaborated the sociological approach. His arguments were largely in agreement with Furlong’s concerns on the structure. Nonetheless, Wong primarily focuses on the socio-economic barriers on “being social”.

Wong and Ying’s (2006) study in Hong Kong illustrates how poverty could disadvantage young people’s social participation and interactions. Self-isolation and “hiding” at home is thought to be an “extreme” outcome of exclusion from society. Young people are being pushed to the limit so greatly that they lose interest and actively reject social interactions. Furthermore, Wong and Ying (2006) highlight that young people could be withdrawn from socialising due to fear of being looked down upon because of their impoverished circumstances, especially by peers. This is emphasised in relation to expenses of socialising:

[they] find it difficult to afford any spending involved in transport, eating inside canteens or restaurants, meeting a friend face to face, going to the cinema or for leisure, looking for a job, not to mention joining other youth consumption activities which are all financially consuming’ (Wong 2008: 9).

In light of this, there is a tendency to focus on examining the structural influences on young people becoming withdrawn. Wong (2009a) argues to adopt a “social exclusion perspective” to analyse the barriers which restrict their options of being social.

Wong’s (2012) later work draws attention to the challenges for young people to re-engage in society because of their prolonged isolation. It shed light on the enduring consequences of being disengaged. It is argued that this group have been so excluded that they lose social skills and confidence to socialise. The young people could feel a sense of rejection and alienation when they re-attempt to interact with others. According to this perspective, young people could be ‘entrapped in such a disempowering and alienated state...[and become] unheard and unseen in the community’ (Wong 2012: 419).

Finally, Chan and Lo (2010; 2014) are scholars from Hong Kong who also research on “hidden youth” from a sociological approach. They support Wong’s

perspective and echo that young people are self-isolated at home as an extreme result of structural exclusions. Chan and Lo (2010) emphasise young people are being denied of rights and autonomy. They are unable to determine their options of social interactions and access to opportunities. Thus, they experience a sense of disempowerment, which result in the act of “hiding” from society. Nonetheless, they are also found to have some online interactions with other young people who are secluded at home. This interaction is suggested to be an attempt to seek an alternative source of empowerment and personal autonomy. This also marks an important step towards recognising the importance of online interactions in their social lives.

In Chan and Lo’s (2014) study, the authors explore the quality of life within this group of young people. In their study, varying levels of withdrawal are importantly distinguished. It is found that young people who have been secluded for longer than a year are more likely to display a less severe level of withdrawal from socialising. In particular, they are more likely to have some interactions with family members and online interactions with other “hidden” young people. Chan and Lo (2014) argue they could have a higher quality of life, as they experience higher levels of social support and lower sense of loneliness. Thus, an important insight revealed here is that young people are not a monolithic group and the kinds of interactions they are disconnecting from can widely vary.

This is a significant shift from other existing studies. It recognises “hidden youth” could be a heterogeneous group and not all are disconnected from social interactions to the same degree. This argument is also reflected in Chan and Lo’s (2016) more recent work, which focuses on withdrawn young people’s negative feelings on delinquent behaviours. It prompts questions regarding the extent of which “hidden youth” could be broadly described as “socially withdrawn”. It also helps underline the tendency to assume young people are isolated and reclusive by “hiding” in the bedroom.

The Construction of the Social of “Hidden Youth”

In summary, from the sociological perspective, this group of young people are considered as excluded from engaging in the social. Their options and opportunities of socialising have been significantly limited by structural barriers in society, thereby become self-secluded in their bedrooms. According to Wong (2009b), these young people should therefore be defined as becoming “socially withdrawn”. The framework

which “hidden youth” is analysed as withdrawn from being social is underpinned by the following components:

- 1) Disengaged from participation in the labour market;
- 2) Disengaged from participation in education;
- 3) Disengaged from interactions with family;
- 4) Disengaged from interactions with communities, especially peer groups and friends.

This also highlights how the construction of the social in this group of young people has been approached in the literature so far. Participation in the labour market and education is reinforced as crucial to how young people socialise and gain recognition in society (Williamson 1997; MacDonald and Marsh 2005). Similarly, interactions with family and local communities are important to their sense of being social and social support systems (Allan and Catts 2012; Leonard 2008; Morrow 1999). This leads to an assumption that young people who are “hidden” at home are ‘reject[ing] entirely most forms of contact and relationship with the outside world’ (Wong 2009b: 337).

Nonetheless, the current discussions appear to be driven by a presumption that the young people are living solitary lives in their bedrooms. The existing approach confines being social as participation in traditional social structures (specifically labour market and education) and face-to-face interactions in person (Mead 1934; Stone 1995). It neglects the potential heterogeneity and individual experiences of how they socialise, and privileges historical continuity and sameness (Erikson 1968; McLean and Pasupathi 2012). Hence, this appears to be a narrow and orthodox approach to analyse the construction of the social, and it is yet to be critically reflected upon in this context.

The Gaps to be Addressed by This Study

Debates on the processes of socialising of contemporary youth are particularly useful to consider. This thesis will carefully reflect on how the debates may shed light on the constructions of the social of “hidden youth”. In particular, digital sociological arguments help highlight the complexities and individualisation in the means of socialising (Baym 2010; Rainie and Wellman 2014). As will be illustrated in the findings, emerging non-traditional interactions could indeed be a significant dimension of being social in this context (Jamieson 2013). How might this challenge the existing conceptual framework, thereby make analysing a young person as socially withdrawn more difficult and complex? This will be an important question to return to and be

unpacked further in the analysis of the study. Hence, the aim of the thesis is: to critically understand how “hidden youth” socialise and attempt to uncover its complexities which may have been previously overlooked.

Furthermore, there is a need to move away from focusing on the influences of macro structures only. There is much understanding on how young people could be excluded by traditional social structures (Wong and Ying 2006). Conversely, their everyday lives in the bedroom and what they in fact do in this space have not yet been explored in depth. Therefore, there is a lack of analysis of “hidden youth” and how they socialise at the micro-level. This thesis intends to address this gap and focus on examining their lived experience. Importantly, adopting this approach prompts questions about whether “hidden youth” could be analysed as “socially withdrawn” at the micro-level also (Chan and Lo 2014).

According to digital sociology, the construction of the social is increasingly expected to involve digital social interactions (Lupton 2015; White 2014). As will be demonstrated later, this casts an important light on the limitations of applying the orthodox assumptions of how “hidden youth” engage in the social; they may not necessarily be living in solitude inside the bedroom as previously thought (Chan and Lo 2010). Conversely, the findings will highlight that they may also experience a sense of “being social” and connectedness by socialising through digital media. This makes the digital sociological arguments particularly important and relevant to be considered. The social is not necessarily being confined to traditional face-to-face social interactions and participation outside. This also points to questions about the significance of digital interactions to “hidden youth’s” sense of being social. The thesis will aim to critically reflect on this and query how their sociality is constructed.

By focusing on the individual, this study also brings questions about the experience of the social “Self” into the debate. The social “Self” is highlighted as increasingly fluid and interconnected in the digital age (Papacharissi 2011). Hence, it could not necessarily be so easy and clear-cut to define a young person as not being social. This study provides further evidence to consider the fluidity of the young people’s sociality. The digital sociological arguments could potentially provide useful tools to understand how they socialise particularly by focusing on the young person’s motivation, perception and experience (Castells 2001). This thesis will therefore explore how such an approach could help analyse “hidden youth” and highlight new dimensions of their construction of the social.

In conclusion, this thesis aims to provide a more nuanced analysis of “hidden youth” and how they engage in the “social”. This will be examined through their lived experience and their subjective understanding of their sense of “being social”. This will be then used to test the framework of “social withdrawal” as highlighted by Wong (2009b). The focus will be on critically examining their participation in the labour market and education and their interactions with family and other communities. It helps question whether the young people could be understood as “withdrawn” and self-secluded according to an analysis at the micro-level. Moreover, this thesis will demonstrate how this analysis offers further understanding to the process of how “hidden youth” socialise. It examines whether there could be dimensions of socialising which have been neglected by previous studies. In doing so, the study will provide insights on how young people themselves understand their means and options of being social. The empirical findings will illustrate that the young people are not necessarily a homogeneous group; there could be variation in their sense of connectedness and “being social”. They may also experience different levels of loneliness and solitude despite being *physically* secluded in the bedroom. Hence, by filling this gap and considering various arguments of the construction of the “social”, Chapters V to VII will aim to highlight the divergence and issues in the existing framework of analysing the young people as “socially withdrawn”. Before doing so, the next chapter turns to explain how this study has been designed in order to understand “hidden youth” to a deeper and more personal extent than before. By undertaking this approach, it is able to critically reflect on existing assumptions about their lives and highlight a much richer perspective of “hidden youth” and how they socialise.

Chapter III — Methodology

The preceding chapters highlighted the ways that “hidden” young people have so far been assumed as self-isolated and disconnected. Nonetheless, it was shown that a critical discussion of their engagements in the “social” has been largely missing in previous research. Instead, digital sociology insights suggest that we need a more complex understanding of young people’s construction of the “social”, pertinent to diverse and fluid forms of social interactions.

This chapter reflects on this study’s research design. It will explain the interpretive approach chosen for inquiry. It also describes why the focus on the perspectives and lived experiences of “hidden” young people was considered particularly important. This was useful to highlight the complexities of how the participants engage in the “social”. The strengths of using semi-structured interviews and the design of the qualitative approach will also be explained. This includes justification for the site selection. Finally, this chapter outlines considerations of participant selection, recruitment, ethics. It also explains the process of analysing the interview data. It will show how the analytical focus and theoretical understandings has been developed from the empirical material in this study.

An Interpretive Approach to Understand “Hidden Youth”

This study’s aim is to examine “hidden” young people’s experiences of interactions and participation in society. An interpretive approach was considered as most appropriate to achieve this aim. The interpretive logic of inquiry focuses on understanding the perceived and experienced social realities from the perspective of the “subject” being researched on; it does not seek a single, objective “reality” from the researcher’s point of view (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). It also assumes multiple realities could come into existence based on constructions of various meanings and interpretations of the social world by the social actors embedded.

From this ontological stance, it was important for this study to investigate how “hidden” young people themselves made sense of their engagements in the “social”. This involved privileging the subjective viewpoint of the participants and seeking to examine young people’s own interpretations of how they socialise. This approach was found useful to construct knowledge of their personal experiences of connectedness and

“being social”. Schwartz-Shea and Yanow illustrate that the constructivist-interpretivist approach:

‘rests on a belief in the existence of (potentially) multiple, *intersubjectively* constructed “truths” about social, political, cultural and other human events; and on the belief that these understandings can only be accessed, or co-generated, through interactions between researcher and researched as they seek to interpret those events and make those interpretations legible to each other’ (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012 :4).

Hence, it was important for this study to acquire knowledge through establishing direct interactions with “hidden” young people. The study attempts to interpret and co-construct understandings of what “being social” means to the young people. This process was also useful to focus on listening to the participants. It offered insights of the complexities of their individual experiences and justifications of engaging in the “social”.

The emphasis on the researcher’s role to seek in-depth understandings of the social actor’s perspectives and meanings of the social world is closely linked to the notion of “thick description”—a term coined by Clifford Geertz (1973). His seminal work underlines the importance of interpreting individual social behaviours and actions. It also emphasises the significance of understanding the situated meanings of the actions *within* the context that the social actors are embedded in. For instance, the simple action of a wink could pertain to various meanings in different contexts; it has to be understood within the context that it is situated in and from the point of view of the social actors involved. Hence, it has been argued that ‘the analysis to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning’ (Geertz 1973: 5).

This importantly articulates the aims that the interpretive approach seeks to achieve. It is characterised by an interest in understanding the ‘nuanced portrait of the cultural layers that inform the researcher’s interpretation of interactions and events’ (Schwartz-Shea 2014: 132). The notion of “thick description” has also been used by Yanow (1996) to elucidate the strengths of interpretive studies. She emphasises that it necessitates the researcher to unpack complex and situated meanings in order to acquire greater understandings of the social world being observed. This highlights that the “thicker” the description—the more details of lived experience, the more modes of

symbolic expression that are discovered and described [...]—the more one is ascertained of the validity of one’s interpretation’ (Yanow 1996: 53). In this way, there was a strong emphasis in this study on developing a detailed empirical investigation of daily practices and experiences, as they could carry symbolic meanings that represent the wider social world—or as Geertz describes, the “webs of significance”. Moreover, this is how the accounts provided from the participants’ perspective were considered as meaningful. Their significance lied in the provision of access to understand how “hidden” young people interpret and make sense of their interactions; the personal accounts illuminated the meanings and reasons behind their social connectedness. Yanow (1996) describes this task could be very demanding and rigorous, and the focus of the inquiry should be to understand the plurality of meanings. Thus, one of the main purposes of this inquiry was to describe and understand “hidden” young people’s states of interactions in great detail and depth, and remain close to the descriptions and interpretations from the young people’s perspectives.

Focusing on Lived Experiences

The emphasis on understanding the details of the lived experiences of “hidden” young people was also considered an important aspect of the research design. It drew on ideas from the phenomenological tradition, particularly in valuing social actor’s lived experience (Husserl 1913; Van Manen 1990). Phenomenology promotes that the social world ought to be understood through the experience and interpretation of the *situated* human actors. How the social world appears to the individuals facing the particular phenomenon or context studied is prioritised. This study is inspired by this approach, especially its focus of the participants’ lived experiences and how sociability is interpreted and understood from *their* viewpoints. This is an interpretive dimension of phenomenology that this study draws on specifically. However, this study does not claim to have conducted a phenomenological research nor followed its pursuit to undertake intensively detailed empirical work. The phenomenological tradition goes further in focusing on the material, sensual and psychological aspects of the social actor’s experience (Patton 2002). Moreover, the accounts it attempts to develop through interviews are more intense, particularly in terms of their range and depth. This study’s aim, instead, is developed from a more basic ambition to build an empirical and interpretive account of “hidden youth” oriented to young people’s viewpoints and lived experiences.

Furthermore, this study paid specific attention to examine details of the participants' everyday lives. By unpicking these details, this study was sensitive to carefully explore various elements that were pertinent to the young people's sense of connectedness. This strategy was particularly conducive to uncover a range of different dimensions of "being social" which were involved in how they socialise. Also, focusing on examining the texture and weave of the everyday was useful to draw out the underlying complexity of how the participants engage with the "social", especially inside the space of the bedroom (Mason 2002). The design of the research acknowledged that qualitative methodology such as the interpretive approach could celebrate the richness, depth and multi-dimensionality of the context studied. Hence, the design promotes in-depth understandings of the sociality of "hidden" young people.

Another important aspect of focusing on lived experiences for this research was to turn the focus on the young people themselves. It allowed the study to give a voice to young people who have been seen as disengaged and "withdrawn" from society. Importantly, it also oriented the study to query how the young people themselves perceived their social interactions and participation, instead of assuming they were isolated and "withdrawn". The focus on lived experiences also facilitated this study to adopt a perspective which recognises the young people to be individual autonomous agents. It helped to raise questions around their agency and personal autonomy in how they socialise. It was also useful to highlight the role played by their motivations and perceptions of various dimensions of "being social". Hence, it opened up possibilities to examine the research question of how they manage the ways they socialise in different types of interactions and with different audiences. It was important for this study to adopt a form of "sustained empathetic inquiry"; this involved me as a researcher being empathetic to the meanings of social interactions from the participants' viewpoint, and also importantly sought to understand the details and nuances of their everyday "lifeworlds" (Atwood and Stolorow 1984: 121).

Reflections and Justifications of Using Interviews

In order to understand the lived experiences of "hidden" young people, this research was required to create a window to understand the participants' views and 'life as lived' (Marshall and Rossman 2015: 18). To do so, semi-structured interviews were chosen to be the most appropriate instrument for data collection. Other qualitative methods such as ethnographies were also considered. Such methods were, however, not

necessarily appropriate to study “hidden youth”. The potential intrusion of privacy, particularly regarding observations in their bedrooms, was a particular concern.

It has been argued by Patton (2002) that in-depth interviews were *necessary* to explore lived experiences. Patton (2002) illustrates that interviewing allows the researcher to understand the participants’ first-hand experiences, and importantly illuminate ‘how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it and talk about it with others’ (Patton 2002: 104). Semi-structured interviews hence enabled me to have a personal conversation with the participants to explore the details and different aspects of “how” and “why” of their sense of “being social”.

The participant-centred approach of semi-structured interview was also best suited for my interest in giving “hidden” young people a stronger voice in the research. It positioned the participants as central, and allowed space for the participants to lead the direction of the conversation and present topics that were important from their points of view (Arksey and Knight 1999). The flexibility and openness found in semi-structured interviews were thus conducive to capture in-depth accounts of the participants’ interpretations of their personal experiences and perceptions of interactions. At the same time, the semi-structured interviews helped to maintain the focus of the conversations with participants on the central theme of their connectedness with the “social”. This involved signposting a broad set of topics related to how they interacted and participated in society in different ways, while keeping the conversation participant-led. Also, it was useful to keep the structure of data generally consistent and coherent, as it assisted the process of comparing and contrasting the commonalities of the participants’ lived experiences of social interactions.

Furthermore, it was considered important in this study to understand the participants’ “journey”. This study emphasised on exploring not only their current states of connection with society itself, but also how the participants linked their past experiences and conceptions of different dimensions of “being social” with their current states of connectedness. For example, how the participants past experiences of attempting to join the workforce were connected to their seclusion in the bedroom, and how they felt about social participation generally, was interesting to explore. Hence, it was important for the interviews to seek understandings of the accounts of how participants engage in the “social”. It has been argued that the key to this approach lied in working with the detail—what Riessman (2008: 117) calls the ‘little things’—because important insights could be revealed from unpacking complex, multi-faceted and

occasionally conflicting perspectives provided by research participants. In this view, research should aim at ‘transforming a lived experience [and] draw[ing] on taken-for-granted discourses and values circulating in a particular culture’ (Riessman 2008: 7). Brown’s (1998) work demonstrates the strength of positioning the participant’s voice alongside the researcher’s voice. It helps interpret the meanings of the social world better through the participants’ experiences.

It was thus important to use semi-structured interviews to explore the perspectives of the participants. This facilitated this research to tell the participants’ accounts of their engagements with the “social”. In doing so, it also allowed me as a researcher to understand further the meanings and contexts of what was expressed and described by the participants during the interviews. The study was in a stronger position to interpret how the young people socialise and highlight inferences to the wider context of the sociality of “hidden” young people (Luttrell 2003).

Background interviews

In addition to interviews with young people, I conducted a few background contextual interviews with youth work practitioners in Hong Kong and Scotland. It was a useful practice to enhance my background understanding of “hidden” young people in each context and ‘soliciting feedback from those familiar with the setting’ (Marshall and Rossman 2015: 46-7). This involved interviewing three youth workers in Scotland and three Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) youth workers in Hong Kong. They had all engaged with one or several young people who were chosen to be interviewed. Nonetheless, the focus was *not* set on discussing a specific young person but their experiences of working with “hidden” young people more generally. The workers offered insightful accounts for me to understand better how “hidden youth” were generally perceived and discussed in the wider contexts. The interviews particularly strengthened my thoughts on the potential gaps in policy in Scotland, where discussions of “hidden youth” were largely absent. The Scottish youth workers reflected that they had encountered many young people who shut themselves in the bedroom in their work. However, there was little awareness and recognition of this and the issue needed to be addressed properly by policy-makers. This material provided a useful background for me to reflect on my study’s findings; it informed my consideration of policy implications and how to use the young people’s interviews for this purpose.

The workers in Hong Kong and Scotland were also asked to comment on what services they provided for “hidden” young people (if any) through their organisations

and how this was potentially linked to policy initiatives and controversies in the context. It was especially helpful to hear the practitioners' first-hand experiences of working with the young people. I gained useful "street-level bureaucrat's" insights on the issues, strategies and challenges of engaging with "hidden youth" (Lipsky 1980; Hupe and Hill 2007; Hupe et al. 2015). This helped enhance my familiarity of the varied experiences of young people and gave a glimpse of their lived experiences from a broader external perspective. Some of the workers' interview material was also helpful in forming follow-up questions and probing in the main interviews with young people.

There was a brief plan during the fieldwork in Hong Kong to extend the interviews to the parents of the participants. This would have been a useful resource for the analysis to examine the young people's family relationships in more depth, particularly as they became largely dependent on the family while "hiding" in the bedroom. However, the take up of the parents' interview was low and insufficient for a meaningful and substantial investigation. This could be due to the access route to the participants' parents being the NGOs and schools. It was more useful for the focus of this study to remain on the young people and not risk exhausting the gate-keepers, who were already putting great amounts of efforts in recruiting "hidden" young people. The plan to interview parents was therefore abandoned in the end. However, getting the parents' perspectives on young people becoming "hidden" could be an interesting avenue for future research to pursue, and will be discussed further in the conclusion chapter.

The Selection of Sites

The design of the site selection of this study was aimed at finding young people who fall on different ends of the spectrum of being "hidden". This helped situate experiences of beginning to disengage from school and work and starting to hide in the bedroom on the one end, and becoming fully secluded and entirely disengaged from work, school, family, and communities such as friends and peer groups on the other. This study's strategy was to select two different sites that could represent and investigate accounts of each end of the spectrum. Hong Kong was determined to be the ideal location to identify young people who were more disengaged and deeply secluded; whereas Scotland was more likely to find young people who were disengaged from "being social" to a lesser extent.

There has been a particularly prominent observation of “hidden youth” across East Asia, including Japan, Hong Kong, Korea, Taiwan and China (Kato et al. 2012). It has become an increasingly popular term in these contexts, and Hong Kong and Japan have some of the highest numbers of young people who are considered as “severely” secluded in the bedroom (Wong et al. 2015). This made Hong Kong and Japan potentially interesting contexts to consider experiences of young people who were more “hidden” and detached from “being social” to a more extreme extent. However, the widespread discussions of “hidden youth” are also an important factor to consider. The public and policy discourses in Japan are intensely focused on considering being “hidden” as a psychiatric disorder, namely “hikikomori” (Furlong 2008). This made it potentially difficult to disentangle the preconceptions of “hidden youth” being a clinical and mental health issue when examining the Japanese context, which was not the focus of this study. In Hong Kong, in contrast, there is a higher awareness of the sociological perspective and there are more discussions and understandings of the social causes and implications of young people being “hidden” in the bedroom (Wong and Ying 2006). This study therefore considered Hong Kong to be a prime site to explore and study the experiences of young people who are on the more “extreme” end of the spectrum of “hidden-ness”. The interview accounts collected in Hong Kong involved young people’s experiences of longer periods of not stepping out of the bedroom and stronger seclusion and disengagements from the “social”.

Conversely, Scotland was considered to be the ideal context to find young people who were placed on the weaker end of the “hidden-ness” spectrum and less detached from “being social”. Issues about young people not in employment and education have raised particularly significant concerns in Western countries, such as the United Kingdom, United States and Western Europe (Brown and Larson 2002). This has been linked to prevalent issues of rising unemployment and widespread economic recession across the West after the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 (Antonucci et al. 2014). A soaring number of young people become or remain unemployed and are unable to find work after leaving school. This has been an especially salient issue in Scotland, where the number of young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) has been on the rise and is one of the highest in Western Europe (Adams 2012). There are also heated debates and controversies in this context around cultures of “worklessness” and long-term unemployment, particularly concerning young people who left school early and have low skills and low levels of education (MacDonald et al. 2013; Roberts 2005).

This made Scotland a particularly appropriate choice of site to find young people who were also disengaged from work and school but not as disconnected from relationships with family and peers. This was especially useful to examine differing experiences of being “hidden” and understand the sense of connectedness of young people who had been less intensely secluded. The selection of Scotland to be included in this study also fills an important empirical gap in the literature, as the issue of “hidden youth” in this context has been under-researched. The experiences of Scottish young people were anticipated to offer new insights and important to maximise opportunities of investigating a variety of experiences of being “hidden”.

Choosing Hong Kong and Scotland for this study therefore provided interesting comparisons of young people who were disengaged from work, school and social relationships to different extents. It helped examine and consider experiences of young people who were on different ends of the spectrum of “hidden-ness”.

It was also interesting that there were salient public and policy concerns regarding increased number of young people disengaged from society in both contexts. This allowed studying contexts which had evidence to suggest that they had high proportions of youth disconnecting from “being social”. It increased the likelihood of finding and understanding young people who could be considered as “withdrawing” from society and “hiding” in the bedroom. This approach also narrowed the focus on contexts where young people’s interactions and participation, and thereby being an active member of society, were regarded as particularly important. This allowed the study to understand more clearly in what ways “hidden” young people could be seen as disconnecting from the “social” in each site. It also elicited more distinctively the various types of interactions and disengagements which were regarded as important in the context. Thus, studying Hong Kong and Scotland helped to deepen the understandings of “hidden youth” and their varied experiences of social connectedness. It brings the discussions of how they are considered as disengaged and withdrawing from the “social” to the fore.

It was helpful that the cases could provide a context where the topic of young people disconnecting from interactions with society was particularly debated and contentious. This feature facilitated the study to further reflect on diverse, varying aspects of socialising that could be pertinent to describe and conceptualise how young people engage in the “social”. It helped to reveal a range of varying interactions and complex links among young people’s motivations to engage in different social

interactions. The most appropriate sites for this study were thus ultimately determined to be Hong Kong and Scotland. The next chapter will provide a more detailed description of each context and illustrate their differences in cultures and youth socialisation experiences.

One of the strengths of studying more than one site was being able to develop more understandings of how the young people socialise in different cultural contexts. Based on Hammersley and Atkinson's (1983) arguments, studying the young people in multiple contexts could be conducive to achieve a greater complexity of understanding, as their experiences of connectedness could be illustrated from different perspectives. This echoed Schwartz-Shea's (2014) suggestion of 'multidimensionality' as being an important strategy which strengthens an interpretive research design. This study hence chose to study "hidden" young people in two contexts. It offered a more nuanced perspective to highlight the complexities and diverse interactions that could pertain to how young people are "being social". This was also achieved by highlighting comparisons of the two contexts.

It was determined that having two sites was the most appropriate for the design of this research. It was able to ensure that the research on the contexts was thorough and comprehensive. This study therefore did not consider to examine more sites, as having more than two would have compromised the depth of understanding. It would have also undermined the intense attention to details and nuances in the empirical materials that this study had been able to dedicate to by researching only two contexts. More sites could have become practically un-manageable within the timeframe and financial constraints of the PhD. It would have risked the analysis of each site becoming thin and overlooking the levels of complexities in how the participants were "being social". Hence, while having a small number of sites to study, it was particularly important for this research to establish carefully and specifically chose contexts that could be instrumental to gain a nuanced perspective of "hidden" young people (Gerring 2004). This involved identifying particular contexts that could facilitate the research to examine the complexities and variations of their interactions and participation society in depth, in order to subsequently consider the theoretical implications that they may have. Furthermore, this exploratory approach across two specific contexts has enabled the research to:

'uncover social practices that are taken for granted...[it] can "close in" on everyday situations and test how something occurs in social life. The advantage

here is depth rather than breadth. Contrary to popular belief, falsification of preconceived notion is more likely to occur...than is verification' (Riessman 2008: 117).

Therefore, it was anticipated that carefully chosen contexts could be particularly helpful to challenge existing theoretical assumptions about "hidden" young people and their choices to live solitary, lonely lives (Teo and Gaw 2010; Wong and Ying 2006). The sites enabled this research to tease out the nuances of their sense of connectedness, despite of their *physical* seclusion in the bedroom for a protracted period of time. To do so, the research helped "closing in" on the young people's everyday lives, and thereby unveiled how social interactions could occur in their everyday lives inside their bedrooms in particular (Livingstone 2009).

Reflecting on the Site Selection

In hindsight, the fact that Hong Kong and Scotland are both technologically-advanced was significant for the findings of the research also. It allowed insights of how "hidden" young people interact with people through technologies and digital media to emerge. It thus sparked important considerations and understandings of how this study could explore the range of varying means of "being social" that pertained to the participants' sociality.

It has been claimed that digital technologies are extensively used by young people in well-developed countries such as Scotland and across the UK; almost all young people do have access to digital technologies and use digital media for social interactions in these contexts. It is argued:

'as in other developed countries...there are very few children [and young people] who do not use the Internet, unlike their parents and adults in general, making the simple assertion of a binary divide between haves and have-nots, or users and non-users, no longer applicable to young people' (Livingstone and Helsper 2007: 690).

Nonetheless, Livingstone and Helsper (2007) emphasise that while most young people use digital technologies, and low or non-users of Internet are rare among the young generation in well-developed contexts, the quality of access and quality of use of technologies are more divided. This includes the speed of Internet connection, frequency of use of technologies, how fully and broadly young people are able to take advantage of opportunities offered by technologies, and where young people have access to

technologies (in their bedrooms, rest of the home or school). For this study, the widespread diffusion and availability of technologies in young people's lives in the Scottish and Hong Kong context was useful.

Therefore, it became apparent once the fieldwork started, the contexts chosen being well-developed, technologically-advanced was also conducive and significant to how this study understood the participants. It facilitated and steered this study to highlight a range of physical and digital dimensions of "being social" which could be important to "hidden" young people's lived experience. It also helped reflect on the heterogeneity of their engagements in the "social" in the analysis.

Collection of Interview Data

One of the key considerations of the implementation and success of the empirical research was the determination of the research participants. It was important that participants of the interviews fit into the description of shutting themselves in the bedroom for a protracted period of time. However, the lack of clear and consistent definition of "hidden youth" in the academic debate made this a particularly difficult task.

At the design stage of the fieldwork, it was decided that this study was to adopt a broad and more flexible set of criteria to identify "hidden" young people. It was a deliberate decision to include a variety of participants who expressed different levels of disconnections from the labour market, education, family and other communities.

Chan and Lo's (2014) study was one of the first works to consider seriously the variation of the experiences of "hidden" young people. Chan and Lo conducted a large-scale quantitative survey and focused on examining the young people's quality of life. The findings highlight that not only the duration but also the different "levels of withdrawal" can affect young people's life satisfactions and experiences. The notion of the "level of withdrawal" here is defined by the amount of social relationships and interactions a young person maintains. Chan and Lo's work provides an important source of inspiration for my study to draw on and approach the experiences of "hidden youth" as non-homogenous. The varied degrees of disconnectedness became a particularly important consideration when understanding "hidden youth". Nonetheless, unlike Chan and Lo, this study was not aimed towards quantifying young people's experiences nor measuring their degrees of isolation based on a predetermined scale. My study takes into account the varied levels of seclusion and develops this further by

analysing differing experiences of connectedness and “being social” qualitatively. This involves attempting to unpack and looking closely at the heterogeneity of “hidden” young people’s sociability and different aspects of the construction of their sense of “being social”. The strategy of sampling is therefore designed to seek a variety of experiences of being “hidden” and to enable a qualitative investigation of young people’s disconnections from the “social”.

This decision also corresponded to the objectives of the qualitative approach; it aims to gain rich insights and “maximise” learning. It did not narrowly select young people by their disengagements from a pre-determined list of social institutions. The result was having a sample of participants who were disengaged from social interactions and participation to different degrees. They were also not necessarily disengaged from the same types of interactions. Nonetheless, the primary selection criterion centred around young people’s protracted physical confinement in the bedroom.

A total of 32 “hidden” young people were interviewed in this study. 12 interviews were conducted in Hong Kong in April to June 2014, and 20 interviews were held in Scotland in September to November 2014. The broader approach of participant selection was unveiled to be particularly useful to uncover the diversity of “hidden” young people. The following section outlines how the participants were divided by different selection criteria in the recruitment process.

Participant Selection and Backgrounds

The sampling design was guided by the aim to select young people who were on different places across the spectrum of “hidden-ness”. This required devising a strategy to conduct purposive sampling of a variety of young people with diverse experiences of being “hidden”. A series of broad “subgroups” (or ideal-types) were used to fulfil this purpose and acted as an *entry point*, which opened avenues to identify young people who approximately fitted in differing aspects of being “hidden”.

The “subgroups” were recognised to be a simplification and constructed ideal that represented different “hidden” behaviours and experiences. This helped include a variety of “hidden” young people who were disengaged from work, education, family and community to different extents in the sample. Nonetheless, the “subgroups” were deliberately broadly defined and more open-ended in practice. The subgroups were devised only for sampling widely, and not used in any analytical purposes or capacity. I

was deliberate and careful in the analysis not to confine the participants to the sampling categories and I paid more attention to the individual experiences.

The first subgroup of participants included in this study was young people who could be considered as more severely “hidden”. They had locked themselves in the bedroom and did not go outside for longer periods of time. They were more disengaged from work and education, and had fewer interactions with families, friends and peer groups (especially in terms of face-to-face interactions). This was considered an important group to interview, as they matched most closely to the existing understandings of “hidden youth”. This helped put the framework of “social withdrawal” to test and allowed comparisons with other “hidden” young people who were less disengaged in this study (Wong 2009b).

Seven interviews were conducted with young people in Hong Kong who matched the description of being more severely “hidden”. In the context of Scotland, six more severely “hidden” young people were also interviewed. This study, however, by no means assumed homogeneity within this subgroup of participants. On the contrary, as will be illustrated in the forthcoming chapters, variations among the individual were carefully considered. The broad categorisation was regarded as a practical concern to strategically sample as widely as possible.

The second subgroup of participants included young people who were comparatively less “hidden”. They were physically secluded in the bedroom for a protracted period of time. Nonetheless, they had lesser degrees of disengagement from work, education, and interactions with families and other communities. The decision of interviewing this group of participants was greatly important to understand the nuances of how young people experienced a sense of connectedness and “being social”. It helped consider that explaining young people’s engagements in the “social” could involve differing components and descriptions of interactions.

The first strategy was including young people who were less disengaged in education and “hidden” in the bedroom when they were not in school. Five young people in Hong Kong who matched the characteristics were interviewed. They displayed different levels of disengagements from interactions with friends, peers, and families. The data chapters will expand on this, and discuss the tensions found in the young people’s experiences of “being social”. It will highlight that they could also experience a weak sense of connectedness, despite being physically in schools. Similarly,

four high school pupils in Scotland who were considered as “hidden” were included in this study.

In Scotland, I also interviewed 10 young people who had left school and not in any employment. However, they attended skills training for one to four days a week at the time of the interview. This included eight young people attending various training classes (lasting up to 12 weeks) and two young people receiving training opportunities through work placements. This strategy was useful to consider “hidden” young people being on a spectrum of disengagement (Chan and Lo 2014). It will be presented in the empirical material that they could feel disengaged from work and education in a different way to the first subgroup of participants. It highlighted that there could be diversity in young people’s experiences of “being social”, in spite of their tendencies to not go outside and lock themselves in the bedroom. Indeed, young people’s disconnections from different aspects of interactions and participation in society were considered in this study. Different degrees of disengagements from socialising were also taken into account.

Lengths of seclusion

The sample also included a variety of levels of seclusion in terms of the period of time that participants had been “hidden”. This was emphasised as an important characteristic to distinguish according to Chan and Lo’s (2014) framework. It is suggested that young people who had been “hidden” for over a year should be regarded as more deeply secluded. In this study, there were a quarter of participants who had been shutting themselves in the bedroom for over a year. This provided a useful comparison of young people’s connectedness in relation to their lengths of seclusion. Figure 3.1 and 3.2 outline the lengths of time that the participants had been “hidden” in Hong Kong and Scotland respectively³. This ranged from at least two months to five years in Hong Kong and two years in Scotland.

³ This information had not been considered for participants who were in school. It was regarded as too vague and difficult for the participants to recall when they began to be “hidden” in this case. This subgroup of participants was also found to be in earlier stage of disengagement compared to other participants. Their process of becoming “hidden” was still evolving and lacked a clear cut-off point. Whereas for participants who were more disengaged, they had found it easier to describe when they started to become “hidden”.

Figure 3.1 - Distribution of Participants (Who Were Not in School) by Lengths of Seclusion in Hong Kong

2 to <3 months	3 months	4 years	5 years
1	3	2	1

Figure 3.2 - Distribution of Participants (Who Were Not in School) by Lengths of Seclusion in Scotland

2 to <3 months	3 to <6 months	6 to <12 months	1 year	2 years
2	2	7	2	3

In short, a range of “hidden” young people’s characteristics had been included in this study and are summarised in Figure 3.3. The distinctions importantly drew out the heterogeneity of the lived experience of “hidden youth”. This study was also able to interview young people with various levels of disengagements from the “social”. Furthermore, the sample included participants of different demographic characteristics, thereby chose to interview a mixture of young people of different ages from 15 to 20, different genders and socio-economic backgrounds. Figure 3.3 continues in outlining the mix of demographic characteristics of the participants in each site studied. Although the mix of characteristics was not perfectly balanced, it helped diversify the empirical accounts and provided more different viewpoints that this study was able to hear and consider.

Figure 3.3 - Distribution of Participants by Characteristics in Hong Kong and Scotland

Level of Disengagements					
	More Disengaged	Less Disengaged (in School)	Less Disengaged (in Training)	Sub-total	Total
<i>Hong Kong</i>	7	5	--	12	32
<i>Scotland</i>	6	4	10	20	
Age					
	Between 15-16	Between 16-17	Between 17-18	Between 18-19	Between 19-20
<i>Hong Kong</i>	1	3	4	3	1
<i>Scotland</i>	5	6	7	2	0
Gender					
	Male		Female		
<i>Hong Kong</i>	8		4		
<i>Scotland</i>	16		4		
Socio-Economic Background					
	Low-Income Family ⁴		Non-Low-Income Family		
<i>Hong Kong</i>	7		5		
<i>Scotland</i>	14		6		

It was also worthy to note that all participants lived with their families. In Hong Kong, the majority of participants lived with both parents and some also lived with siblings and grandparents additionally. Only one participant's parents were separated, and lived with her father. Another participant's father had passed away and lived only with his mother. Whereas in Scotland, although the participants all lived with their families, their family circumstances were more mixed. 12 out of 20 participants' parents were separated, eight lived with one of their parents only, and four lived with one parent and their new partners. In addition, seven participants lived with both parents, and one lived with a grandparent temporarily at the time of the interview. This also allowed the study to explore the varying connections and interactions with families of the participants. Moreover, it was conducive to unveil the underlying nuances of how they interacted with their family members. All the participants in both contexts lived in housing either owned or rented by their families. Nonetheless, there were also

⁴ In the case of Hong Kong, "low-income family" was determined by whether the participant's family was eligible to receive Public Rental Housing targeted for low-income families. This meant their families were receiving no more than HK\$ 22,390 (approximately £2000) in monthly income for a family of three persons. In the case of Scotland, "low-income family" was determined by whether the participant was eligible to receive Education Maintenance Allowance in Scotland (EMA), a means-tested benefit for young people from lower-income backgrounds, and hence had a family annual income of less than £20,351 or £22,404 (for households with two or more children).

differences in housing tenures, reflecting their diverse socio-economic circumstances and family backgrounds (see Figures 3.4 and 3.5).

Figure 3.4 - Distribution of Participants by Housing Tenure in Hong Kong

Public Rental Housing	Owned Housing Authority's Housing	Rented Old Tenement	Private Owned Housing
7	2	2	1

In Hong Kong, the majority of participants lived in public housing estates, which were government-subsidised housing provided for low-income families and were rented at significantly lower prices than the private rental market. Some participants lived in Housing Authority's housing⁵ purchased by their families, and some in rented flats in old tenement buildings⁶. Only one participant lived in private housing owned by parents.

Figure 3.5 - Distribution of Participants by Housing Tenure in Scotland

Local Council Housing	Affordable Housing	Temporary Accommodation	Private Rental Housing	Private Owned Housing
9	1	2	2	6

Whereas in Scotland, almost half of the participants lived in council housing, which were provided by Local Councils according to priorities of housing needs. Several participants were in affordable housing⁷ and temporary accommodation⁸. Eight participants lived in private housing either rented or owned by their families. This was particularly useful to understand the variety of connections that the young people could have with families, thereby explore their disengagements from interactions with family members further. Importantly, it also contributed to enrich the discussion in this study to consider varying components of their sociality in different types of interactions.

⁵ The Housing Authority was a public agency and offered a homeownership scheme specifically for middle-income households to purchase flats in a purpose-built housing estate at below-market rates.

⁶ Flats in old tenement buildings were typically less expensive and lower quality than mainstream private housing and new-builds in Hong Kong.

⁷ Affordable housing was provided in the social housing sector available to be rented or purchased at below-market price for households on limited income.

⁸ Temporary accommodation was provided by the Local Councils for individuals who are homeless or in threat to be homeless.

Exclusions from the sample

The identification of participants also involved decisions of excluding certain groups of individuals from the study to remain focused on the aims of the research. Firstly, it was important to exclude young people who were disconnecting from social interactions and “hiding” themselves at home as a result of mental health illnesses. While the mental health of “hidden” young people could be interesting to explore in future research, mental health as a contributing factor of being “hidden”—or “secondary social withdrawal” as Kato et al. (2012) importantly distinguished—was not the interests of the research. In light of this, young people who were diagnosed with mental health conditions were not included in the study. All participants in the study did not suffer from any mental health illnesses.

Secondly, particularly in the context of Scotland, young people who lived in rural areas were excluded from the research. This was an important consideration because this study was primarily not aimed towards exploring the influences of geographical remoteness on young people’s disengagements and being confined at home. Hence, to minimise the factors related to imposed inaccessibility based on geographical distances and living in remote areas coming into play, this study focused on young people who lived in urban and accessible areas. Considering 70% of Scotland’s land area could be classified as rural and inaccessible, and 18% of population lived in rural areas, this was a particularly important exclusion in this context (Scottish Government 2015b). All participants in Scotland lived in areas which were urban, where populations were over 10,000 people, and were not remote, in terms of being no more than 30-minutes away from the next settlement by driving.

Access to the Participants

Another crucial, demanding aspect of the fieldwork was identifying and gaining access to young people who were “hidden”. A significant amount of time was spent in negotiating access and building relationships with a number of gate-keepers who had links with “hidden” young people in their work. In Hong Kong, this involved approaching youth workers in Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) who had worked with socially disengaged young people. The initial attempt to establish access with NGOs which had targeted services for “hidden” young people was maybe an obvious route, but was met with great difficulties due to the organisations’ time and resources being limited. Nonetheless, it was found that larger NGOs which provided broader services and had further resources available were more responsive to the

research. The vast number of young people they worked with and more youth workers they had also increased the chances of being able to identify “hidden” young people among their service users (Wong 2012). This unfolded to be a successful strategy to access young people who fit the criteria of disengaging from social interactions and shutting themselves at home through two different NGOs.

Similarly, I chose to contact youth workers in Local Councils who worked with disengaged young people to help find suitable participants for the research in Scotland. In particular, it was useful to approach youth work teams which supported young people who took part in the Activity Agreement⁹, and hence had been classified as disconnecting from society and “hard-to-reach” (YouthLink Scotland 2013). This choice importantly made the identification of young people who lock themselves in the bedroom in the context of Scotland more likely. The strategy was also advantageous to find suitable young people showing varying levels of disengagements particularly from work and education to be included in the research.

Furthermore, less disengaged participants in Hong Kong were recruited through several principals and guidance teachers of local secondary schools. This was particularly effective to include young people who displayed different levels of disconnections and were engaged in education. Conversely, early attempts of approaching schools and teachers in Scotland were met with a very low response rate, and the strategy was in the end abandoned. The feedback from several teachers highlighted that the young people they identified to fit the criteria were either considered “too difficult” to entice them to partake in the research, or more likely, they were commonly non-attending school. This led to an important decision to shift the focus of participant recruitment back to the Local Councils at final stages of the fieldwork, and this was revealed to be a fruitful attempt. It gave successful access to one strongly disconnected young person who was non-attending school, and four less disconnected

⁹ The Activity Agreement is provided by all 32 Local Councils in Scotland in partnership with YouthLink Scotland. It is aimed at offering an individually-tailored learning and skills training programme for young people aged 16-19 who have left school, disengaged from work, and become disconnected from society. The programme was a direct response to the call to provide support for the “hardest-to-reach” and “most disengaged” young people in society (YouthLink Scotland 2013: 1). The skills training was therefore specially designed to accommodate low levels of connectedness and interactions of the target young people. Initially, a young person is only required to attend training sessions or meetings with an Activity Agreement advisor for as little as 0-1 day a week (i.e. level 1 of Activity Agreement). The level and frequency of engagement will only be increased when the young person is considered ready and can be progressed to level 2 or level 3 of the programme.

young people who were in school full-time but received skills training from the Local Council one day a week.

This study also employed a “snowballing technique” to identify gate-keepers; it expanded avenues to seek potential interview participants (Miles and Huberman 1994). It became apparent very quickly this technique worked most successfully when the researcher was attentive to hierarchical structures in the professions of the individuals who were gate-keepers to potential interview participants. This was most remarkable in the case of youth workers in NGOs in Hong Kong in this study. During the preparation and start of the fieldwork, my initial attempts to get access through youth workers were difficult and mostly unresponsive. Most youth workers were reluctant to provide access, because they were sceptical towards the research and saw me as an anomaly. My position as an outsider to their professions appeared to raise concerns in giving me, a non-youth-work professional, access to talk with a group of young people who they considered as particularly vulnerable and they themselves found challenging to work with. Some youth workers appeared to be very protective of their “clients” because of this also, and explained they were untrusting towards my involvement, as I was seen as a risk to their relationships with the clients.

The concerns around my outsider position escalated one week into the fieldwork in Hong Kong in April 2014, because a young person who had been “hidden” for ten years attempted suicide after two days of re-engaging in work (Apple Daily 2014; Oriental Daily 2014). This also became the account which opened the introduction chapter in this thesis. Although the young person survived the incident, there were heightened concerns around the vulnerability and risks of young people who were “hidden” in Hong Kong. After the incident, youth workers I was in contact with became more cautious and many decided to decline to give access. Nonetheless, the turning point came when I contacted an acquaintance who was a senior member of the director board of a large youth NGO. This became an important strategy to re-negotiate my position in the eyes of the gate-keepers, and successfully led to their active response and co-operation to give access to young people who fit the participant criteria among their service users. It also prompted my reflection of the significance of “guan-xi” and connections to reinforce co-operation particularly in Chinese society (Gold et al. 2003).

The strategy was then also useful in negotiating access with Local Councils in Scotland. Once I established contact with a senior management member of the Activity Agreement Programme, I was introduced by her to the Heads of relevant youth work

team in the Local Councils and they were asked to assist my research. The process of gaining trust and overcoming anomaly worked more successfully as a result. Nonetheless, another challenge in the fieldwork in Scotland was overcoming the initial reluctance to take part in the research from potential participants. The feedback from one of the gate-keepers was most useful and became an effective strategy throughout the fieldwork. He indicated most young people would refuse to be interviewed during the first time he asked. It was only after being asked a few more times that young people would eventually agree, as they had more time to process and understand what the interview involved. It also appeared to increase the rate of response and showing up from the potential participants if they were picked up and drove home by a youth worker to attend the interviews. At the later stage of the research, it was found that arranging the interviews during times when young people were required to attend training sessions or meetings with the Councils was an effective strategy as well.

Dealing with Difficulties in the Participant Selection

This research had some limitations due to difficulties of access and having limited avenues to contact and approach young people who were “hidden” in the bedroom. The fieldwork ultimately relied on third sector organisations and schools in Hong Kong and Local Councils in Scotland for participant recruitment, and was thereby faced with potential biases in the identification of participants.

In Hong Kong, the choice of access routes could have caused at least two types of biases: i) the sample could be skewed by the youth work practitioners’ ideas and preconceptions of who “hidden” young people were, and ii) the selection could be biased by the stigma attached to “hidden youth” and considerations of the young people to be a “problematic” group in this context.

Firstly, because the identification of potential participants was done externally through youth work practitioners and school teachers, the sample could be skewed by the gate-keepers’ presumptions of who they thought and classified as “hidden youth”. This was particularly affected by the services and organisational frameworks that pre-determined who “hidden” young people were and how to work with them. The remit of the services offered by the organisation or school could also influence the gate-keepers’ views, particularly based on what characteristics of “hidden youth” were emphasised and targeted as needing to be addressed by the services. A possible bias in the recruitment process could therefore be introduced by what “hidden youth” meant to

the gate-keepers. It could skew the assessment of the suitability of a young person as a participant and whether they were of interest to this research. For example, in the early stages of the fieldwork, the gate-keepers appeared to be partial to their perceptions of “hidden youth” and limited the recruitment to “severely hidden” young people, which to the gate-keepers mostly meant young people who had been secluded at home and not been in work and education for years. To address this issue, I took time to explain to the gate-keepers on several occasions that the interest of this research went beyond the image of “hidden youth” that was typically found in the public and policy rhetoric in Hong Kong. This study aimed to challenge the dominant assumptions and adopted a broader and more open-ended understanding of being “hidden”. Once I explained this to the gate-keepers, it proved to be effective in persuading them to broaden the recruitment and helped this study capture a wider variety of experiences and different levels of “hidden-ness” of young people.

Secondly, the selection of participants in Hong Kong could be biased by “hidden youth” being considered as a social “problem”. The behaviour of being “hidden” was heavily stigmatised and often associated with a range of other issues such as long-term unemployment, family problems, emotional issues, school disaffection, socially inept, and lack of income (Wong 2012). Young people who shut themselves in the bedroom were therefore considered as “troubled” and in need of help and support. These assumptions inevitably affected how youth workers and school teachers had identified “hidden youth” for this research. It could create a biased sample that only included young people who were regarded as requiring support by the school or organisation. Moreover, this was reinforced by the fact that the gate-keepers could only search for potential participants among their “client base” and young people to whom they provided support and had established a relationship with, particularly in the case of the NGOs. The sample could therefore be limited by the work of the organisations. My strategy to diffuse the effects of this was to create a wider pool of young people to draw participants from. This involved finding participants through third sector organisations with different foci in their services and approaching several schools, which helped reduce partiality based on how a young person was deemed in need and receiving support. However, due to the reliance on the NGOs and schools in recruitment, this research did not include any “hidden” young people who were not in school and not supported and pre-identified by a third sector agency. This created a limitation in this study of not being able to consider the experience of young people who could be most “hidden” and reluctant to engage with youth work services or schools.

In Scotland, there was minimal awareness of the issue of “hidden youth”. However, this made it more difficult for gate-keepers to understand and identify young people who were of interest and could be included in this study. Bias was therefore potentially introduced by youth work practitioners’ lack of understanding of what “hidden youth” means, and there could be different views and ideas formulated on who could be considered as “hidden”. This issue required planning more meetings and good communication of information with the gate-keepers, especially at the start of the fieldwork. It was important that I did not merely rely on distributing the participant information sheet and that I communicated directly and clearly with the gate-keepers about how to identify potential participants. This helped clarify expectations and helped the gate-keepers to understand better my approach of studying “hidden youth”, which aimed to include a broad range of experiences of young people shutting themselves in the bedroom.

This was an important strategy to reduce bias that could be introduced to the sample by not ensuring a clear understanding of how to assess the suitability of a young person to be included in this study. It also helped ensure that young people who were suitable had been correctly identified. However, the recruitment of participants through Local Councils was also affected by the scope of the Councils’ work and policy agendas in this context, which focused on supporting young people to find employment. The youth workers who acted as gate-keepers mainly supported young people who had left school with low qualifications and offered them skills training through the Activity Agreement programme. The selection of participants was therefore mainly restricted to young people who were on Activity Agreements and was restricted to the age group they worked with (16 to 19). Although the sample could be biased by the specific type of service and support that a Local Council provided, this study attempted to address this issue by recruiting participants through several different Councils. Each Council had different approaches in how they recruited young people to participate in Activity Agreement. For example, one Council actively sought potential eligible participants through schools. Other Councils relied on school and parental referrals or young people’s self-enrolment. Similarly, the Councils also had different priorities and approaches in how they worked with young people who had various levels of readiness and willingness to engage in training or employment. This resulted in being able to recruit young people who were on different places of the spectrum of “hidden-ness” and had varied experiences of “hiding” in the bedroom. Nonetheless, as in Hong Kong, this research faced limitations in fully understanding the most “hidden” young people, as

young people who were not pre-identified or unwilling to engage in Local Council's services were not included in the sample.

Reflecting on the Process of Interviewing

It was a crucial aim to design and facilitate interviews to allow open and meaningful conversations with the participants. One of the important strategies to achieve this was to ask open-ended questions and show empathy and interests to understand the participants early in the interviews. This strategy was designed into the interview guide which served as a reminder of what topics and main questions could be relevant to the purpose of the study (see appendix I). The questions being asked in the interviews centred around themes including:

- What the participants normally did in their everyday life and how they normally spent their day.
- What activities they enjoyed doing when they were at home and why.
- The participants' perceptions, feelings and experiences about "being social" in terms of: i) becoming involved in the workforce, and; ii) continuing in education.
- Decisions and feelings around being at home versus going outside.
- Descriptions of family situation and interactions.
- Descriptions of people who the participants felt they had a good relationship with and why. How they normally interacted with each other.
- Experiences of who else they interacted with, how they interacted, and the participants' feelings towards such interactions.

The order of questioning was not always followed, apart from the first two questions listed above, as they served an important purpose of establishing rapport with the participants. It set the tone of the interviews by showing interests in the participants' daily lives, and helped opened up lively conversations by first talking about what they were interested in and enjoyed doing. This was also useful to ease the participants into the interview process, and not see their lives and social interactions and participation as being interrogated but a subject of interest.

All the interviews were conducted individually by myself, and the vast majority were carried out on a face-to-face basis. The exceptions were four interviews with participants in Hong Kong, particularly with participants who had been disengaged and

“hidden” for over four years. It appeared that they were more reluctant to meet with me in person. However, one participant who had been withdrawn for three months also did not want to be interviewed face-to-face.

My identity became most apparent in the process of research when arranging one of the interviews which was not face-to-face. The participant, who had been “hidden” for four years, was hesitant to meet me in person because I am male and have a different gender to hers. It was a challenging situation, as I became more aware of invisible yet inherent barriers that could be imposed by who I am as a researcher. I attempted to make myself appear as non-threatening as possible, and the fact that I could interview her online without exchanging contact details such as phone numbers also appeared to put her at ease. She was also reassured when told that she could end the interview any time without giving reasons. In the end, she did open up and gave genuine responses regarding her daily lives and sense of connectedness. It turned out to be a highly insightful interview to understand young people who had been “hidden” for a long period of time.

The potential reluctance to interview face-to-face was not unanticipated, and I offered the option of conducting phone and online interviews to all participants in Hong Kong and Scotland. Nonetheless, only three participants chose to be interviewed over the phone and one participant was interviewed online in Hong Kong. The online interview was conducted using voice communication on Voice over Internet Protocol software, Microsoft Lync (Lync). Lync was chosen as it was the easiest to set up audio recording compared to other software such as Skype. Lync also had the unique function of allowing the share of multi-media content and use of drawing tools on the content. It made obtaining a signature for consent from the interview participants easier than other software as well as phone interviews. In the latter case, consent forms were signed and retrieved through the gate-keepers. It was also reflected that online tools were particularly useful in the context of this study, and made interviews, which would not have been possible, possible. It has been argued that online interviews could be:

‘beneficial in overcoming temporal and spatial barriers to qualitative research...[and] capitalise on increasing societal use of the internet as a powerful medium for communication...[It could be useful] to engage young people...including those who may be excluded from traditional methods’
(Moore et al. 2015 :26)

Although only a surprisingly small number of participants chose to be interviewed online or over the phone, the methods were indeed helpful for this study to overcome different barriers of traditional interviewing for several “hidden” young people. Furthermore, the study also paid attention to potential discrepancies among interviews due to the lack of non-verbal cues (such as body language and facial expressions) in alternatives to face-to-face interviews, as highlighted by Moore and colleagues (2015). The content and themes in online and phone interviews were found to be consistent with what had been explored in face-to-face interviews. The participants appeared to be at ease and more comfortable to be interviewed over the phone or Internet. The levels of depth and richness of insights achieved were similar.

Practical considerations of interviews

The face-to-face interview locations were chosen based on where would be a safe and familiar environment for the participants. The majority of interviews took place in a private, quiet room in NGO or school buildings in Hong Kong and Local Council buildings in Scotland. Rest of the interviews were conducted in a private room in community centres. The choice of location appeared to be appropriate as the participants felt more at ease to be interviewed in venues where they had regularly visited and were comfortable in.

All participants were asked to take part in a 45 to 60-minute interview. Eight out of 12 interviews in Hong Kong and 13 out of 20 in Scotland were within this time frame. The remaining interviews typically lasted for approximately 30 minutes. The shortest interview in Hong Kong had an abrupt end from the participant after 20 minutes, as she did not wish to be asked more questions. Whereas in Scotland, the shortest interview lasted for only 15 minutes because the participant was required by Council staff earlier than scheduled. Other than these occasions, all participants appeared as comfortable to be interviewed and continued the conversation for as long as I required to.

The scheduling of interviews with the participants however demanded more tactics than anticipated. In addition to being prepared for last-minute cancellation and failing to turn up, I also became more aware of their lifestyles and late-night routines through the gate-keepers during fieldwork. It was then decided that the participants’ preferences had to be accommodated as much as possible, and hence most interviews were conducted in late afternoons and evenings in the end. In a few cases in Hong Kong, interviews had to be conducted at midnight also. The flexibility allowed in

interview time was thus important to not only the response rate but also reducing feelings of anomaly by the participants.

All interviews were audio-recorded by a digital recording device. The choice was made to allow a complete word-for-word record of the interviews to be reproduced, and they were useful for re-visiting the interview content multiple times for analytical purposes. The participants appeared to be generally at ease with being recorded, and explanations and their permissions to record were always established before the recording began. Only one participant in Hong Kong in particular expressed concerns before being recorded. After reaffirming the recordings will not be shared with anyone else, the participant became more accepting to be recorded.

Hand-written notes were also taken during the interviews to supplement the voice recordings. It helped retain significant thoughts and what I had found particularly striking during the interviews. The notes were thus useful for reviewing the interviews in context at later stages of the research. In addition, notes-taking was an effective tool to develop follow-up questions and prompts during the interview (Rubin and Ruben 2005). Being mindful of using phrases that the participant had specifically used was found to be a useful strategy to probe further reflections from the participants and helped participants to elaborate on their thoughts.

Challenges of Managing the Interview Dynamics

It was a challenging as well as important learning experience to manage the power dynamics between me and the participants. During the fieldwork preparation, I was unaware of the potential that I could be seen as dominating a position of higher authority by the participants, particularly because of our differences in education levels. Nonetheless, I began to realise—after my first interview took some time for the participant to open up—the participants could assume me to be the “well-educated” researcher and felt intimidated to speak and express themselves freely. It was thus key that I presented myself to be friendly and easy to relate to from the moment I met the participant, and not acting to be more “knowledgeable” and professional. Before each interview began, I made sure to emphasise I was in the position of the “unfamiliar”. I highlighted to the participants that I saw them as giving me help to understand the sociality of themselves, and hence enabling me to study young people who could be considered as disengaged from society.

In this way, the power dynamics effectively shifted in the interviews. The participants could in fact consider themselves as the “experts” who held valuable information to the research. Also, it was useful to reaffirm the participants what might have seemed ordinary and mundane to them regarding their everyday social lives were in fact interesting to this study. This importantly helped draw out the rich and nuanced details of their sense of connectedness to different types of interactions and participation in society. Furthermore, this approach placed emphasis on understanding the participants’ own interpretations of their engagements in the “social”, instead of imposing the researcher’s assumptions and pre-judgements. It reinforced my position to be open and not assuming the participants as isolated from society or had low levels of engagements in the “social”. This was particularly instrumental to how this study obtained a more nuanced analysis of how they were “being social”.

Another important lesson learned about managing interviews with “hidden” young people was the barriers of interactions and communication with them could indeed vary. Not all participants appear to have weak interpersonal and social skills as suggested by previous studies such as Wong’s (2009b; 2012) in Hong Kong. He argued that the longer the time a young person has been “hidden”, the more likely they had gradually “lose” their skills and confidence in conversing with people and became “avoidant” of interactions with people. However, in this study, the majority of participants showed minimal signs of finding it difficult to communicate and converse in the interviews, regardless of their lengths and levels of disengagement. They were not necessarily shy nor unwilling to talk, and some appeared to be relatively outgoing.

Only two out of 12 participants in Hong Kong, who were in fact still in school, and one in 20 in Scotland, who was in training 0-1 day a week, conveyed a sense of unease and gave short responses consistently in the interviews. For the rest of the participants, it was typical that they entered the interview with some feelings of hesitation and reservation initially. It was not uncommon that they only gave short responses also at first. This was an expected challenge of the study, as several youth studies scholars had highlighted short responses and general unresponsiveness could be major barriers of interviewing young people who are socially disengaged (Beresford 1997; Finlay et al. 2010; Lister et al. 2005). Curtis et al. (2004) share experiences of interviewing “hard to reach” young people. Their work suggests that disengaged young people could find it uneasy to articulate their thoughts and frustrating to elaborate on answers to questions which they had already been asked.

Therefore, this study attempted to avoid questions of the interviews appearing to be repetitive and allowed space, and often prolonged silences, for participants to think and reflect on their experiences of “being social”. This also importantly encouraged nuanced, complicated, and sometimes contradicting, accounts of their connectedness to be conveyed in the interviews. In this way, the participants became more communicative and able to express deep reflections of how they interacted with society in different ways once initial rapport was established. Difficulties and barriers of acquiring genuine responses in interviews with “hidden” young people could thus be overcome.

Considerations in Research Ethics

This study was careful in approaching the ethics of conducting research with young people. It was considered a key principle to maintain transparency throughout the research process (Lincoln and Guba 1985). In particular, making information regarding the research clear and transparent to the participants was especially important to this study. This was deemed crucial to seek direct, informed consent from every young person in the study, and also reinforced their confidence and willingness to provide genuine responses in interviews (Dexter 2006).

It was considered that heavy amount of information and formalities presented on paper could be an obstacle to make the participants fully informed. It was common that the participants were disinclined to read the participant information sheets and consent forms carefully, and wanted to rush to sign their names hastily. Therefore, in addition to shortening and simplifying the texts presented in these documents (attached in Appendix II), I also took care to go through the main points verbally with participants before the interviews began. This showed to be an effective strategy to ensure that the participants understood the information fully, and informed written and verbal consent could be established. The participants were also given a chance to raise questions and discuss concerns about participating in the research directly. Furthermore, the study abided to the legal framework in regard to the age of consent, and sought parental approval before the interviews when necessary. The gate-keepers in Hong Kong and Scotland also confirmed no disclosure checks were required for the interviews.

In terms of confidentiality and anonymity, the protection of the participants’ identities was a major priority to this study. All names of the participants were replaced with pseudonyms from the moment the interviews were transcribed. Scottish

participants were given English pseudonyms (such as Nathan and Tammy), and Hong Kong participants were given an English transliteration of Chinese pseudonyms (such as Waiyan and Kaiho).

Other personal information that could lead to the participants being identified—such as areas they lived in, names of parents and friends, and names of schools, NGOs or Local Councils they were connected to—were anonymised in all interview transcripts and research outputs. It was also a deliberate decision to not name the specific areas or regions of where the participants were, and similarly of the names of the gate-keeping organisations (apart from YouthLink Scotland, being the only organisation that manages the Activity Agreement programme across Scotland). It was considered an important measure to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Participants were not directly asked to talk about any sensitive or child protection issues in the interviews. However, there was a chance that young people could have shared information that was related to “significant harm”, especially when answering questions about their relationships with family, relatives, neighbours and friends. Issues that could have been particularly relevant include neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, sexual assaults, and criminal offences. Although the likelihood of such disclosure had been considered low, it was particularly important for this study to be aware of, and for me to be prepared to provide an appropriate level of support, as “hidden” young people may experience a range of complex issues and emotions in relation to being disengaged (Wong and Ying 2006).

The position and principle I maintained was that: should participants share any information on current or past child protection issues, risks or illegal activities, I would have to breach confidentiality and report it to relevant authorities (such as the police or social services) if their own or someone else’s safety were in danger. This procedure was clearly explained (through conversations in person and participant information sheets) to the participants prior to the start of the interviews. There was also a support framework in place to ensure my ethical integrity and responsibility as a researcher was being met should sensitive information be shared or a young person was in danger. During all interviews, I carried printed materials and resources containing information on where participants could find appropriate help and support and was prepared to hand them to participants if needed. This includes ChildLine and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) for participants in Scotland and the Hong Kong Federations of Youth Groups’ “Hotline”, which provides telephone counselling

service for young people who are in stress or danger. The resources would also have been useful had any participants been upset or worried about particular issues (including personal or well-being issues that were not related to child protection) discussed in the interview. Although unlikely, if someone were in immediate danger, the most appropriate support was the emergency services and dialling 999 (in either site). In addition, all the young people interviewed were supported either by youth workers in NGOs or in Local Councils, and participants who were in school had guidance teachers or principals, who acted as gate-keepers for participant recruitment. They would therefore be my first point of contact had there been any concerns about young people's safety or significant harm. The gate-keepers were considered to be a more appropriate resource than I was, as they were already in an established and sustained supporting relationship with the participants. I would also have explained clearly and made information transparent on whom I would be relaying the information to, as a measure of concern for safety, with the participants.

Although none of the potential issues came up during the interviews, it was helpful to minimise the risks of causing traumatic emotions, stress or psychological harm to the participants. It was important to create a safe environment where young people could share and speak about their personal relationships. The precautionary measures also avoided putting myself as a researcher in an ethically irresponsible or dangerous position. This research was careful to address properly and not underestimate potential disclosures of various levels of risks or distress.

Due to ethical concerns, certain questions related to identity and self-representations would have been interesting and helpful to raise, but were avoided in the interviews. This was particularly the case relating to issues that could appear as being judgemental or condemnatory. For example, "what makes you become a 'hidden' youth?" or "do you see yourself as being 'hidden'?" were questions that I did not include in the interview schedule. I was careful in ensuring that the questions were phrased in a non-judgemental manner and to avoid imposing "labels" and categories on participants that they did not necessarily identify with. This strategy was important because "hidden youth" was a particularly stigmatised label in Hong Kong. This, however, created a limitation in this study of not being able to explore how these young people perceived the category of "hidden youth" and what being "hidden" meant from their viewpoints and experience. This gap in the data was considered to be necessary in order not to risk offending unintentionally the participants or making them feel uncomfortable and

judged during the interview. This was instrumental to prevent distracting the participants' attention in the interviews and to create a safe setting that was conducive to young people opening up and giving genuine responses.

All digital data linked to the study were securely saved on a laptop and back-up devices with password encryption. Physical copies of field notes and signed consent forms were locked in a secure location. All data will also be carefully destroyed two years after the research is completed.

Finally, the transcription and analysis of interviews were only handled by me individually. Every interview was fully transcribed, as it was considered essential to allow me to review and reflect on the content of the interviews back and forth for the analysis.

The Data Analysis Process

Moving between the empirical data and various theoretical literature was crucial to the analytical process which took place after the fieldwork in this study. It was not a straight-forward path to find and develop the analytical focus, due to the interview findings gradually revealed itself to be diverging from the existing literature on “hidden youth”. As I mulled over the interview content repeatedly, I began to realise the findings were pointing towards a different framework of making sense and interpreting how “hidden” young people engage in the social.

This process was guided by the key principles of inductive research commonly found in qualitative research (such as Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967). The emphasis of analysis was on searching for categories and themes that appropriately depicted the meaning of the data. Moreover, it allowed this study to base the analytical process firmly on “hidden” young people's own interpretations and accounts of how they socialise, thereby aligned with the logic of interpretive inquiry. The participants' subjective views and meanings were appropriately privileged. Hence, it was important that this study attempted abstracting the interview content provided by the participants into broader theoretical concepts and understandings.

This involved an important iteration of querying what the empirical material was telling and suggesting regarding the different aspects of young people's social interactions and participation. In order to test the “social withdrawal” framework, the focus was placed on analysing the young people's participation in work, participation in

education, and interactions with families and other communities, especially friends and peer groups. It was found striking that both the contexts of Hong Kong and Scotland unveiled similar accounts. They articulated the participants' varying engagements in a wide range of dimensions of the "social". It particularly highlighted that digital interactions as well as physical interactions could be significant to the participants' sense of "being social". This also prompted this study to reflect on how the participants' engagements in the "social" could be conceptualised as involving heterogeneous components, instead of simply described as being self-isolated and living in solitude. In here, the predominance of interactions through digital media—in contrast to face-to-face interactions in person—in relation to how the participants were "being social" was a particularly thought-provoking and initially puzzling consideration in the reflection.

This study thus progressed to a demanding process of navigating back and forth the interview transcripts, emerging theoretical abstractions and consulting potential relevant literature to make sense of the participants' interpretations of their engagements in the "social". The literature in digital sociology (such as Baym 2010; Lupton 2015; Orton-Johnson and Prior 2013) was found particularly useful in this pursuit. In this way, the analytical focus based on a digital sociological argument emerged at the later stage of the research.

Behind this decision, however, was another major challenge encountered in this study. The decision involved an uneasy task of seeking a suitable concept which could adequately capture the complexities of the emerging findings. I initially experimented with the framework proposed by scholars who have studied "hidden youth", such as Wong (2009a) and together with colleague Ying (2006). Their arguments emphasised the influence of social exclusion and socio-economic deprivation on how "hidden" young people connected to the "social". Nonetheless, this framework was found ultimately unsatisfactory in capturing what was emerging from the empirical data. It was not able to incite more understandings on the participants' diverse forms of "being social", particularly regarding their digital interactions. Social exclusion was also unhelpful in reflecting on the remarkably complex picture of the participants' sense of connectedness emerged in the interviews.

In hindsight, this decision was particularly important in contesting preconceptions which I carried with me into the initial analysis. My understandings of the sociality of the young people were still heavily shaped by existing literature which I had read at that point. It was becoming fuzzy whether my understandings of how the

participants' socialise were informed by what the data said or the previous studies on "hidden youth" said. It was thus a useful decision to take a step back after initial analysis to seek clarity and re-consider my distance from past studies of "hidden youth". This exercise constituted a crucial step towards sharpening the analysis based on the empirical findings and linking them with theoretical arguments found in digital sociology.

Reflections on Thematic Analysis

The most effective tool to guide the coding process on the interview transcripts to achieve this study's aims was chosen to be thematic analysis. It provided a systematic mechanism to section the interview data into segments of texts and organise them according to emerging themes which the texts pertained to (Riessman 2008). This involved my position as the researcher to interpret the meanings of the texts and ascribe one or more categories to sections of texts of the transcripts. Texts coded under the same category were not necessarily determined by the participants' uses of same phrases or specific key words, but the meanings and interpretations of certain aspects of engaging with the "social" being similar. This process also provided an important window to examine themes and patterns across the data in order to understand the empirical insights about their sense of social connectedness revealed from the interviews. In this way, coding according to themes was a crucial process for the abstraction of data and linking various segments of data in a way which helped answering the research questions in this study (Richard and Morse 2007).

To assist with the coding process, a qualitative data analysis software was used to aid the systematic organisation of data and themes. It also provided an easier way to repeatedly re-code and have flexible controls of viewing data, compared to working with printed copies by hand. In addition, the choice of software was an important consideration in this study. Early in the analysis, I was dissatisfied with the experience of working with NVivo, and therefore chose to attempt using a new software, Quirkos, which was designed to address some shortcomings of NVivo. Not only did Quirkos have a more user-friendly interface, it could also be an effective tool for visual thinkers to work with. It displayed the categories in multi-coloured bubbles on the left side of the screen, and the transcript of a selected interview on the right. The coding process was facilitated by either drag-and-drop of highlighted texts into a bubble or pressing short-cut keys on the keyboard assigned to specific categories. The sizes of the bubbles were responsive to the amount of text coded in a category, thereby served as a dynamic and

constant reflection of the emerging themes across the data throughout the coding process.

Furthermore, one of the key strengths of Quirkos for this study was its ability to not lose sight of the contexts which the texts were embedded while interview transcripts were being fragmented into segments. In particular, when viewing aggregated segments of texts across the sample coded under a same category, Quirkos allowed the function of also displaying the texts which were said before or after each coded segment on the same screen. This was particularly useful to keep in mind of the texts' connections with its overall experience, and remain attentive to nuances found in the participants' accounts. Thus, it was also significant to how this study was able to construct rich perspectives and convey the complexities of their experiences of "being social".

Language considerations

In this process, it was important that the interviews were transcribed and analysed in the language it was conducted. This was Cantonese in the context of Hong Kong and English in Scotland. Keeping the analytical work conducted in the original language had been considered essential to the meaning-making process, as it was most effective in retaining and staying true to the participants' interpretations.

Being fluent in Cantonese and English was a major advantage in interpreting and understanding the meanings conveyed by the participants in the interviews. Having lived in both Hong Kong and Scotland for more than eight years was also useful in this process. I was immersed and familiar with the environments of young people's social interactions and participation in both sites. Thus, I was confident of being able to interpret the meanings and recognise underlying contexts behind the participants' reflections of how they socialise, and not merely glossed over the surface of words being said.

Structuring the analysis

This study aimed to stay close to the participants' interpretations and the ways they imagined their engagements in the "social". For example, all the participants articulated an important distinction between physical and digital forms of interactions when they reflected on their connectedness. It was clear that this distinction was significant to how the young people made sense and understood how they were "being social". To reflect this distinction, the analysis and how it would be presented in this thesis were organised accordingly.

The analysis presented in Chapter V focuses on young people's sense of "being social" which pertained to the physical world. Through thematic analysis, this study also understood young people's physical dimensions of "being social" as being associated with a range of concepts and categories. These were categories devised based on the different layers that the participants identified about their connections with the "social" in the physical sense. Various aspects were deemed broadly relevant to "physical social interactions and participation", including: interactions which were face-to-face, interactions in person, being outside and leaving the bedroom, and interactions "in real life" (IRL) as described by some participants. The focus of the participants' perspectives in this area particularly centred around participation in the labour market and education. The participants also talked about perceptions towards their future and opportunities in society. This was emphasised with their lack of motivations to engage in work and education. Hence, the analysis presented in Chapter V was structured according to the accounts of physical dimensions of "being social".

Similarly, the analysis presented in Chapter VI considers the participants' engagements in digital dimensions of "being social". The participants particularly talked about their interactions with families, friends and peer groups together with digital interactions, and not face-to-face interactions in person. This study took this into account, and presented the analysis according to how the participants interpreted their experiences of connectedness in the digital world.

While this structure provided clarity in presentation, I was also aware that physical and digital means of "being social" were distinct but not necessarily separated. This consideration was particularly useful during the analytical process. The seventh chapter will provide the fuller picture that was found in this process. It also illustrates how the findings were interpreted and connected to empirical and theoretical insights of "hidden youth".

It is important to note the study focused on analysing the interview content within the site it was studied. The study did not find the rigid, directly comparable analysis of comparative studies being suitable to the exploratory aims of the research (George and Bennett 2004; Kennett and Yeates 2001). After careful considerations, it was decided that the empirical insights of the interviews were best understood and illustrated in connections with the particular contexts. Thus, this study did not attempt to seek generalisability across sites nor assume a "universal" theory which could explain how "hidden" young people engage in the "social". On the contrary, this study pursued

the analysis assuming that how the participants engaged in the “social” could be potentially different across and within the sites studied. This provided useful comparisons to offer a more nuanced analysis of “hidden” youth and how they engaged in the social in different contexts.

Considerations of gender and ethnic differences

A number of classic social categories, such as gender, were considered in the initial analysis. I attempted to reflect on the voices of both genders equally and carefully in this process, despite there being more young men than young women who responded to this study’s recruitment. However, analysis based on gender differences did not suggest any substantial nor meaningful results. There were insignificant differences in the accounts described, and the findings of participants’ experiences did not vary based on gender (contrary to early anticipation prior to the fieldwork). Another notable issue was the consideration of ethnic and racial differences. A mix of ethnic backgrounds had not been included in the sample in both sites. This was due to a large majority of the population of Hong Kong is Chinese and Scotland is predominantly Caucasian. It was difficult to recruit young people who were from other ethnic groups given the small population of ethnic minorities in the sites, especially when the choice of participants was limited by relying on NGOs and Local Councils. This meant that there was not sufficient differentiation in the sample to pursue meaningful analysis based on ethnic backgrounds. It could be interesting for future research to investigate the “hidden” experiences of ethnic minority groups in these contexts more specifically. Other social differences yielded more fruitful and insightful analysis in this study. The differences in participants’ experiences based on socioeconomic circumstances, particularly in relation to housing and family, appeared to be relatively more significant. Young people’s schooling involvement also offered especially productive investigation of varied experiences of being “hidden”. Differences in education backgrounds and schooling stages therefore became a main category that was considered in the analysis. This approach was ultimately effective in highlighting the nuances and differing experiences of “hidden” young people in both sites. The results will be illustrated and discussed further in the following chapters.

Chapter Summary

This chapter reflected on the effectiveness of the plan and strategies which had been devised to address the aims of this study. It also discussed and explained in detail the important decisions made in the journey of the research, thereby making the history

of the design transparent. It elicited how the approach of interpretive inquiry, qualitative studies, empirical fieldwork and inductive process of analysis was designed. This helped pointed towards uncovering a more nuanced perspective of “hidden” young people in this study. After reflecting on the foundations of the knowledge and intellectual considerations, the next chapter turns to elucidate the empirical analysis further.

Chapter V and VI will serve the purpose of illustrating the participants’ accounts found in this study. Excerpts and quotations from the interviews were being used to elucidate a typical finding in the analysis. When the account quoted was a particular exception in the study, this had been indicated in the description. Nonetheless, a number of participants in Hong Kong and Scotland, who had been locking themselves at home for longer, could be quoted more than others. This was normally due to selecting the most illustrative and illuminating perspectives out of the data. Chapter VII then turns to illustrate how the findings were linked to developing a more critical analysis of “hidden youth”. It will explain the main argument of the thesis based on the inductive, interpretive inquiry of this study.

Chapter IV — The Contexts of Hong Kong and Scotland

This chapter provides an in-depth discussion of the two locales where the research was conducted. This aims to offer further understandings of the contexts that the young people who participated in this study were situated in. For each site, the chapter briefly outlines their historical and demographic backgrounds. The differences in cultures and the roles of the state and family in young people's lives are illustrated. The chapter then turns to highlight the configurations of young people's socialisation and social participation and how these are affected by recent economic changes. Finally, the chapter discusses how existing youth policies and practices are framed in each site.

The discussion aims to provide a useful comparison of the two contexts and underlines similarities and differences in policies, cultures, and everyday experiences of young people. The context of Hong Kong will first be discussed, followed by Scotland's alongside further reflections on the comparison of the two sites. This provides the contextual backgrounds and a sense of place for each locale to interpret and understand better the interview findings illustrated in chapters V-VII. The implications for policies of this study will then be returned to in the conclusion.

The Context of Hong Kong

Hong Kong is a well-developed city located on the south-east coast of China, and is one of the most dynamic metropolitans in East Asia. Hong Kong currently has a population of 7.3 million people, and 835,200 are aged 15 to 24 (Census and Statistics Department 2015). Up until the 19th century, Hong Kong had been a fishing village with a small number of inhabitants and minimal international activities. This changed dramatically after China lost in the First Opium War in 1842; parts of Hong Kong were ceded to the British Empire in perpetuity. This was followed by further cessation of land and a 99-year lease on remaining parts of Hong Kong being signed after the Second Opium War in 1898. In this period, the British Empire held a strategic interest in the geographical location of Hong Kong, which acted as an important gateway to the Pearl River Delta and China (Carroll 2007). This also led to significant cultural transformations in Hong Kong. As a British colony, it served as a key trading city between east and west and had been heavily influenced by the politics and economic

activities of the United Kingdom for over a century. By the 1960s, Hong Kong grew to become one of the major international financial capitals and is described as a “Chinese Global City”, which is embedded in a ‘regional and global network of economic ties’ (Chiu and Lui 2009: 3). Hong Kong became increasingly globalised and was influenced by a mix of cultures; it developed a hybrid of Western and Chinese traditions and lifestyles (Sassen 2001).

The city also underwent substantial changes not only culturally but also politically. In 1984, the United Kingdom and China signed the Sino-British Joint Declaration to end the colonial regime in Hong Kong. It was agreed that Hong Kong would be returned to Chinese sovereignty on the 1st July 1997. The agreement defined the “one country, two systems” principle, which states Hong Kong would maintain its autonomy as a “special administrative region”. It also states that the socialistic regime of the Chinese government would not be exercised nor interfere in the ruling of Hong Kong for 50 years. Under this principle, the Hong Kong Government was established after the hand-over in 1997. The Hong Kong Government acts as an independent policy-making body and governs according to Hong Kong’s own legal framework, the “Basic Law”, which mirrors the English law that was in place in the colonial era. However, the extent of the Hong Kong Government’s autonomy has been heatedly debated and raised public concerns (Fong and Lui 2017; Poon 2008). Despite this, Hong Kong retains a separate political and economic system while being a part of China.

Culture, State, and Family Traditions

Despite being increasingly globalised, Chinese family traditions and cultural norms underpinned by Confucianism continue to have an important influence in Hong Kong (Holliday 2000). Yeh and colleagues (2013) remark that the significance of the virtue of filial piety in people’s lives in modern Hong Kong continues to exist, alongside the recent increase of the values of capitalism in Hong Kong’s industrialised economy. This fuels the need and demand for youth to earn and provide for the family further (Leung et al. 2010). Bell and Hahm (2003) illustrate that Confucianism is not only a cultural value system but also a social, political and moral driving force that infiltrates everyday way of life and is integral to the organisation of Chinese societies.

Confucian family traditions

One of the most influential ancient Chinese philosophers, Confucius, developed Confucianism based on the principle that humans are not ‘atomistic, discrete, self-serving individuals...they are first and foremost identified by the familial roles that they

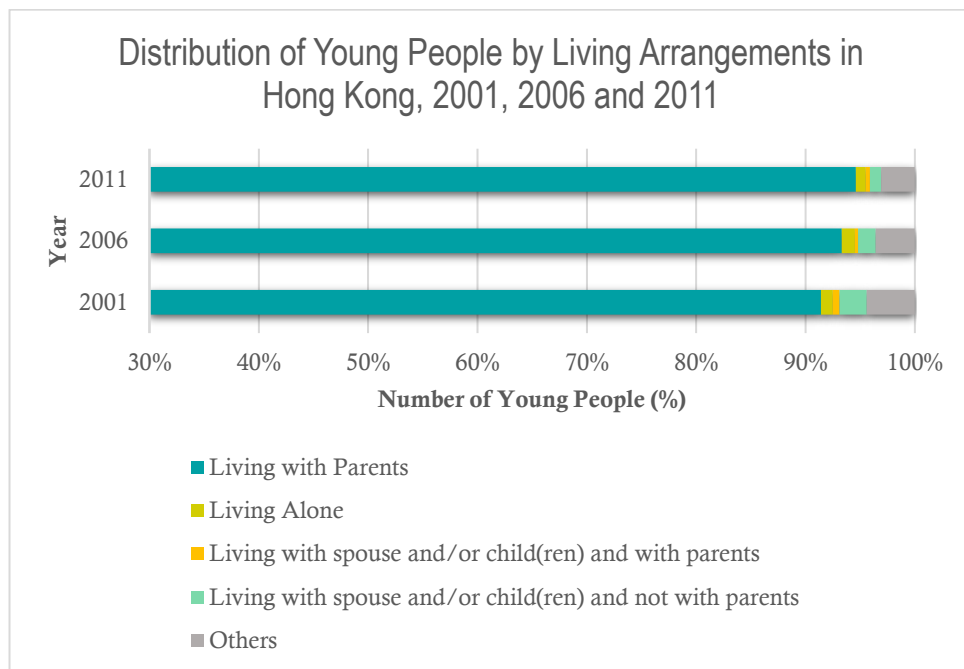
take on: husband, wife, father, son, mother, daughter, brother, sister, and so on' (Fan 2010: 15). This emphasises that humans are of familial nature and have responsibilities to not only care for themselves but also others, especially family members. The family is regarded to be at the *centre* of how society is organised. This is reinforced by the virtue of filial piety (“孝”, *xiao*, in Chinese). It enshrines the love between parent and child as the most important value and the foundation of society. Parents and children are expected to respect, love, care, and protect one another, even after a child is grown into independent adulthood. They have also a life-long duty to mutually support and provide care for each other. Just as parents nurture their children as they grow up, it is considered a moral obligation for young people to provide for their parents when they grow old and become in need (Hort and Khunle 2000).

Influenced by Confucian virtues, intergenerational family support plays a paramount role in the organisation of the welfare system in Hong Kong (Peng and Wong 2010). Families and closed personal networks are considered the primary source of care, solidarity and support for young people. The family is the main welfare institution and ‘caring responsibilities as well as income from work are shared across the generations’ (Hort and Khunle 2000: 164). The centrality attached to the family, and not the state, is similar to the model of welfare delivery observed in Southern Europe (Allen et al. 2004; Castles 1993; Ferrera 1996). There is a high level of reliance on family for welfare provision. An illustrative example is that it is not uncommon in the cultural norms of Hong Kong for young people to extend their dependence on older family members and remain living in the family home long into adulthood, even when they have their own families and children (Yip 2013). There are widespread expectations and acceptance for the reliance on parental provisions beyond childhood, and young people’s transitions into independence can be relatively longer compared to Western societies (Fan 2010).

This is particularly striking in the case of housing, especially due to the high property cost in Hong Kong (Wissink et al. 2016). The most recent Census reports that 94.6% of young people aged 15-24 live with their parents in the family home (Census and Statistics Department 2012). There are over 95% of young people not in work and 92% of working young people who remain dependent on the family for housing. On the contrary, only 2.7% of population aged under 30 are homeowners (with or without mortgage or loan repayments), compared to 52% in the overall population. Only 3.4%

under-30s are in private rental or public rental housing¹⁰, compared to 44% of total population being renters (including 30% of overall population living in public rental housing). An upward trend has been observed regarding the proportion of young people who live with parents and who are not able to afford independent housing in the past decade (see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1- Distribution of Young People by Living Arrangements in Hong Kong, 2001, 2006 and 2011 (%)



Source: adapted from Commission on Youth (2014: 92)

This highlights that there is a significant proportion of young people who remain dependent on the parents, especially in housing. The expectations for young people to leave home and become independent are also much weaker and later than Western culture (Forrest and Yip 2013). This epitomises a welfare system strongly based on support from the family instead of the state.

The role of the state

The role of the state is limited and state support and public welfare for young people are relatively minimal in Hong Kong. Its welfare state is strongly influenced by capitalistic and free-market ideologies, and 'social rights are minimal, stratification effects are very limited, and the market is prioritised' (Holliday 2000: 710). Holliday

¹⁰ Public housing in Hong Kong is provided for low-income families and subsidised by the government. Such housing is rented at a significantly lower price than the private rental market, and is commonly known as public rental housing (PRH).

argues that East Asian welfare systems are characterised by a “productivist” principle and what he calls “East Asian exceptionalism”, which steers state interventions to target economic growth. Hong Kong is categorised as having a “facilitative welfare state”, in which non-economic policies for youth and society are subordinated to the objective of facilitating individuals to be productive economically. There is therefore limited state intervention in the welfare of young people. This is echoed by the former Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Matthew K.-C. Cheung, who is the current Chief Secretary of Hong Kong, in one of his speeches, stating that:

‘[the Hong Kong Government’s] long-term strategy for social protection is to develop the economy, create employment opportunities, invest in education...Expenditure on education alone now takes up 23% of our government's recurrent expenditure - the largest share among all policy areas. This underlines our belief that education and training are fundamental...to building a knowledge-based economy...[and] to provide essential social and economic cushions for our population’ (Cheung 2010).

Historically, the most substantial welfare reform was introduced in the 1970s. Public services were expanded under the “Four Pillars”, including public rental housing, compulsory state education, healthcare and social services (Adorjan and Chui 2013; McLaughlin 1993). These policies were implemented as a response to a series of riots resulted from widespread poverty and wealth inequalities in the late 60s. Nonetheless, Hong Kong continues to have high levels of social stratification and its welfare state has limited redistributive effects; this results in a high “tolerance” of social and economic inequality in Hong Kong (Peng and Wong 2010: 667-8).

Welfare and State Benefits for Young People

There are no benefit schemes that are specifically targeted towards young people in Hong Kong. The main benefit available to young people with financial needs is the “Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme” (CSSA). CSSA is aimed towards households with low or no-income and which require financial assistance from the state (Social Welfare Department 2013). CSSA is a means-tested cash benefit and is designed to provide a basic “safety net” against financial hardships due to old age, disability, illness, unemployment or low-wage. CSSA recipients aged between 15 and 59 are also required to take part in the “Support for Self-Reliance Scheme” (SFS) if they are not working full-time or deemed unavailable to work due to disabilities. SFS imposes

conditions on the benefit, such as requiring recipients to apply for at least two jobs per fortnight and not declining any reasonable job offer. Recipients who are unable to find jobs for an extended length of time can also be required to do community work (Yu 2008: 383). However, there is a low take up of this benefit by young people. Recipients of CSSA between the age of 15-24 dropped from 6.6% in 2005 to 4% in 2015 (Social Sciences Research Centre 2016).

It is important to note that young people who live in the family home would not be entitled to receive CSSA, as it is distributed per household. This means young people who are in financial need but cannot afford to live independently would not be entitled to receive the benefit themselves. As homeownership and private rental are expensive, the basic benefits provided by CSSA would not be sufficient for young people to afford independent housing and there are no housing benefits available. There are also long waiting lists for public rental housing, which the average waiting time is 4.6 years and priorities are given to elderly and households with children (Hong Kong Housing Authority 2017). This reflects the importance attached to the family as a main welfare provider for young people. Interestingly also, the framing of the CSSA does not directly include young people.

There are a number of youth services provided by the Social Welfare Department (SWD). One of its main provisions is the “Integrated Children and Youth Services Centre”, which operates in every district in Hong Kong. Each centre offers counselling services, socialisation programmes, “social responsibility and competence” development (such as volunteering and interest classes), and support for young people from low-income backgrounds (Social Welfare Department 2012). The most popular uses of the centres include the after-school study room facilities and affordable summer classes, which are framed as providing ‘opportunities for children and youth to spend their leisure time constructively’ (*ibid*). Yu (2008) reflects that welfare services for young people in Hong Kong are strongly framed by the traditional Confucian view of the state. The state is believed to play a role in morally educating people on how to live in a “good” and virtuous manner. Bell and Hahm (2003) argue that the state in contemporary Chinese societies retain strong authority in intervening in individual lives. It is believed that the state has the responsibility to guide and “correct” moral practices and to re-establish a “way” (“道”, *dao*, in Chinese) to correct “moral deficiency” in society (Qing 2011). This is believed to reinforce young people’s duties to be a “good” member of society with good morals and virtues (Yu 2008).

The SWD also runs the “District Youth Outreaching Social Work Teams” and “Overnight Outreaching Service for Young Night Drifters” to provide counselling and guidance for young people in juvenile gangs or “at-risk”. The focus on youth outreach builds on policy concerns that emerged during the colonial regime, particularly “unattached youth” in the 1970s and then “youth at risk” in the 1990s (Wong 2012: 417). These discussions were centred around public “fears” of delinquent and deviant behaviours of young people, including crime, gangs, and drug use, particularly at night. The label “young night drifters” captures concerns about young people who loiter around public spaces (such as outside buildings, parks, and streets) being vulnerable to involvement with gang activities (Groves et al. 2014). This turned into a key area of youth services in Hong Kong, and support and outreach for young night drifters were created (Lee 1998; Social Welfare Department 2012). There is also some involvement of voluntary organisations, which have been historically influenced by religious charitable bodies, such as the Caritas, Young Men’s/Women’s Christian Association (YMCA/YWCA), and Red Cross since the British colonial era. They also provide similar services to the SWD, with a focus on youth outreach, “young night drifters”, and aid and support for disadvantaged young people. There has been a close association between the operation of the Third Sector and the government (Lam and Perry 2000). The SWD works closely with Third Sector organisations and coordinates with the services they provide. For example, the “P.A.T.H.S. to Adulthood: A Jockey Club Youth Enhancement Scheme” was one of the biggest local youth projects, which was funded by the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust and operated by the SWD. There is also a strong public-voluntary collaboration on rehabilitation and support for young drugs users.

Education

There is free state education in Hong Kong, starting at the age of 6. This was extended from nine years to 12 years in the education reform introduced in 2008. The new system includes six years of primary education and six years of secondary education, which is divided into lower and senior levels. Secondary 1-3 (S1-S3) form the lower-secondary level and Secondary 4-6 (S4-S6) the senior-secondary, in which students begin the national curriculum to prepare for the Hong Kong Diploma for Secondary Education (HKDSE) examinations. There are three major types of schools: government, aided, and a small number of private and international schools. The most

common type is aided school, which are run by charitable or religious organisations and funded by the state.

The statutory compulsory schooling is associated with the level of education reached, instead of age. Young pupils are required to finish lower-secondary school, which is normally completed at the age of 15. Young people may choose to leave school early after S3, subjected to an application being made by parents (or legal guardians) and approved by the Permanent Secretary for Education.

At the end of S6, normally at the age of 18, students would sit the HKDSE examinations for four core subjects (English, Chinese, Mathematics, and Liberal Studies) and two to three elective subjects. The elective subjects must be chosen before entering S4 at the age of 15. Students would have to make an important choice on the streams of subjects offered by the school, which normally include science, arts and commerce. The science stream is traditionally the most popular and most competitive stream exclusively for students with the best academic performance. This creates early pressure for students to achieve good grades to secure a place in the desired stream, as school exams results throughout S1-S3 would determine which stream pupils are sorted into. Upon completion of the HKDSE examinations, achieving 12 out of 30 marks in the best five subjects is the basic entry requirement for university degree programmes, and some further education programmes also require applicants to have at least completed the HKDSE qualification. On average, only the top 40% of students meet the basic requirement for undergraduate programmes and 70% for sub-degree programmes every year (Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority 2016). Higher education takes four years to complete and entrance is also selected by a highly competitive system based on HKDSE performance, school transcripts, and extra-curricular activities. According to the University Grants Committee (2017), only 23.1% of senior-secondary students were accepted to university in 2015/16. Fraser and colleagues (2017: 246) describe this as creating a 'hyper-competitiveness for educational places' among young people in Hong Kong. Fraser and colleagues' study highlights that young people experience a great amount of pressure to perform well constantly in school and to achieve good grades in public examinations. This also has an effect on constraining young people's leisure time; private tuition and private tutorial classes are cited as one of the most common free-time activities and their social lives are preoccupied by education and pressure on hard work.

Youth Socialisation

The social lives of young people in Hong Kong are strongly influenced by the socio-economic pressures historically found in this context, particularly long working hours and shortage of land for housing and open space (Jephcott 1971). Jephcott importantly highlights the roots of how youth socialising activities have been limited since the 1960s—a critical juncture when the economy of the former colony began to flourish significantly. Young people spent a great amount of time working, looking after siblings or studying. Young people as young as 14 were working up to eight hours per day with only one holiday per week. Nonetheless, young people and their free-time were perceived as a “resource”, rather than a “threat” to society, unlike Scotland at the time (Fraser et al. 2017). There were high expectations for young people to contribute to the income and share care responsibilities of the family. Youth was predominated by a strong ‘ethic of self-reliance and commitment to work’, and there were limited concessions to childhood or leisure (McLaughlin 1993: 122). In addition, another crucial factor that affected youth socialisation was the crowdedness and high density of population in Hong Kong. As land was extremely scarce, living conditions were confined and overcrowded. There was limited private space for young people at home, which was commonly a small apartment in a high-rise building. Many young people would spend their free-time ‘strolling about the streets’ (Jephcott 1971: 34).

In contemporary times, there is continuity of the conditions and patterns of youth socialisation that were observed in the 1960s (Fraser et al. 2017). The lack of available open space and pressures to focus on education and hard work remain prevalent. Much of young people's time is dedicated to studying and revising. There is also influence from the growth of commercial leisure activities and consumerism. Going to cinemas, walking around shopping malls, going out for meals, and karaoke are common socialising activities with friends and peer groups among young people. However, these activities can be financially consuming and expensive. Leisure activities are unaffordable to some and may prevent and exclude young people from socialising with others (Wong 2008). Furthermore, increased pressure on land and space can impact on choices of youth socialisation. There are few open or public spaces for young people to “stroll around”. Fraser and colleagues (2017: 246) remark on the distinct street culture of Hong Kong, where street drinking and violence are rarely found, unlike in Scotland. This is linked to a limited sense of attachment to specific neighbourhoods among young people and where they socialise, due to ‘far less stability and intergenerational continuity in communities’ (*ibid.*: 246). It is also noted that the

alternative for some young people is to stay at home instead of going out, and some are turning to digital media to find entertainment and leisure.

Many well-developed countries witnessed a rapid rate of innovation in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT); digital media became widely integrated into the ways people socialise, interact and communicate with each other (Barney 2004; Castells 2004). Evidence suggested that there is particularly widespread use and diffusion of technologies among the younger generation in well-developed, technologically-advanced places like Hong Kong (Banaji and Buckingham 2010). Many young people are growing up with everyday interactions that involve extensive uses of online platforms such as social networking sites, e-mails, online blogs and Internet forums (Hills 2009; Mandarano et al. 2010). Younger generations in Hong Kong are also highly accustomed to the use of technologies; 99% of young people aged 15-24 using digital media and the Internet regularly, and young people spend around 25.9 hours a week online on average (Social Sciences Research Centre 2011). There are also 97% of young people who say they use digital media for “communication/interaction” (*ibid*). Jung and colleagues (2012) show that young people in Hong Kong most frequently use digital media to engage in “communication and entertainment”, and sometimes for “information and research” and less frequently “expression and [political] participation”. This suggests that many young people use digital technologies like social media and online interactions in their daily lives. Technological devices and platforms are growing in importance in the configuration of youth socialisation in this context.

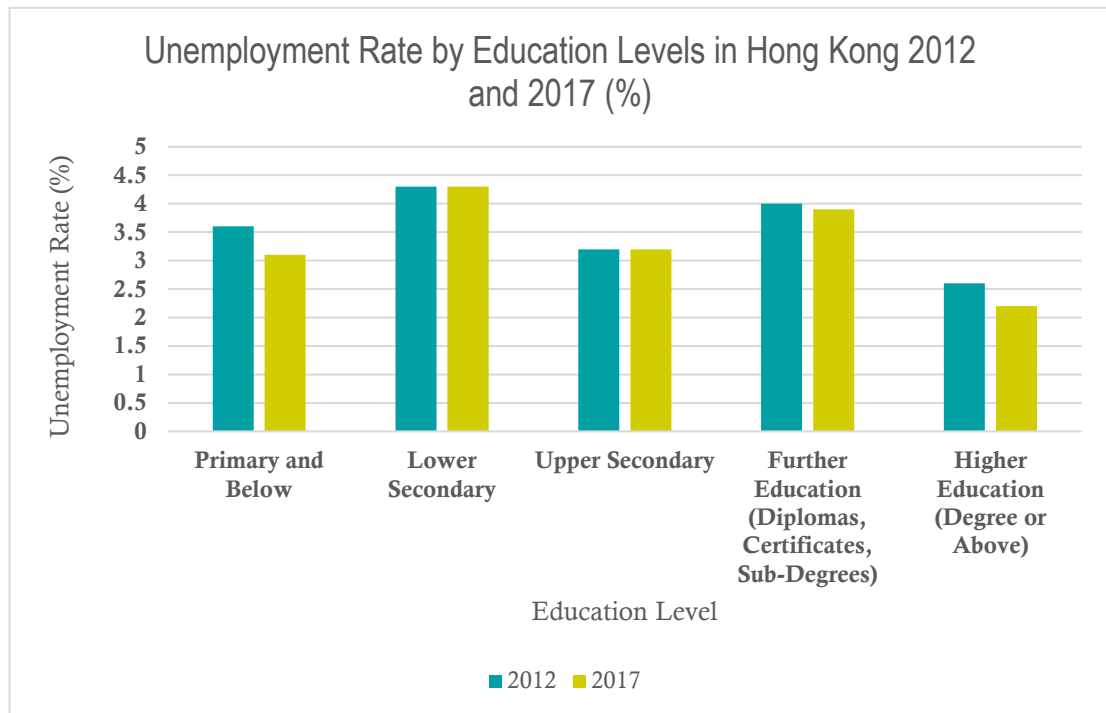
Economic Changes and Competitive Culture

Hong Kong has a strongly competitive culture, in which young people are subjected to highly demanding expectations in their youth. This stems not only from the pressure for educational places but also the importance attached to self-reliance for advancing prospects and opportunities among fierce competition in the labour market. According to Peng and Wong (2010), young people face intense pressures to compete and succeed in the labour market and education from a young age. The culture in Hong Kong fosters an emphasis on individual performance and an elitist system that favours high-achieving individuals (Lau 2005). There are strong demands placed on young people getting into the best school and top-earning jobs. This could typically begin as early as the age of three and competing to get into the best kindergarten—not only top schools and universities—in the hope that this will secure opportunities for the best education trajectory and subsequently high-earning careers in the future (Kember 2016;

Poon and Wong 2008). There are therefore prevalent concerns on young people's participation in education, particularly in their abilities to gain an advantage and appear on "top" within the competitive environment (Legislative Council 2010).

The conditions of the competitive environment are also shaped by Hong Kong's transition from a manufacture-based to a knowledge-based economy. Many jobs that were available to young people with low or no-skills disappeared with the decline of manufacturing industries, which once thrived and provided ample work opportunities for young people in the 1960s (Jephcott 1971). However, these were replaced by a strong service industry and an advanced economy based on international trade and financial services. Young people's opportunities to participate in the labour market became heavily dependent on education level, qualifications, and skills (Lung 2012). The economic changes also reinforced the stress on young people to thrive in the formal education system and progress to higher education, as individuals with high skills and qualifications were more privileged in the labour market. Conversely, young people who fell behind in performance in school and leave school with low qualifications struggled to join the workforce, and they also faced difficulties to return to further education. Siu and colleagues (2011:42) highlight that over 50% of young people in Hong Kong who have not completed above senior-secondary level were not engaged in work or education. They were perceived to be in an unfavourable position of having low skills and low qualifications, thereby low employability, in the competitive environment of Hong Kong. The *General Household Survey* in 2012 and 2017 illustrate that the unemployment rate was significantly higher for individuals who had not gone into higher education, particularly individuals who left school early at lower secondary level (see Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2 - Unemployment Rate by Education Levels in Hong Kong 2012 and 2017 (%)



Source: adapted from Census and Statistics Department 2013; 2017

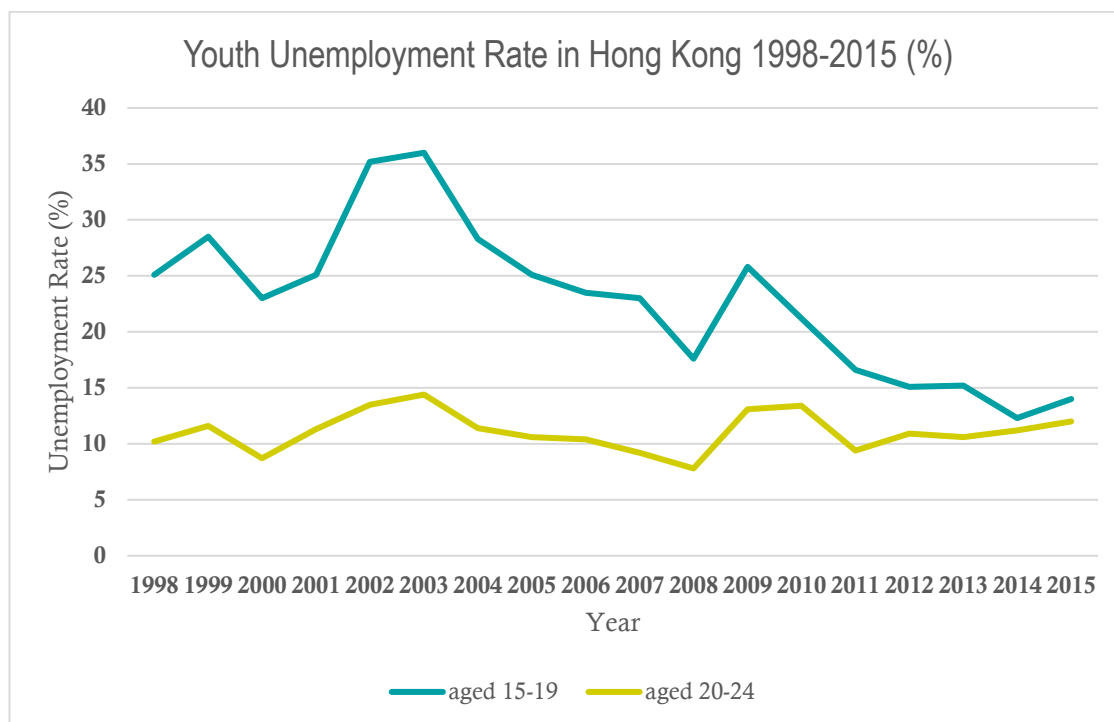
Other qualitative research indicates that young people attached strong values to being able to participate and continue in education, and ‘many of the youths believed that one should upgrade their knowledge and skills’ in order to be successful (Social Sciences Research Centre 2011: 7). Nonetheless, their opportunities to participate in work and education were highly unequal. This was structured by levels of skills and education level in a context with highly competitive conditions (Peng and Wong 2010). Transitions from school to work not only became difficult but also put great demands and stress on young people. The stress intensified for many who ‘have failed to achieve the necessary educational qualifications to participate in the knowledge-based economy’ (Groves et al. 2014: 829). This helps explain the social expectations attached to young people’s participation in education, and hence their opportunities to become involved in the labour market upon their completions of school (Labour Department 2010; 2011).

The prominent concerns about young people’s engagements in work stemmed from historical events of the late 1990s, particularly the Asian Financial Crisis and its consequent economic downturn. The surge of young people becoming disengaged from work and education was framed as one of the most prioritised social issues by the Hong Kong Government at the time (HKSAR Government 2001; Holliday 2000). The Hong

Kong Government was strongly concerned with reinforcing young people's participation in the labour market when they left school. In 1998, the youth unemployment rate rapidly rose from 5% to 10.4%, and the escalation continued and peaked at a historically high rate of 15% for two consecutive years in 2002 and 2003 (Research and Library Services Division 2004: 1). As a result, public concerns regarding young people's social participation grew rapidly; measures to promote and safeguard young people's opportunities to participate in the labour market were particularly called for (Commission on Youth 2003). The Hong Kong Government introduced a series of policies in response, with the overarching aim of providing training and enhancing skills of young people who became disengaged from mainstream participation in society, more specifically the labour market and education (Economic and Employment Council 2004).

Although the youth unemployment rate slightly rose again after the Global Financial Crisis in 2008, Hong Kong's economy re-bounced from the crisis relatively quickly compared to other parts of the world. Hong Kong continued to sustain economic growth and maintained labour demand; the youth unemployment rate has remained at a low level since 2011 (Commission on Poverty 2013). More recently, the overall unemployment rate for young people aged 15-24 went down to 7.2% in 2014, indicating 22,500 young people were disengaged from work (Census and Statistics Department 2014). Figure 4.3 below summarises the changes in trends of youth unemployment in Hong Kong since 1998.

Figure 4.3- Youth Unemployment Rate (aged 15-19 and aged 20-24) in Hong Kong in 1998-2015 (%)



Source: Adapted based on numbers from Table E021, Census and Statistics Department (2016)

With the major drive and changes in policies, the youth labour market and overall economic conditions in Hong Kong appeared to be relatively strong at the time of the research. This was particularly evident in the significant decline of youth unemployment in the past few years, and overall unemployment rate of the population being below 3.5% since 2011 (Census and Statistics Department 2016). Nonetheless, the historical background discussed in this section underlines how young people's engagement in work and education were an important concern in public and policy discussions (Labour and Welfare Bureau 2008; Legislative Council 2010). For example, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong highlighted in the Policy Address 2013 that promoting young people's participation in society, particularly the labour market, continued to be a high priority for the Hong Kong Government (HKSAR Government 2013). New policies were introduced to increase the financial incentives for young people to engage in on-the-job training for employers, in order to employ disengaged young people (Commission on Poverty 2013).

There were strong concerns about extreme inequality among young people, which led to several political protests (Forrest and Xian 2017). A significant amount of young people had not only been involved but also led the political movements, of which

the most significant event was the “umbrella revolution” in 2014 (Batchelor et al. 2017a). The mass protests instigated by student activist groups “Scholarism” and “Hong Kong Federation of Students” involved mainly young people (but not exclusively) occupying and blocking several main roads in Hong Kong for 79 days.

‘Whilst the protests were triggered by arguments around universal suffrage and the election of the new Chief Executive of Hong Kong in 2017, the discontent and frustration went much wider than this... as the debate around political representation progressed, it became enmeshed in a more general critique of power and inequality in Hong Kong...this becomes linked to demands for a more democratic and fairer Hong Kong’ (Forrest and Xian 2017: 1-3).

The events reflect a deep dissatisfaction against authority and the “ruling class”, particularly from young people (Poon 2010). The student leaders of the “umbrella revolution”, despite being unsuccessful in calling for universal suffrage, formed the first student-led political party in Hong Kong, “Demosisto”. The party is leading the movement to call for a referendum to determine the sovereignty of Hong Kong.

Youth Policies

The youth policy discussions in Hong Kong centre around providing assistance for young people to participate in the labour market. Due to fierce educational competition, it is made a priority to target support for school leavers and young people who struggle in the education system. Young people are considered to be in need of improvements of skills, credentials, and employability particularly through training. The label “non-engaged youth” (NEY) is instrumental to how policy discussions about young people has been framed.

The label of NEY

After the Asian Financial Crisis, policies in Hong Kong became focused on economic re-structuring and promotion of employment for many years. In the *Chief Executive’s Policy Address 2001*, the former and first Chief Executive, Mr. Chee-hwa Tung, highlighted that there needed to be more priorities given to young people in policies. He claimed that:

‘as young people grow up and develop, they face many risks and difficulties. In this period of economic restructuring, they face even more problems, and are most in need of our care and understanding’ (HKSAR Government 2001: 31).

In 2002, the Chief Executive gave an urgent task (within six months) to the Commission on Youth (COY) to research and find solutions to the increased number of school leavers who were not in any form of employment or training (HKSAR Government 2003). COY produced the *Continuing Development and Employment Opportunities for Youth Report* (Commission on Youth 2003) and put forward recommendations to diversify training options and enhance employability of young people who had low levels of education and struggled to find work.

The label of “non-engaged youth (NEY) was officially introduced in this context. NEY was defined as ‘economically inactive young people who are not pursuing any studies [or training]’ (Commission on Youth 2003: 10). The report estimated that there were 94,100 NEY (aged 15-24) who were not engaged in education, employment or training; this meant 10.4% of young people were categorised as NEY in Hong Kong. The high proportion of NEY became a major issue in policy debates. There was also some recognition that NEY were more likely to be from low-income families, but the focus has been on young people who leave school early in general (*ibid*: 10-11). The policy response was to increase training and credentials of young people, in order to enhance their employability and competitiveness in the labour market and thereby assist their transitions to work.

Focus on young people’s economic productivity

Because of the predominant debates of “NEY”, policies for young people have been heavily focused on encouraging participation in the labour market. There have been limited discussions on other aspects of young people’s social lives; the concern has been primarily fixed on making young people economically productive in the workforce and to reinforce wider economic growth (Yu 2008). The overarching aims in youth policies are therefore to support young people to: i) find employment, and; ii) attain more vocational qualifications and training opportunities to improve their employability.

The Youth Pre-employment Training Programme and Youth Work Experience and Training Scheme (YPTP & YWETS) is a key policy programme run by the Labour Department to meet the training needs of young people. YPTP was launched in 1999 to provide vocational and interpersonal skills training for 15 to 19-years-old early school leavers with no qualifications. Between 2000 and 2004, the YPTP trained more than 45,000 young people and 70% of trainees (excluding those who pursued further studies) secured employment after completing the programme (Economic and Employment

Council 2004: 1). YWETS was launched in 2002 to provide on-the-job training for young people aged 15-24 who had below-degree qualifications. Within two years, 21,200 young people were placed in training through the scheme, which doubled its original target (*ibid*). The two programmes merged in 2009 and became YPTP & YWETS to operate as an integrated youth training service. Its aim is to provide “pre-employment” training and enable ‘young people to better understand [sic] themselves and their work aptitudes while enriching their job skills and experience so as to enhance employability’ (Labour Department 2010). In addition, all participants of the programme are case managed by a youth worker for advice, guidance and counselling. According to the report produced by the Commission on Poverty (2013), 9437 young people participated in 2011-12.

Another important policy initiative for youth was “Project Yi Jin” (or commonly referred to as “Yi Jin”), which was introduced by the Education Bureau in the year 2000. “Yi Jin” was implemented to provide alternative education for young people who had left school early and unable to progress to further or higher education due to poor school performances (Yi Jin 2013b). “Yi Jin’s” emphasis on academic learning (including in languages, mathematics, information technologies) set the initiative apart from other vocational-based training programmes. Upon completion, young people acquire a formal academic qualification equivalent to a minimum pass (scoring “2” in five subjects) of the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education, which provides access and fulfils the basic requirement of entering further education. As of 2012, over 67,000 young people had completed “Yi Jin” since it was launched (Yi Jin 2013a). After the programme was introduced, the number of young people disengaged from work began to climb down. The overall youth unemployment rate fell to a new low within five years of 8.5% in 2008 (Social Sciences Research Centre 2011: 3). According to a survey of the graduates of the 2011-12 programme, 54% graduates took up employment and 35% pursued further studies (Yi Jin 2013a).

The Vocational Training Council (VTC) is a public statutory agency established in 1982. It is the ‘largest vocational education, training and professional development group in Hong Kong’, which provides training for more than 250,000 students every year (Vocational Training Council 2013). In 2011, 20,000 young people completed a full-time course and 90% of graduates found employment upon completion (Commission on Poverty 2013). VTC’s youth programmes are focused on increasing the credentials and training necessary for young people to find employment. VTC has 13

member institutions, including the Institute of Vocational Education (IVE). IVE is one of the most popular destinations for school leavers who struggled most in the education system, as IVE has one of the lowest academic entry requirements compared to other training programmes. In 2004, VTC launched the “Vocational Development Programme” targeting NEY who were between the age of 14 to 24. The programme was introduced as a direct measure to address the policy issue of NEY in Hong Kong. Not unlike other initiatives, it targeted to offer vocational and life-skills training to improve the employability of young people. Since 2008, part of the programme has been funded and run collaboratively with the Employees Retraining Board’s “Youth Training Programme” for 15 to 20-year-old young people. The VTC introduced the “Apprenticeship Scheme” and “Modern Apprenticeship Programme” for school leavers aged 19 and above to reinforce employability through on-the-job training (Legislative Council 2010).

Responsibilities of the individual

Amidst policy focus of improving youth employability and encouraging youth participation in work and education, there has been an underlying assumption that succeeding is the responsibility of the individual. Yu (2008) argues that there is a heightened sense of young people being perceived as deficient and under-performing, which she observes in policy debates in Hong Kong and similarly in the United Kingdom. Moreover, reinforced by the label of “non-engaged youth”, the emphasis has been placed on the individual responsibility on young people to improve their skills and qualifications. If young people are not engaged in work or education, it is assumed to be due to their lack of credentials and abilities or lack of motivations.

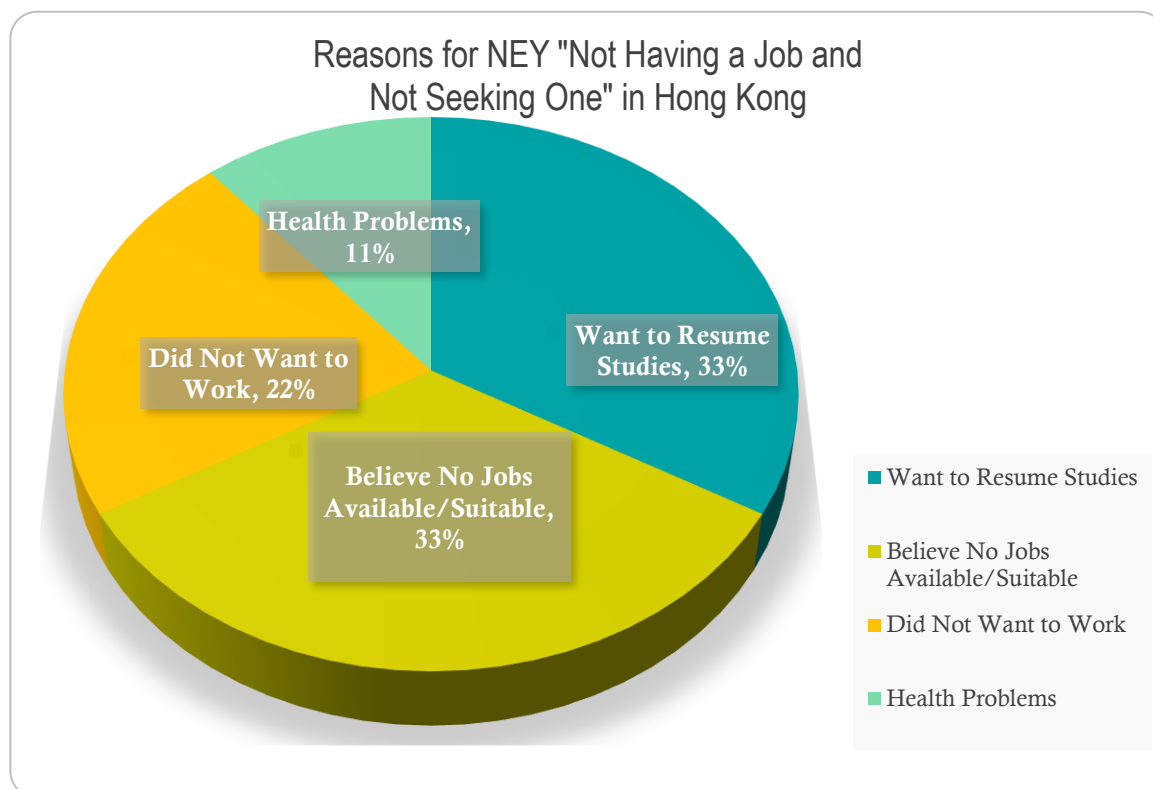
For example, young people are assumed to lack motivation to participate in work due to being unsure of what career paths they are interested in. The introduction of the “Youth Training Programme” was intended to help young people to understand their career preferences and NEY was identified as one of the special target groups (Legislative Council 2010). The programme’s aim was to ‘rekindle their desire to learn and further study, and motivate them to actively plan for their future’ (Employees Retraining Board 2008a). The emphasis was therefore placed on young people’s individual responsibility and self-improvement. In 2007, the Employees Retraining Board (ERB) extended its service to young people aged 15 or above, as part of the Hong Kong Government’s decision to reinforce its focus on youth employment (Employees Retraining Board 2008b). This included the “Employment Set Sail for Youth” programme and “Manpower Development Scheme”, which offered support for young

people who were considered to be at a disadvantage to participate in the workforce by their limited work experience (Employees Retraining Board 2008b). Similarly, VTC provided a wide range of short taster courses (such as the “Talent Projects”) for young people who were “undecided” on their career paths and had limited motivations to work and study (Wong 2012: 424).

A more recent addition to Hong Kong’s youth policy was the “Youth Employment Start” programme (Y.E.S.). The Chief Executive announced in the Policy Agenda 2006 that two new employment resource centres were to be set up by the Labour Department (Labour Department 2011). This provided a new employment support services for young people aged 15-29. The centres offer a range of facilities, seminars, workshops, professional counselling and advice for young people who require more skills and information on how to look for jobs. There are also office facilities to support self-employment. In 2012, the two Y.E.S. centres served an impressive number of 73,758 young people aged between 15 and 29-years-old (Commission on Poverty 2013).

In a survey conducted by the former Task Force on Continuing Development and Employment-related Training for Youth, 19% of NEY were found to be without a job and not seeking work (Labour and Welfare Bureau 2008). However, a variety of reasons were uncovered in why NEY did not seek work, including wanting to resume studies, suffering from health problems, believing that there was no job available or suitable in the short-term, and feeling reluctant or unwilling to work (see Figure 4.4). The number of NEY who reported having no plans to pursue training programmes offered by government policies was 83%. The evident heterogeneity of circumstances and perspectives illustrated further that the reasons behind young people being “non-engaged” could be different. It was also not necessarily related to deficiency of abilities and qualifications, as assumed by the youth policies in Hong Kong.

Figure 4.4 - Reasons for NEY "Not Having a Job and Not Seeking One" in Hong Kong



Source: Adapted from Labour and Welfare Bureau 2008

Emerging debates of "hidden youth"

Finally, the category of "hidden youth" emerged as a key topic of policy debates in recent years in Hong Kong. There was a strong "hidden youth" angle in how youth policies and disengagements were being framed. Since 2004, concerns about young people disengaged from society have been particularly salient, and the issue of "hidden youth" specifically had been in the limelight (Wong and Ying 2006).

"Hidden youth" ("隱蔽青年", "yan bai ching nin" or "隱青", "yan ching", in Chinese) is a term commonly used in the public discourse and by mass media in Hong Kong (Apple Daily 2014; Commission on Poverty 2005; Oriental Daily 2014). It draws the attention not only among politicians but also academics, youth practitioners, and voluntary organisations in Hong Kong (Chan and Lo 2014; Commission on Youth 2003; Wong 2012).

In the mid-2000s, the Hong Kong Christian Service (2006) and its LET'S WALK Life Engagement Training Scheme (LWLETS) was the first and only Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) to provide services specifically for "hidden youth". In its first report about "hidden youth", Hong Kong Christian Service LWLETS (2006)

estimated there were 6000 young people in Hong Kong who were shutting themselves in their bedrooms and withdrawing from interactions and participation in society. Further research conducted in 2007 indicated that there were over 18,500 young people aged under 24 who were “hidden”, and the figure was predicted to continue to grow at a rapid rate (Chan and Lo 2010). As of 2014, the latest survey done by Paul Wong and colleagues (2015) estimated that up to 41,000 young people in Hong Kong were “severely” socially withdrawn and “hidden” in the bedroom for over six months. The surge of number of young people disconnecting from society was not only evident but also heightened the concerns in Hong Kong’s policy communities.

Addressing the issue of “hidden youth” has been a significant priority of the Hong Kong Government. The focus of the Hong Kong Government’s policies and discussions has been framed around “re-integrating” young people into society. The main aim was to support “hidden youth” to re-engage in social participation, particularly in terms of work. The Labour Department’s YPTP & YWETS launched special training programmes that were designed specifically for “hidden youth” in 2008 (Legislative Council 2010). The programmes combined skills training, career counselling, and youth work to help “hidden” young people to improve self-esteem, confidence and social skills. In the same year, YPTP & YWETS collaborated with the Hong Kong Government’s Community Investment and Inclusion Fund (CIIF) to introduce the “Applying Social Capital Strategies to Enhance Youth Employability” initiative (CIIF 2015). One of the key aims of the initiative was to provide services and assistance for “hidden” young people, and:

‘It flexibly integrates the pre-employment and on-the-job training elements of YPTP · YWETS with the social capital developmental strategies advocated by CIIF, with a view to reaching out to youths with special needs (including "hidden youths" [sic] facing employment difficulties), offering them services and assistance, cultivating among them positive attitudes and extending their social networks, so as to provide them with opportunities for sustainable development in the employment market.’ (Legislative Council 2010).

It was emphasised here that “hidden” young people were seen as needing support and external interventions. The attention was focused on supporting them to participate in communities and interact more with society. One of the key considerations in the design of the Y.E.S programme was to attract young people who were “hidden” (Labour Department 2011). It intended to encourage “hidden” youth to use the employment

support services and enhance their participation in work. To do so, the Y.E.S. resource centres were purposely built in locations that were popular for young people to gather and socialise, in a belief that they were more likely to draw “hidden” young people out of their bedrooms (Legislative Council 2009). One of the recent target areas of the District Youth Outreaching Social Work Service and the Integrated Children and Youth Services Centres was “hidden youth” (Social Welfare Department 2012). The SWD’s “Integrated Teams” were also tasked with offering targeted outreach and support for “hidden” young people, including home visits and working with their family members (Legislative Council 2012).

In the early 2010s, there was an increase to five NGOs that had youth workers providing dedicated services and outreach work with “hidden youth” (Wong 2012). The services generally aimed to provide support in increasing skills and confidence of “hidden” young people to engage and find active participation in society. The LETS project has the longest history in Hong Kong to deploy youth workers and counsellors to support “hidden” young people, and aims to ‘guide them to live disciplined lives and participate in meaningful projects to elevate their motivation. The ultimate goal is to help them find a direction for themselves’ (Hong Kong Christian Service 2006). Like the SWD, youth workers and professionals in the LETS project also regularly conduct home visits to initiate engagement with “hidden” young people. It was found that the young people were largely reluctant to attend programmes that were outside of their homes (Hong Kong Christian Service 2006). The LETS project also works with parents of “hidden” young people and provides support in parenting.

The above policy examples articulate how young people are perceived as “hidden” and disengaged from society in the case of Hong Kong. Such young people are perceived as not being active members of society, and this perception is intertwined with values in the Confucian culture. It is considered immoral for an individual to not participate economically and socially, and detrimental to the individual’s contribution to a “good” society (Qing 2011; Wong 2012). Influenced by this perspective, the social participation and connectedness of “hidden” young people gain increased attention in how youth issues are discussed in this context.

The Context of Scotland

Scotland covers the northernmost part of the United Kingdom (UK) and has a well-developed economy like Hong Kong. It currently has a population of 5.4 million

people, with over 610,000 aged between 16 and 24 (National Records of Scotland 2017). Until the 17th century, the Kingdom of Scotland had its own sovereignty, independent from England. This changed after one of the most significant events in the Scottish history took place—James VI of Scotland inherited the throne of England and Ireland and became James I. The three kingdoms subsequently entered a political union and formed the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland in 1801. Scotland, similar to Hong Kong, became heavily influenced by the historical developments and economic expansions of the British Empire in this period. Scotland developed a strong tradition in manufacturing and grew trading ties with many countries, especially in the cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh (Checkland 1981). Glasgow, in particular, played a significant role in the shipping industry and heavy engineering that fuelled the growth of the British Empire. In contemporary times, Scotland evolved into a post-industrial economy, with continual growth in the service and tourism sectors while maintaining its industrial heritage (Maver 2000).

Scotland experienced important socio-political transformations in the 1990s. Scotland gained increased amounts of autonomy and legislative power in the UK devolution. A devolved administration, the Scottish Government (formerly the Scottish Executive), and a devolved legislature, the Scottish Parliament, were established in 1999. While some governing powers and policy areas are reserved to the UK (Westminster) government, the devolved government for Scotland is responsible for many important areas such as education and training, health and social services, housing, economic development, labour market strategy, communities, and support for children, young people and families. The Scottish Parliament also gained new powers such as altering taxation and welfare, which were being introduced gradually after the Scottish Independence Referendum in 2014.

Culture, State, and Family Traditions

One of the most significant differences between Hong Kong and Scotland is their cultures. There are also important implications on how welfare is organised and the roles of the family and the state are perceived. Scotland has been more influenced by traditions of liberal democracies and the turn of neoliberal economics and politics in the Western world (Abrahamson 2012). This creates increased pressures and expectations for young people to become independent and self-sufficient (Nudzor 2010). Neoliberal values also reinforce ‘practices that serve to individualise and privatise social problems’ that affect young people’s lives further (MacLeod and Emejulu 2014: 447).

Neoliberalism has been a dominant ideology in economic and policy debates globally since the late 1970s, especially in the United States and the UK (Chang et al. 2012). It promotes the value of free market and the importance of economic development and globalised financial activities. The neoliberal ideology also emphasises the principles of *laissez-faire* economics, and:

‘... proposes that human wellbeing can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices’ (Harvey 2006: 2).

This ideology was strongly influential to the economic and policy measures implemented by the former UK Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, in the 1970s-1990s. Thatcher’s office introduced some of the most radical anti-Keynesian policies that prioritised the role of the private sector and individuals whilst reducing the role of the welfare state (Kus 2006). Neoliberalism was framed as a strategy to reinforce economic growth, with increased hostility to public welfare and welfare dependencies (MacLeod and Emejulu 2014).

The socio-economic system in Scotland is argued to be rooted in the ongoing influence of neoliberalism (Davidson et al. 2010). In addition to market-friendly relations, it also attaches strong importance to values of individual freedom. This is reinforced by underlying principles in Western democracy of enshrining personal liberty. Building on the Scottish Enlightenment philosophies of human nature, humans are considered as rational beings who should have the rights to act according to their wills and to actively pursue self-realisation (Berlin 1969; Rousseau 1762). Values of autonomy and personal freedom are therefore central to how society is organised.

The commitment to realisation of the full potential of the self and flourishing in independence has become integral to the Western culture, especially reinforced by global capitalism (Weber 1930). The emphasis on self-realisation implicates an individualistic perspective of society and young people’s ways of living. The purpose in life becomes strongly tied to a “eudaimonic” ideal that encourages young people to fulfil their potentials and maximise personal achievements (Scollon and King 2004). Such achievements are celebrated as the “positive attributes” of a person, and the pursuits of self-realisation and self-sufficiency become a strong expectation on young people in the

Euro-American individualistic culture (Uchida et al. 2004: 225). At the turn of the 1990s, a new perspective emerged on how individualism manifested in post-industrial societies. Beck (1992) argues that society is no longer organised around the principle of “I am hungry” but “I am afraid”. There is a heightened sense of insecurity that preoccupies young people’s lives in the “risk society”. As uncertainties grew in the de-industrialised economy, individuals were required to make decisions and seek solutions to negotiate risks around them on their own. Giddens (1991) similarly argues that values of individualism and personal choices dominate the “high modernity” (or, “late modernity”) of the Western world. Looking at changes in the labour market, Beck (2000) points out that Western culture is preoccupied with individualised social identity. Young people are under greater demands to transition from school to employment through their own efforts and attributes in an increasingly flexible labour market and individualistic culture.

Scott and Mooney (2009) highlight that, since devolution, Scotland has begun changing its approach to policy, with the prominence of neoliberalism being challenged by an increasing emphasis on social justice. There has also been a drive to reinforce preventative policy measures and universal public services (Christie Commission 2011). Such focus on social justice and state intervention (in areas such as housing and education) set the Scottish debates apart from the discussions in the Westminster Government (Stewart 2004).

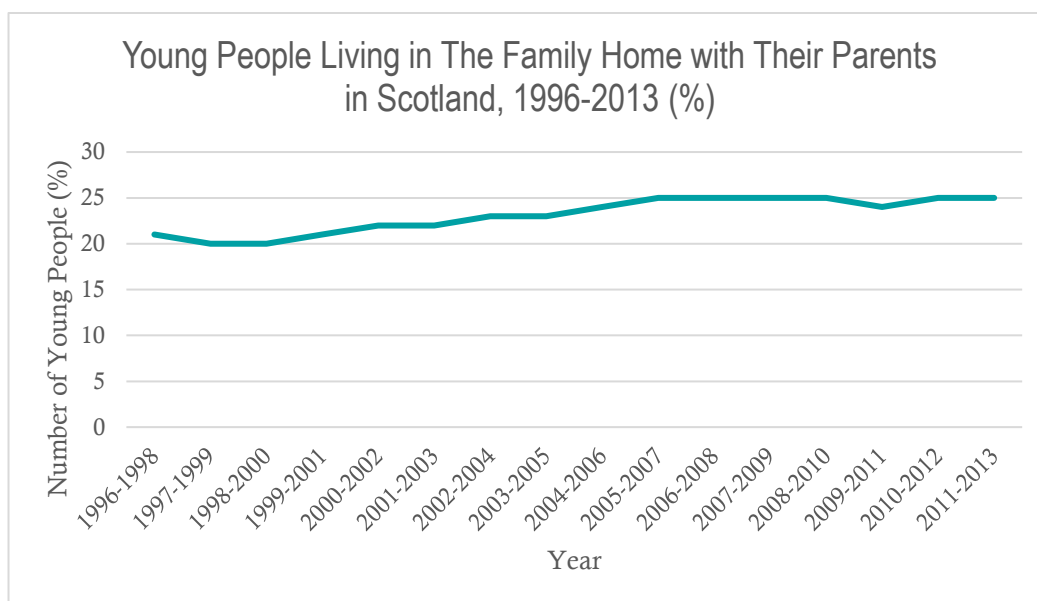
The role of the family

Scotland has a very different culture of family traditions compared to Hong Kong. The family is not necessarily the dominant provider of care, and there is a stronger role played by the state in welfare delivery in Scotland than in Hong Kong (Mooney and Wright 2009). There are also weaker expectations and less reliance on older family members for welfare provision, especially when children enter adulthood. The centrality attached to intergenerational family support in welfare organisation is not as apparent in Scotland. Conversely, there are stronger expectations for young people to become independent from the family and parental provisions. Young people gaining full independence and achieving self-sufficiency becomes a celebrated value influenced by neoliberal ideals. There are therefore different sets of expectations on young people from the family in the Scottish context; transitioning into independence is more strongly demanded and reliance on parental support stigmatised. This influences young people’s experiences of receiving support and care from older family members. For example, it is

less common for young people to live in the family home or be dependent on the parents beyond childhood, unlike Hong Kong.

There is also a growing trend in young people depending on the family home (see Figure 4.5). Young people are living in their parental homes for longer than previous generations (McKee 2012).

Figure 4.5 - Number of Young People (20-34) Living in The Family Home with Their Parents in Scotland (%)



Source: adapted from Office for National Statistics 2014

There were 260,000 young people living with their parents in 2011-2013 in Scotland, rising from 220,000 in 2001-2003 (Office for National Statistics 2014). Young people under the age of 24 were significantly more likely to be dependent on the family for housing. McKee (2012) highlights that there were increased number of young people who could not afford moving out due to rising housing prices and recent housing welfare reforms. Only 30% of young people aged 16-34 were homeowners, compared to 60% in the overall Scottish population (Scottish Government 2015c). The number of young people in the private rental sector rose from 20% to 41% between 2004 and 2014, while only 14% of the population were private renters. There were 26% of young people living in social housing, although the number was declining over the past 15 years, with 24% in social housing in the general population. This reflects the increased difficulties for young people to afford homeownership, and significantly higher proportion of young people moving into privately rented properties (Beer et al. 2011; Heath 2008; Rugg and Rhodes 2008).

The surge of renters and decline in homeownership among the younger generation is recognised and encapsulated by the term ‘generation rent’ in recent academic debates and public discourses in the United Kingdom (Alakeson 2011; Blackwell and Park 2011; Willetts 2010). Meen (2013) explains that the rise of ‘generation rent’ is accounted by multiple conditions in the current housing market that disadvantage the younger generation. There is a 20% increase in the number of young people living with their parents in the UK, including some returning to their family homes after having moved out (Moore 2013). The rising levels of students’ debt, soaring youth unemployment, extensions of education careers are argued to be factors that contribute to young people needing to extend their dependence on their parents (Andrew 2010). Nonetheless, intergenerational family support can be experienced in other ways in the Scottish context apart from living in the family home.

Support from older family members in terms of providing financial assistance for home purchases or mortgage deposits could be crucial for the younger generation in their housing options (Searle and McCollum 2014; Tatch 2007). Other forms of financial and material support from older family members could also be important in young people’s experiences of transitions, especially in housing. Assistance and contributions to support the cost of housing are diverse as well as continuous, ranging from gifts, inheritance, to loans, to anything ‘in-between’ (Heath and Calvert 2013). However, the older generation have differing abilities to transfer wealth and afford provisions of financial assistance, particularly for home purchases and mortgages. Kemp (2015) argues that young people from low-income, ‘housing poor’ families could lack such assistance.

Scotland is shown to have a smaller but growing proportion of young people remaining dependent on older family members. It highlights the expectations and pressures experienced by young people to transition into independence. Moreover, transitions are expected to be earlier and closer to late-teens compared to Hong Kong. There are wide expectations and demands for young people to grow out of dependence on parental support after leaving school. Moving out of the parental home can be encouraged and considered a representation of individual growth in a context that values self-realisation and autonomy.

The role of the state

There have been significant changes in the role of the state in young people’s welfare over the past several decades in Scotland (MacLeod and Emejulu 2014). After

the Second World War, state provision in social welfare was substantially increased (particularly in social security, healthcare, education, housing and employment), and the “golden age” of the welfare state emerged (Pierson 1991). In this historical context, the state became vital to the welfare system, and public welfare provided for young people has been more extensive in Scotland than in Hong Kong. This remains true despite the reduced size of the welfare state in the 1980s, which witnessed ‘the beginning of a neoliberal turn ...[and the] post-industrial welfare state is indeed going down a liberal road of retrenchment, privatisation and marketisation’ (Abarhamson 2012: 92). The modern British welfare state is characterised by its “safety net” approach, which emphasises means-tested and basic public welfare for young people and society. This typifies a “liberal” welfare regime and the redistributive and de-commodification effects of state welfare is relative low compared to other European countries (Esping-Andersen 1990). On the contrary, there is strong dominance of market-friendly principles and de-regulation of the private sector in the UK policies; individualised gains are prioritised but also allowed high social stratification and inequality in society. However, the devolved policies in Scotland are shifting towards having increased state intervention, in order to promote social inclusion and equality of opportunities (Riddell 2009; Scottish Executive 1999). There have also been calls to connect concepts of rights, social justice, and co-production to the approach of social welfare (Christie Commission 2011; Davis et al. 2014).

The increasingly individualistic culture has a significant impact on how the role of the state is perceived. The concern for liberty and autonomy is central to the relationship between the state and the individual (Dean 2002). Freedom in Western society ‘embodies a form of self-realization, independent self-rule, or some related state of being reflective of the most rational or virtuous life’ (Christman 2005: 80). Berlin (1969) argues that this requires an absence of extrinsic and intrinsic constraints for individuals to act rationally. Unlike in the Confucian culture, the state is expected to allow young people to exercise autonomy and ascertain their privacy to live the way they desire (Murphy 2003). However, there is a contentious debate about whether the state, especially concerning the expansion of the welfare state, limits or enhances individual freedom by imposing objectives of state policies (Dean 2002; London 1971; Nelson 2005).

Since the 1990s, the role of the state has shifted from traditions of providing direct services and interventions to offering young people opportunities through policies

and regulations (Finlay et al. 2010; Majone 1997). There is a strong focus on facilitating young people to become active citizens and being included to take part in society (Smith et al. 2005; Lister et al. 2005). Youth participation—economically, socially and politically—is emphasised as a citizen’s right to be enabled by the state (Pole et al. 2005). However, the role of the state became entangled with budgetary constraints and deficit reduction under the UK coalition government; significant cuts in public welfare spending and services have been implemented across the UK since 2010 (Clarke and Newman 2012; Yeates et al. 2011). Taylor-Gooby (2011) highlights that the rhetoric of “austerity” has dominated policy debates and introduced a will to diminish the role of state-sponsored welfare. The “austerity” programme has been carried forward by the Conservative government in office since 2015. Many public services and benefits for young people and the general population faced being eliminated, stream-lined or privatised in the aim of saving public money (Sommerlad and Sanderson 2013; Sosenko et al. 2013). This created a great amount of tension in Scotland, especially since the Scottish National Party (SNP) gained power in 2007 (forming a minority government) and subsequently becoming the ruling party in 2011. The SNP, which has a social democratic leaning, steered Scottish policies to reinstate the role of the welfare state in areas such as education, housing, and social services (Mooney and Poole 2004; Mooney and Scott 2005; Viebrock 2009). Law (2005) highlights that there have been stronger aspirations and commitments for state welfare in the policy discussions in Scotland than the rest of the UK. Scott and Mooney (2009: 384), however, remarks that ‘the SNP’s political commitments to solidarity and to fairness and cohesion have...been couched in a neoliberal framework of economic growth and competitiveness’. The expectations for state support in young people’s lives remain limited. The pressures on young people to individualise and privatise mitigations of risks are intensified by the neoliberal and individualistic values in this context.

Welfare and State Benefits for Young People

There are several state benefits that young people are entitled to receive in Scotland, primarily if a young person has low or no income. Most benefits are means-tested and aimed towards providing basic support and sustaining young people's living. One of the main benefits available is the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)¹¹.

¹¹ It is noted that EMA has been abolished for young people in England since 2012 due to budgetary constraints, but it is continued to be provided in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

EMA is a cash benefit designed for young people who are at school-leaving age and are staying in education or training. Only young people aged 16-19 who are in school, college or the Activity Agreement are eligible to receive the benefit. EMA is means-tested by household income, and in most cases based on a young person's parent(s) or carer(s) income. At the time of the fieldwork in 2014, family annual income of no more than £20,351 or £22,404 (for households with two or more children) were required to receive the benefit. There is a strong component of requiring young people to be committed to learning and staying proactive as a condition. Young people must enter a "learning agreement", which sets out the learning activities and coursework obligations to be completed every year and is co-signed by a parent (or responsible adult) and the learning provider. 100% in weekly attendance to the agreed learning programme is also part of the conditions, or else young people could risk losing the benefits. Unlike the CSSA in Hong Kong, the benefit payment (£30 a week) is directly entitled to the young person instead of the household. Payments start as early as the date of the young person's 16th birthday. This reflects the significance of turning 16 being an important marker of entering adulthood in the Scottish cultural context. Age appears to have a stronger symbolic meaning in being associated with expectations on independence from the family (Berrington and Stone 2014). In Hong Kong, 18 marks the legal age of being an adult, but has less significance in terms of expectations on detaching from family dependence.

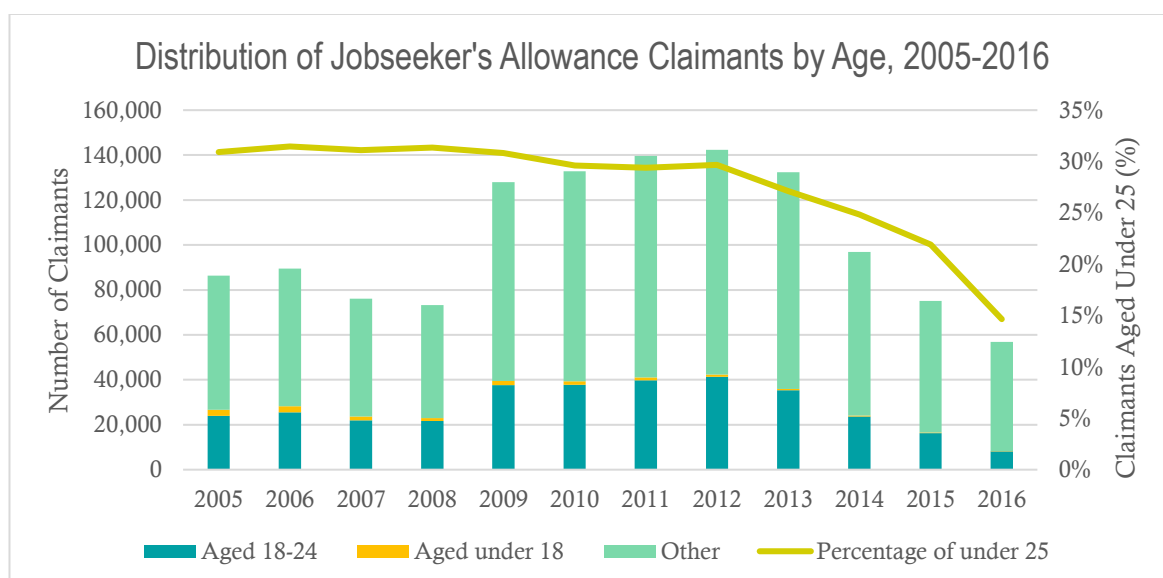
The Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) managed by the UK Department for Work and Pensions is another key state benefit available for young people in Scotland. JSA provides means-tested financial assistance for individuals who are unemployed (or employed less than 16 hours per week) and actively looking for work. A single young person under the age of 25 normally receives £57 a week, providing they meet the strict eligibility requirements. The benefit is only available for young people over 18 years old who are not in full-time education and are able and available to take up employment. Part-time students may also be eligible if they can work while they study and are willing to stop their courses to take up work if required. In exceptional circumstances (such as no-one can provide support), young people aged 16-17 looking for work and not in education can receive JSA. This reflects the importance and expectations attached to young people staying in education. Since the 2010 welfare reform, there has been increased welfare sanctions and conditionality for young people claiming the benefit:

'Eligibility for JSA depends upon a claimant entering a Jobseeker's Agreement, which is a compulsory condition of eligibility for benefit. The introduction of

JSA intensified the requirements placed on claimants to provide evidence of compliant behaviour and introduced a tougher set of sanctions. There is now strong mainstream political agreement in favour of conditionality, whereby welfare entitlements are increasingly dependent on citizens agreeing to meet compulsory duties or approved behaviour' (Fletcher 2015: 330).

Young people receiving JSA are required to attend regular appointments with Work Coaches at the Jobcentre Plus, in which agreed steps of finding work are reviewed and assessed fortnightly. There is also a heavy emphasis on monitoring young people to be actively looking for work and accepting job offers or interviews; otherwise, claimants could risk losing benefits for up to three years. Fletcher (2015) highlights that there is a reinforced concern on “workfare” in recent welfare policy debates, especially due to public budget cuts and rising hostility towards welfare dependencies. Discussions about unemployment benefits continue to be centred on moving individuals from “welfare to work”. The rhetoric has been framed especially around young people who could become long-term unemployed otherwise. There have been more concerns on issues of “worklessness” and welfare dependencies of young people in the context of Scotland than Hong Kong (Macdonald et al. 2013). The concerns also reflect the higher proportion of young people who receive state benefit for unemployment in Scotland (see Figure 4.6). Between 2005 and 2013, over 25% of JSA claimants were under the age of 25.

Figure 4.6 - Distribution of Jobseeker's Allowance Claimants by Age in Scotland, 2005-2016



Source: adapted from Office for National Statistics 2017

Since 2005, there has been more than 20,000 young people in Scotland who received JSA benefits. There was a significant increase from 2009 after the Global Financial Crisis, and the figure peaked at 42,000 in 2012. However, the drop in JSA was noted as the Universal Credit system began to be rolled out in 2013. The Universal Credit gradually replaces JSA and other means-tested benefits available for young people including Income Support (for lone parents, disabled or sick), Housing Benefit, and Working Tax Credit.

Cole and colleagues (2016) highlight how young people's housing support was also influenced by recent welfare reforms. Housing Benefits for 18 to 21-year-olds were abolished by the UK government in a controversial welfare cut implemented in April 2017. Many young people's positions in the housing market became marginalised and non-owner-occupation housing options stigmatised. The barriers for some young people, particularly disadvantaged youth, in accessing the housing ladder were neglected by policy-makers. This was highlighted by the effects of the drastic transformations in the housing benefits system (Clapham et al. 2014). Many young people under the age of 22 could be at risk of losing crucial support in housing from the state with the benefit cuts. On the other hand, the option of remaining in the family home could be 'non-existent for those with no homes, no parents, suffering relationship breakdown, or fleeing abusive relationships' (Cole et al. 2016: 9). Due to the changing landscape of housing and social welfare across the UK, young people's transitions are more limited and chaotic in Scotland (Hochstenbach and Boterma 2015). There is also limited availability of state support in terms of social housing for young people (Kemp 2011). The social housing sector has been in retrenchment as a legacy of neoliberal policies in the 1980s (Murie 2014; Stephens et al. 2002). The construction and supply of new social housing was put on hold for a long time by the UK Government. There are therefore increasing difficulties for young people to access social housing across the UK; this contributes to intensifying stress and limiting options for young people to become independent (Fitzpatrick and Pawson 2014; Wilcox et al. 2010).

Youth work and voluntary organisations

There is a close association of the state with the voluntary sector in the delivery of youth work and services in Scotland. While the role of the state is diminished due to neoliberal values, Burt and Taylor (2002) note that there is an increased commitment of engaging voluntary sector organisations in governance within the Scottish Government. It is suggested that 'the voluntary sector could prove effective in resolving major social "problems" that fall between the interstices of public and private provision' (*ibid*: 93).

There are a range of programmes and activities provided by local authorities' youth work teams and voluntary organisations. For example, YouthLink Scotland is the Scottish national organisation for youth work. It works closely with the Scottish Government and all 32 local authorities in Scotland, including on the Activity Agreement and distribution of national funding (YouthLink Scotland 2013). In addition, other notable local organisations include Young Scot, Princes Trust, and the Scottish Youth Parliament, which offer a variety of universal and targeted programmes to promote youth development. A report produced by Education Scotland (2014) highlights that there is a strong focus in the youth work sector on aiming to improve the life chances of young people. Through engaging directly with young people and partnering with other stakeholders like schools and colleges, youth work agencies play a crucial role in supporting young people, such as in health and mental health, sports, outdoor learning, culture, arts, and criminal justice interventions. Youth workers could have a significant impact in young people's lives by providing important services to:

'...engage with young people through building trusting and supportive relationships, also through using social group work and mentoring skills to negotiate with young people. Diverse activities help young people gain confidence, develop important skills for life and achieve success but also to have fun, and engage with others as they progress through adolescence to adulthood.'

(*ibid*: 4)

In addition to youth work, there is a range of UK-wide and Scottish agencies focusing on improving the employability of young people, including "welfare to work" agencies specifically. The Jobcentre Plus (JCP) provides several programmes in assisting young people who are unemployed moving into work (Work and Pensions Committee 2017). Initiatives such as the "Work and Health Programme" (which will replace the "Work Programme" and "Work Choice" in late 2017) offers training and guidance for young people receiving JSA, particularly school leavers, to prepare for and seek employment. The new "Youth Obligation" initiative also offers unemployed young people receiving Universal Credit participation in an employment support programme. Young people will be supported to take up an apprenticeship, traineeship or work placement after six months. In addition, Jobcentre Plus is working with schools and pupils directly to offer advice on labour market and work experience opportunities before they leave school.

Lindsay and colleagues (2014) emphasise the significant involvements of third sector organisations in the delivery of state-funded “welfare-to-work” services for young people in Scotland. Voluntary organisations are noted to offer added value by having more independence and flexibility in innovation of services and being more able to involve individuals directly (Osborne and MacLaughlin 2004). Third sector organisations could also be valuable in providing specialist services and working with young people with more complex issues for an extended period of time (Smith and Smyth 2010). There is therefore a growing partnership between the third sector and the state in the delivery of employability services for young people. Lindsay and colleagues (2008) highlight that many job seekers have positive experiences and benefit from the support offered through employability services that are delivered by a voluntary agency and funded by the state.

Education

Public education is free for 5 to 16-year-olds in Scotland. Children are required to start schooling at age 4-6, and study in primary school for seven years (P1-P7). This is followed by First Year (S1) of high school, which normally begins at age 11-13. Compared to Hong Kong, the Scottish system for education and national examinations is more flexible (Bryce and Humes 2008; Munn et al. 2004). This is reflected in the introduction of the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) in 2012. It emphasises increased flexibility, choice, skills and personal development in the design of the curriculum for 3 to 18-year-olds (Priestly and Humes 2010). There are more options and freedom allowed in learning and when and what qualifications young people pursue. During S3 and S4, young people begin to prepare and sit examinations for the former Scottish Standard Grade (which was replaced by the National 4 and 5 after the research took place). Young people may then choose whether they wish to pursue the Scottish Higher qualifications starting from S5 at age 15-17 and more Highers or Advance Highers can be taken in S6. There are three main types of schools in Scotland: state, private and denominational. The majority of young people attend state and denominational schools, which are publicly-funded and run by local authorities. However, there is a higher prominence of private, fee-paying schools in Scotland than in Hong Kong. There are more than 70 private and independent schools, which educate 4.1% (29,600) of Scottish children and young people (Scottish Council of Independent Schools 2017).

Statutory compulsory schooling is associated with age, unlike in Hong Kong. A young person may choose to leave school after they turn 16, and the school leaving date

is normally at the end of S4. Young people may also choose to stay in school, go to university or attend Further Education colleges for vocational training, which are also free and funded by the state.

The subject choices available to students in Scotland are flexible, and not based solely on academic performance. Young People normally study six to nine Standard Grade subjects in S4, and the qualification take one year to complete. Only Mathematics and English are compulsory, and young people may choose to study any combination of subjects with no or minimal entry requirements, unlike Hong Kong. If a young person chooses to pursue Highers or Advanced Highers, they may study three to five subjects of their choice, and this also normally takes one year to complete.

Young people can go to college and university as early as aged 16, if they have taken the Scottish Highers. Attaining three or more Higher qualifications is a basic requirement for entry to higher education. Higher education normally takes four years to complete. According to the Scottish Funding Council (2014), 29.3% of young people aged 16-19 go to higher education institutions and 15.1% attend further education colleges in 2012-2013. In addition, over 50% of the population attend higher education or colleges before reaching the age of 30. Apart from university, young people can study a Higher National Certificate (HNC) for one year or Higher National Diploma (HND) for two years at college. They are not only qualifications to gain skills for a vocational career, but HNC may also allow direct entry into second year of a degree programme and HND into third year. There is a limited number of degree-level diplomas, certificates, and professional qualifications available at college.

Youth Socialisation

The social lives of young people in Scotland are strongly influenced by the cultures and traditions rooted in its industrial past. There has been a long history of young people's socialisation being associated with street-based activities (King 1987). In the heyday of the industrial era, it was common for young people who worked in heavy engineering industries and manual work to socialise in public spaces over alcoholic beverages or watching football (Damer 1990). Jephcott (1967) highlights that there has been a prevalent culture of young people "hanging out" in public spaces such as parks, streets, and outside buildings from the 1960s. It was also common for young people to go to local cafes, cinemas and pubs to socialise with friends and peers. In contemporary times, there are strong continuities of the "street culture" in Scotland; socialising in public spaces, consumption of alcohol and sports remain central to young people's

socialising habits (Fraser 2015; Kintrea et al. 2011). However, influenced by the decline of industrial activities, there are changing conceptions of the “street” and “free-time” of young people’s lives. There is a growing negative view of young people’s free time and associating it with emptiness. “Free” time became ‘viewed as something of a curse—spent as it was in a constant round of searches for work’ (Fraser et al. 2017: 242). Pressures of looking for work and values of being in work came to dominate young people’s social lives. In Fraser and colleagues’ recent study (2017), young people in Scotland were found to be spending up to 90% of their free time engaged in work-related activities and job-hunting. “Hanging out” in public space has also become perceived as increasingly unsafe, due to threats of violence, drugs and alcohol abuse, criminality, and gang activities (Batchelor et al. 2001; Batchelor 2011; Paton et al. 2012). An image of “danger” and civic “degeneration” has become increasingly prevalent and attached to young people’s engagements in street-based activities (Gray and Mooney 2011).

Young people’s socialisation is also influenced by pressures arising from youth unemployment and underemployment trends in the Scottish context (Maver 2000). The choice of socialising activities that young people can participate has been restricted by increasingly insecure income and lack of money (Shildrick and MacDonald 2006). This can become a significant barrier to socialise for many young people, especially due to the popularisation of commercial leisure activities (Batchelor et al. 2017b). Although there is little limitation on the availability of public and open spaces in Scotland, the lack of low-cost entertainment and leisure activities for young people is similar to the situation in Hong Kong (*ibid*). Many young people facing economic marginalisation and not having a steady wage or employment could be unable to afford going to popular commercial venues for socialising. Examples include going to shopping malls, eating out at fast food chained restaurants, going to a café, and enjoying a movie with friends. Roberts (2005) highlights that these have become expensive activities that could be unaffordable to some, especially if they struggle with finding work or having limited income. Pressures linked to unemployment faced by young people can therefore have significant consequences on how they socialise.

Some young people are choosing to spend more time at home. Fraser and colleagues (2017) highlight that there is convergence in youth social activities in Scotland and Hong Kong, especially around globalised consumer brands, retail and entertainments, and use of technologies such as mobile devices. Like in Hong Kong, there are increased socialising activities that take place through digital media (like social

networking sites) and within the private space of young people's home. In Scotland, the *Scottish Household Survey 2011* indicated that a large majority of 96% of 16 to 24-year-old young people have access and regularly use the Internet, whereas only 76% of the overall population do so (Scottish Government 2012d). Other evidence shows that young people in Scotland commonly use technologies for the purpose of a variety of interactions and socialisations, including social networking, voice and video communications, finding information, and seeking advice from others (Office for National Statistics 2013). This shows that the availability and prominence of technologies in young people's social lives are highly significant in the Scottish context as well as in Hong Kong. This is reinforced by a policy drive from the Scottish Government to reinforce the integration of technologies in citizen's everyday lives. The Scottish Government (2012c) introduced major initiatives to promote the use of Internet and computers in all households as part of its wider social inclusion agenda. The initiatives aimed to tackle the "digital divide" between the "haves" and "have-nots", and provided important support, accessibility and training to ensure opportunities for all individuals in Scotland to be able to use technologies for daily interactions and social activities (Scottish Government 2010b: 83; Scottish Government 2012c). Therefore, like Hong Kong, technological devices and digital platforms are increasingly important in the configuration of young people's socialisation in the context of Scotland. A significant number of young people are using technologies like social media and smartphone apps to socialise with people.

Economic Changes and Youth Labour Market

The Scottish economy has experienced several significant fluctuations, which imposed increasing demands and pressures on young people and their participation in employment. This stemmed from the deindustrialisation and growing role of the service sector in the economy in the 1980s (MacLeod 2002). There was substantial restructuring of the opportunity structure in the labour market. Similar to Hong Kong, the demand for unskilled and low-skilled young people in Scotland had decreased with the decline of manufacturing and heavy industrial sectors. Employment opportunities in the post-industrial economy began to revolve around service-based industries, which required more educated and flexible workers (Furlong and Cartmel 2007). This created increased demands and expectations for young people to attain higher levels of education thus delayed transitions to work. Conversely, young people who struggled in the education system and left school early faced more pressures due to diminished opportunities for

employment. This shift to the serviced-based economy therefore had a significant impact on growing fragmentations and tensions in youth employment in Scotland.

While the economy became more advanced and flexible, jobs for young people became:

‘...generally of a much lower quality—in terms of pay, job security and job satisfaction—than those lost in traditional manufacturing activities...[the norm turns to be] a low wage and casualised work environment or an unregulated and degraded training system’ (Cumbers et al. 2009: 2).

The Scottish labour market became increasingly dominated by precarious and insecure work conditions. Standing (2011) highlights that the decline of stability and security was strongly influenced by neoliberal values of deregulation of the market, and its impacts were especially strong and negative for youth. It has become increasingly difficult for young people in Scotland to secure opportunities to work or have stable employment. In addition, there was a decline in full-time work, which was gradually being replaced by positions with temporary, fixed-term, part-time or zero-hour contracts (Clasen and Clegg 2011; Davies and Freedland 2007). Shildrick et al. (2010) highlight that many young people are trapped in the “churn”, and going around “low-pay, no-pay” cycles and between part-time positions and unemployment repeatedly. In a growingly precarious labour market, young people experience increasing difficulty in securing employment.

The concerns of youth unemployment have also been intensified by the recession of the economy since 2008. Unlike Hong Kong, Scotland experienced a drastic economic decline after the Global Financial Crisis. There has been slow earnings growth in the overall population, and it has been especially difficult for people in low-income groups to accumulate savings and sustain income (Aarland & Nordvik 2009). The financial crisis therefore left a lasting and negative impact on the UK and the Scottish economy. The slowing down of economic activities affected many young people, and their opportunities to participate in employment became further limited. The weakened conditions of the economy and labour market suffered from a slow recovery in Scotland, unlike Hong Kong, and the levels of youth unemployment thereby escalated drastically (see Figure 4.7). There was a surge in the number of young people who became disengaged from work after the Global Financial Crisis.

Figure 4.7 - Youth Unemployment Rate (aged 16-24) in Scotland in 2005-2014 (%)



Source: Adapted from Scottish Government (2015a)

Figure 4.7 shows that the unemployment rate for young people (aged 16-24) began to rise in 2008 and peaked at over 20% for three consecutive years from 2011. Unemployment only began to climb down slightly in 2014. Nonetheless, the youth unemployment rate remained at above 15%, which was higher than the pre-2008 level. The rhetoric of economic “austerity” reinforced concerns regarding retrenchments of jobs and increased precariousness of the labour market (Antonucci et al. 2014). There were heightened pressures and stress experienced by young people brought by rising youth unemployment in a depressed labour market (Macdonald and Marsh 2005; Standing 2011). Many young people struggled to find or participate in work as the number of jobs and vacancies decreased with the economic decline. There were also common perceptions of job opportunities becoming increasingly limited, which reinforced disparities and doubts among young people about their prospects in the labour market (Macdonald et al. 2013). This reflects that there were more prominent

concerns about rising youth unemployment and declining labour demand in the context of Scotland compared to Hong Kong (Scottish Government 2010a). The Scottish Government has put promoting youth employment as a high priority in its policy agenda, especially in response to the economic decline (Scottish Government 2011). Nonetheless, pressures and tensions experienced by young people in transitioning from school to work continue to be intensified due to growing labour market uncertainties.

The economic downturn was also intertwined with other political changes in Scotland at the time of the research. The debates around Scottish independence and the referendum in 2014 stirred much interest and involvement of the younger generation in political events, not unlike in Hong Kong (Batchelor et al. 2017a). The discussions have been linked to calls for tackling issues associated with the depressed labour market and rising unemployment (Kenealy et al. 2017). The Scottish Independence Referendum has also been influential in the recent growth of political participation and political concerns of young people. This was most notable in 16 and 17-years-old being allowed to vote for the first time in Scotland. Young people from the age of 16 have since been made legal to vote in all Scottish elections in 2016. Eichhorn (2014) highlights that the “newly enfranchised” voters’ concerns and interests in various political and socio-economic policy issues are evident and increasingly influential.

Youth Policies

The context and concerns of rising youth unemployment have important implications on how youth policies have been framed in Scotland (Adams 2012). The policy discussions have focused on safeguarding opportunities for young people to participate fully in society, and young people’s inclusion in the labour market and education have been emphasised. The importance attached to the promotion of work and education is similarly observed in Hong Kong (Yu 2008). However, the debates in Scotland are strongly linked to concerns of poverty and income inequality (Mooney and Johnstone 2000). It has been a key priority in the Scottish and UK-wide policy agendas to improve the life chances of young people who are from low-income families and those who are economically marginalised. In Hong Kong, there has been a more general approach in aiming policy towards young people with low levels of education, and concerns related to their income backgrounds have been minimal. Conversely, the policies in Scotland are more targeted and intended to address the needs of young people living in poverty. This is reflected by widespread debates centred on “social

exclusion” and “Not in Education, Employment and Training” (NEET), which have been instrumental in the framing of policies for young people in Scotland.

Addressing poverty and social exclusion

From the late-1990s, the concept of “social exclusion” captured a vast amount of attention among the policy community and it became a key policy interest in Scotland and the UK (Jones and Bell 2000). In the UK-wide context, the former Labour Government established the Social Exclusion Unit in 1997. Social exclusion became a prime focus of government’s plans and debates; initiatives targeted to meet the needs of people living in the most deprived neighbourhoods across Britain were introduced (Macdonald and Marsh 2001). Policies focused on supporting certain geographical areas that had a high concentration of poverty, and “welfare-to-work” and “make work pay” initiatives were at the heart of an “employment-first” approach to alleviating poverty (Finn 2003). One of the “flagship” programmes was the “New Deal for Young People” (NDYP). NDYP was aimed towards providing support and reducing the number of young people aged 18-24 who were in long-term unemployment due to social exclusion across the UK (Blundell et al. 2003; Giorgi 2005).

Addressing issues of poverty and income inequality was also a salient agenda of the devolved government under the Labour-Liberal Democrat administration in Scotland in 1999. Echoing the UK Labour government’s approach, the Scottish government’s policies reinforced a viewpoint that growing up in poor economic circumstances could have long-lasting negative impacts on young people’s life chances (Lupton and Power 2005). Tackling this was also associated with addressing a set of complex interrelated issues entangled with the process of social exclusion, including ill health, poor housing, unemployment, crime, anti-social behaviours, and family changes (Mooney and Johnstone 2000). Nonetheless, there was a strong emphasis in the discussions in Scotland on the “inclusion” of disadvantaged young people. This was continued by the SNP-minority government in 2007, and it was argued that:

‘...while Scotland’s policy discourse under New Labour tended to emphasise social inclusion (in a more positive light than the Westminster concern with social exclusion), a less familiar and arguably more social democratic language of ‘solidarity’ has been introduced by the SNP-led government. This signals a greater concern with social equity and a conscious attempt to create a sense of cohesion around the idea of Scotland as a nation’ (Mooney and Wright 2009: 363).

Measures to eradicate poverty and debates on “social inclusion” played an important role in shaping the policy rhetoric and services for young people in Scotland, especially under the SNP government. There have been more policy developments addressing structural inequality and provisions of support for economically marginalised young people compared to Hong Kong. There has also been a stronger “social exclusion” and anti-poverty approach in how youth policies are framed in Scotland.

However, there have been critiques about paid work being regarded as the paramount route for disadvantaged young people to escape poverty (Finn 2003; Levitas 1998). A dominant principle in the social exclusion debates is that:

‘...work is, as with the UK government, prioritised as the main way of addressing income inequality... However, poverty is seen essentially here as a drag on economic growth and it is economic growth that remains the primary aim of the [Scottish] government’ (Scott and Mooney 2009: 384).

Despite the policy rhetoric focusing on empowerment and social inclusion, Scott and Mooney (2009) argue that the redistribution of wealth had been under-addressed in Scottish policies. How young people engaged and participated in society became highly contentious in this context. There are on-going debates regarding damaging consequences to society as well as to individuals when young people experience exclusion and isolation (Levitas et al. 2007; Sandford et al. 2006). The emphasis had been placed largely on marginalisation from the labour market and education system but also, to a lesser extent, lack of social ties and support in local communities and families (Sinclair and McKendrick 2012).

The label of NEET

Despite the usage of the term “social exclusion” being in recent decline due to its association with the former New Labour administration, concerns about young people’s social participation continued to be prevalent in the UK and Scotland. Recent discussions became centred around “NEET” (Not in Education, Employment or Training), which denotes concerns about young people between the age of 16 and 19 who have left school and not actively engaged in work nor training (Yates and Payne 2006). The label of “NEET” has been highly controversial, and it has stirred numerous on-going debates among policy-makers, politicians, academics, media and policy commentators in Scotland since the early 2000s (Nudzor 2010; Scottish Government 2012a). Yu (2008) remarks that the prominence of the label NEET and concerns around

young people's participation in employment and education have strong parallels with the label of Non-Engage Youth (NEY) in Hong Kong.

According to the *Annual Population Survey*, there were over 36,000 NEET young people in Scotland in 2010, which was equivalent to 13% of the overall youth population at the time (Scottish Government 2014). The year 2010 also marked the highest record of NEET young people in a decade in Scotland, and the number of NEETs remained to be around 10% since 2000 (Adams 2012). More recently, NEETs reduced slightly to 29,000 young people (11.9%) in 2013. The rate of young people becoming NEET continues to raise significant concerns among the policy community in Scotland.

McGregor and colleagues (2006) highlight that the discussions of NEET in Scotland have been strongly influenced by the legacy of the social inclusion agenda. Policy reports of the Scottish Government (2012a) and the former Scottish Executive (2003; 2006) emphasised that becoming NEET was closely related to economic deprivation and several aspects of social exclusion. There were also continued concerns about anti-social behaviours, youth delinquency and family and social issues. In the academic discussions, NEET was also linked to debates associated with social exclusion, including poor quality and lack of housing, socio-economically deprived neighbourhoods, school exclusion and truancy, and struggles with family relationships and conflicts (Finaly et al. 2010; Kemp 2015; McKee 2012). Sanford and colleagues (2006) illustrate that the emergence of the label of NEET and how it has been discussed remain steered by concerns about social exclusion and marginalisation. Young people becoming NEET were considered to be connected to experiences of socio-economic disadvantages and, more importantly, the lack of opportunities to overcome these issues.

As part of the "Closing the Opportunity Gap" initiative, the former Scottish Executive¹² (2006) publishes the *More Choices, More Chances: A Strategy to Reduce the Proportion of Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training in Scotland*. It importantly highlights the characteristics, needs, and policy actions in Scotland regarding NEETs. The More Choices, More Chances (MCMC) programme was implemented and emphasised an approach that young people who lacked credentials and opportunities required more support to find and engage in work. One of the

¹² The Scottish Executive was established as the Scottish devolved government in 1999, and it was formally renamed as the Scottish Government in 2012.

MCMC's aims states that intervention is required in 'providing those who are in negative destinations with opportunities to develop the skills for learning, life and work' (Scottish Government 2010a: 9).

With the objective of preventing young people becoming "NEET", the Scottish Government focused on developing policies that promoted young people's entry to "positive destinations" upon reaching 16, at the end of compulsory schooling age. One of such key initiatives was the "16+ Learning Choices" framework introduced in 2011. "Positive destinations" for young people were considered as one of the following: i) staying in school or attending further education colleges full-time or part-time; ii) higher education, such as universities and other higher education institutions; iii) full or part-time employment; iv) the National Training Programme (NTP), and other personal or skills development programmes, and; v) doing volunteering work (Scottish Government 2010a). The policy agenda targeted towards NEETs has also strongly influenced youth service practices and a wide range of stakeholders, including Local Councils, voluntary organisations and Skills Development Scotland (SDS). The SDS is tasked to coordinate the creation of "positive destinations" in Scotland and ensure that the number of places available for young people is sufficient to meet the demands. The SDS runs the "National Training Programme" and other initiatives including the "Get Ready for Work" and "Skillseekers", which are targeted specifically towards reducing the number of young people and school leavers who become NEET. There is an emphasis on creating new provision to support young people in meeting rising challenges and barriers to enter the labour market. This reflects that promoting young people's participation in employment and education are considered as paramount concerns in youth policies in Scotland, as similarly observed in Hong Kong. However, the usefulness of the term NEET in youth policy debates is hindered by the historical contingencies in the Scottish context, as 'unfortunately throughout the 2000s, the challenge of tackling the NEET issue and meeting the needs of young people affected by it has been hampered by the prevalence of negative attitudes towards them—particularly adolescents' (Adams 2012: 166). Adams highlights that highly politically charged campaigns on tackling social exclusion and anti-social behaviours across the UK (such as the anti-social behaviour orders) in the early 2000s left a negative public image of disadvantaged young people (Scottish Executive 2003). There is a haunting perception of economically marginalised young people being associated with risks and fears in society, including neighbourhood crime and violence, youth gangs, and welfare dependencies (Fraser 2013; Roberts 2005).

Focus on young people's economic productivity

The policy agendas in Scotland and Hong Kong share a similar focus on addressing young people's non-participation in work and education. With rising levels of youth unemployment in the Scottish context, there are heightened concerns about young people not being economically active and not economically independent. The interventions and initiatives introduced in Hong Kong and Scottish reinforce similar underlying assumptions that: i) young people are considered first and foremost as potential economically productive members of society, and; ii) an individual carries the responsibility and regarded as being "deficient" if they do not engage in mainstream social activities, especially work or staying in education (Nudzor 2010).

Policies focused on reducing NEETs in Scotland are strongly driven towards making young people more economically active and productive in the workforce (Yates and Payne 2006). There are growing pressures centring on young people's skills and employability. There is also strong importance attached to youth participation and activities in the labour market, and less so in other domains of their social lives such as communities and social ties (Finlay et al. 2010). Young people's active engagement in work and their potential economic productivity are perceived as contributing positively to society. Youth policies therefore focused on promoting skills enhancement, reinforcing the value of education and skills training, and ultimately supporting young people to improve their employability and enter employment.

The Scottish Government has been supporting young people into work and strengthening employment opportunities by promoting education and training since 2007 (Scottish Government 2012a). Policies are framed around concerns of skills development and enabling young people to sustain economical activity, as stated in one of the government's document:

'The national performance indicator on school leaver destinations, and our skills strategy, *Skills for Scotland: A Lifelong Skills Strategy*, both reflect the Scottish Government's wish that all young people stay in learning after 16 since this is the best way of improving their long-term employability' (Scottish Government 2010a: 4)

The "Opportunities for All" policy was introduced in 2011 amidst growing concerns of NEETs. "Opportunities for All" aimed to provide a "guarantee" that every young person aged 16-19 in Scotland was offered a place to participate in education, employment or training (Scottish Government 2011). The policy was implemented in

collaboration with various stakeholders including Skills Development Scotland, Jobcentre Plus and 32 Local Councils in Scotland (Scottish Government 2012b). This brought together national and local policy actors in a commitment to promote youth participation and productivity, which was considered as conducive to overall economic development in Scotland.

Other recent programmes such as the “Youth Employment Scotland Fund” were introduced to stimulate financial incentives for youth recruitment and to make it easier for employers of small and medium businesses to employ young people (Employability in Scotland 2013). The “Modern Apprenticeship Programme” also aimed to provide alternative routes and opportunities for young people to increase their skills levels and become engaged in work. The “Skills for Work Programme” of the Scottish Qualifications Authority was a school-college collaborative initiative created to encourage young people to take up vocational training and enhance their employability (Adams 2012). This reflects that enabling entry to employment was considered as a paramount aim and “solution” in youth policy measures, particularly in relation to issues of NEET and poverty (Macdonald and Marsh 2001). The pre-dominant focus of NEET in the policy debates also reinforced an assumption that the objective and “benchmark” of youth participation in society was to succeed in the labour market and thus to make a positive contribution in economic activities (Lister et al. 2005; Smith et al. 2005; Mannion 2005). This viewpoint was supported by the labour market policies and discussions found in the UK-wide context. A recent government publication states that providing opportunities and equal life chances for the younger generation ‘mean[s] ensuring that all young people are in employment or education—either “earning or learning”’ (Work and Pensions Committee 2017: 3). The approach summarised by the crude phrase, “either earning or learning”, serves to underline that the policy developments and expectations on young people have been heavily economically-centred.

Responsibilities of the individual

Increased policy initiatives and rhetoric centred on employability reinforce a perception that specific groups of young people, especially school leavers and NEETs, are under-achieving in terms of skills and education. Rising youth unemployment is depicted as an issue of young people failing to acquire the necessary credentials and attributes to enter work in Scotland, not unlike the policy discussions in Hong Kong. Macdonald and Marsh (2001: 387-308) highlight that “youth unemployment is, therefore, a symptom of an ill-prepared workforce; the ‘fault’ of the young unemployed’.

Non-participation in employment and education is considered as an individual shortcoming and accounted by personal choice. Influences of external and structural processes on young people's life chances are obscured, and the "blame" is shifted largely to the individual (Barry 2005a). The "blame" on individuals is intensified in Scotland by controversies of generations of "worklessness", as older and younger generations in the same household are claimed to have been out of work and becoming dependent on welfare in the long-term, despite the lack of research evidence (Macdonald et al. 2013)

The emphasis on individual choice and responsibility is also reinforced by the focus on NEET. There are increased number of scholars who criticise that policy debates around NEET in Scotland. Yates and Payne (2006) challenge that the issue lies in how the term fundamentally describes young people by what they are *not*. The policy agenda is intensely fixed on addressing what young people are *not* doing, rather than what they do (Lister et al. 2005; Smith et al. 2005; Barry 2005b). It also diverts the perception of youth away from being based on who they are and what they think, and it is argued that:

'[There should be more] emphasis on giving "voice" to young people... [and] more than window-dressing in the face of the somewhat rigid expectations of government that young people will conform, and should be penalised if they do not. How much participation would be acceptable to policy makers? How far are they willing to listen to young people's own agendas?' (Jones and Bell 2000: 54).

NEET has become a blanket term and undermines the heterogeneity in the circumstances and experiences that young people face. Some studies have shown that young people who become NEET may be influenced by wide ranging factors and live with different conditions and challenges (McGregor et al. 2006). Young people can also become NEET for various reasons, and it can be a temporary state between work and education opportunities. NEET may be a short-term situation for many young people, especially for those who have just left school and are actively looking or waiting for forthcoming education, training or employment opportunities. For some, being NEET can be a positive and deliberate choice. Nudzor (2010) highlights that some young people in Scotland *choose* to be NEET for a period of time out of personal will—what she calls the "positive NEET group". Nudzor underlines that the "pro-creation" choice to have children and make time for parenthood is particularly important for young females who can be considered NEET. Similarly, some may choose to be NEET and

focus their time on caring responsibilities, such as for elderly family members, siblings and parents with disabilities. A small proportion of young people choose to undertake a “gap year” and use their time to travel abroad or volunteer for charitable organisations. Being NEET can therefore be a positive choice for some young people and has been largely ignored in the Scottish policy context (Scottish Executive 2006). Finlay and colleagues (2010) illustrate that there can be complex issues and risks in a young person’s life that keep young people in a state of NEET. Finlay and colleagues argue that some young people experience homelessness, being in care, being an (ex-)offender, exclusion from school, emotional and behavioural issues, physical and mental health issues that need to be addressed further before they are able to move on to employment or training on a long-term basis. Some may also be affected by low expectations about their future and struggle to sustain motivations to find work after leaving school (Mannion 2005). Framing youth policies around the concerns of NEET can therefore be problematic, and it is highlighted that:

‘...in order to provide appropriate support it is necessary to identify not just the symptoms of being unemployed and not in any form of education or training, but to gain an understanding the lives that these young people are living’ (Finlay et al. 2010: 852).

The framing of youth policies in Scotland around choices and employability can obscure the diverse circumstances and challenges that young people not in education or employment can experience. There are heightened expectations and pressures for young people to enter paid work, and their own motivations and other more deep-rooted socio-economic issues being under-addressed (Yates and Payne 2006). In addition, Yates and Payne highlight “weak family and other social networks” including friends and peer groups as a prominent risk factor for young people to become NEET. However, policies both in the UK and in Scotland show limited concern to address young people’s needs regarding social ties and interactions (Scottish Executive 2006; Social Exclusion Unit 1999). Like Hong Kong, the enhancement of young people’s skills through engagement in education and training became most important, and youth participation in labour market strongly promoted.

Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed the influences of history, culture, state and family traditions, and welfare provisions in young people’s lives in Hong Kong and Scotland.

There are different factors that shape the pressures and demands on young people's participation in society and how they are being "social". However, there are similar expectations centred on young people's participation in employment and education in both contexts. The chapter also contrasted the configurations of youth socialisations and how they are influenced by different historical developments and economic changes, particularly the increasingly competitive culture in Hong Kong and economic recession in Scotland. As will be illustrated in the following chapters, this has important implications on how young people perceive their opportunities and experiences in engaging in various social activities.

Hong Kong and Scotland also have notable differences in labour market conditions and how youth policies are framed, which provide an insightful backdrop to highlight the diverse experiences of "hidden" young people in this study. The policy discussions in Hong Kong have a stronger emphasis specifically on the issue of "hidden youth", in addition to focusing on employability and skills. Conversely, the Scottish context gives more attention to addressing social exclusion and NEET with underlying concerns on poverty and economic marginalisation. The youth policies and services in Scotland are not framed in any way by the concept and concerns of "hidden youth", unlike in Hong Kong. The remaining chapters of the thesis seek to address this and focus on exploring the experiences of "hidden" young people in both contexts. The conclusion will return to consider the implications and gaps in the policy debates emerged from this study.

Chapter V — ‘What Future Do I Have?’: Exploring “Hidden” Young People’s Participation in the Labour Market and Education

The previous chapter outlined and reflected on the strategies devised in this research to study “hidden” young people and their experiences of “being social”. This chapter turns to discuss the findings of the empirical study conducted. The focus of this chapter is on young people’s participation in society in terms of being engaged in work and education. This draws attention to this study’s analysis of the participants’ construction of connectedness, particularly through engagements in long-standing macro structures in society (Stone 1995). According to Mead (1934), these dimensions of “being social” in the physical world are crucial to one’s sense of connectedness.

This will be explored in three different themes identified: i) the variations in young people’s disengagements from work and education; ii) how the participants’ opportunities of participating in these areas were limited by structural barriers in contemporary societies, and; iii) how the participants felt a sense of hopelessness and feeling demotivated to engage in these aspects of “being social”. Hence, the following sections aim to highlight the heterogeneity which could be involved in describing “hidden” young people and their engagements in the “social”. The nuanced perspectives provided by the participants also articulated that the themes identified were connected to each other, although presented separately in this thesis for clarity.

Variation in Young People’s Disengagements from the Labour Market and Education

The participants’ participation in work or education varied considerably. While all participants in Hong Kong and Scotland could be broadly considered as disengaging from work and from continuing education on the one hand. The interviews also revealed that the degrees of their disengagements should be described and interpreted differently. This variability was observable among participants across, as well as within, the two contexts studied. Hence, the following discussion aims to elicit how “hidden” young people’s sense of connectedness could pertain to differing descriptions.

Varied Experiences in Hong Kong

Specifically, the interviews revealed that the young people had heterogeneous levels and experiences of participating in the labour market. In the context of Hong Kong, none of the participants appeared to have engaged in work regularly. All participants were not in full-time employment at the time of the interview. Nonetheless, three out of the 12 participants were engaged in casual and relief work. The participants similarly described their work patterns as “ad-hoc” and that they were not working more than one day a week on average. Such accounts also included one young person who was still attending school as a full-time student. He described that he took up relief work in a restaurant and occasionally worked after-school and weekends.

In addition, only one participant in Hong Kong described previous experiences of participating in the labour market. After leaving school four years ago at the time she was interviewed, she worked in two short-term employments on a temporary basis. While both jobs were full-time, each only lasted briefly for no more than three months. She expressed that she was otherwise confining herself in the bedroom and being disconnected from the labour market and other forms of education in the rest of the four years. Therefore, the findings highlighted that all participants in Hong Kong appeared to show low levels of social connectedness, particularly concerning how they participated in society in terms of joining the workforce. Nonetheless, it was also illustrated that the levels they were disengaged from this dimension of the “social” could widely vary.

The diversity of their experience was continued, if not more clearly, observed in their engagements in education. The accounts from the participants shed an important light on the nuances and range of experiences of how the young people came to be disconnected from school. While five out of 12 participants in Hong Kong left secondary school with no qualifications, four young people described experiences of discontinuing from school before reaching Secondary 3 (not completing lower-secondary level of education). In Hong Kong, Secondary 1-3 (S1-3) constitute the lower-secondary level and Secondary 4-6 (S4-6) constitute the upper-secondary level of school education. The lower-secondary level is required to be achieved in statutory compulsory education and it is normally completed at the age of 15. Nonetheless, four participants similarly articulated experiences of beginning to be non-attending school at an early age initially, and subsequently left or became excluded from school before reaching S3. One participant in particular explained she stopped attending school as early as the age of 13, after only finishing S1.

Having left secondary education early, particularly not completing the lower-secondary level, the participants conveyed it was very difficult, or described as “not possible” by one participant, to go into further education. Therefore, all participants who had left school early felt they could not continue in education nor go back to school, thereby felt strongly disconnected from this dimension of the “social”.

At the same time, other research participants in Hong Kong also expressed feelings of being disengaged from continuing in education. The findings revealed that they had a different set of experiences to the former subgroup of participants. Two participants had completed secondary education and had left school for approximately three months. Both participants sat all the required exams at the end of their S6 to acquire the Hong Kong Diploma for Secondary Education (HKDSE). Attainment of the HKDSE qualification is normally the minimum entry requirement to progress to higher education and further education institutions. At the time of the interviews, the participants were waiting to hear about their results. However, one participant in particular expressed she had not performed well academically and would not be able to achieve the passing grades to attain the HKDSE qualification. Hence, she described she also felt disconnected from continuing education (such as going into higher education or further education programmes). The findings emphasised further that there appeared to be differences in how the young people could feel disconnected from “being social” in terms of being in education.

Another way that the participants could feel disconnected from continuing in education was highlighted by accounts from participants who were in school. Five of the 12 participants in Hong Kong had stayed in school and made the decision to continue their pursuit to complete secondary education. Although they did not discontinue from going to school (unlike other participants), it was shown in the interviews that they could also be disengaged from staying in education to a lesser extent. More specifically, all five participants in school expressed concerns about their academic performances. They described similar experiences of having low performances and hence worried they would not be able to progress to higher education. One participant in particular articulated concerns about having worsening performances in subjects such as English and mathematics, which passing would be essential to be able to stay in education after secondary school in this context.

Several participants also talked about not feeling able to keep up in school, as the level of difficulty of their studies increased as they progressed. Thus, the participants

expressed that it was not uncommon they would have minimal interactions and not pay attention in class although being in school. Also, they articulated experiences of feeling disinclined to engage in revision and homework from school. In this way, it was possible that the participants could feel disconnected from participation in school and education.

Varied Experiences in Scotland

Similarly, a range of experiences in relation to the participants' engagements in the labour market and education were also found in the interview accounts in Scotland. It was highlighted that none of the participants in Scotland were engaged in the workforce, and they did not have any form of employment at the time when they were interviewed. Only two out of 20 participants had experiences of working and being a part of the labour market previously. One young person had worked part-time when he was in school, and subsequently stayed in the job full-time for two months after leaving school. Nonetheless, he had been out of work for six months when he was interviewed. Although another participant worked in a temporary seasonal job over holiday time in the past, she had otherwise been disengaged from the labour market and education since leaving school for two years. This demonstrated the differences in the participants' levels of disengagements from being in work.

The findings also revealed that 15 out of 20 participants were no longer involved in formal school education. Moreover, 14 participants discontinued from being in school and left school with low qualifications soon after they turned 16 years old. Unlike Hong Kong, the statutory compulsory education in Scotland depends on the pupils' age instead of the level of education reached. 16 is the age when young people in Scotland could choose to leave school. They would normally be in third or fourth year of high school, depending on the age they started schooling.

In this study, 10 young people left school in fourth year as soon as they turned 16 with some Standard Grades qualifications. A number of participants, especially those who had left school later in fifth year, achieved Standard Grades qualification in more subjects than others. This again reflected the variations of disengagement from education among the participants in this research.

The former Standard Grades exams, equivalent to the National 4 and 5 in the current Scottish Qualifications Certificate qualification system, are one of the national formal qualifications in Scotland for young people aged 14 to 16-year-olds. Scotland

also provides the Scottish Higher qualifications, which constitute one of the essential entry requirements for young people to enter higher education. The Scottish Higher exams are normally taken in fifth or sixth year in high school. Nonetheless, none of the participants attained the Scottish Highers qualifications. Only one participant in Scotland continued to go onto sixth year before leaving school, and the young person also only obtained Standard Grades qualifications. Therefore, all participants who had left school consistently described that they would not be continuing to progress into higher education. In addition, all but one participants expressed they were disinclined to continue in formal education such as going to further education colleges.

Conversely, given that this group of participants were interacting and participating in the Local Council's Activity Agreement, the 15 participants who had left school appeared to be more open to consider engaging in skills training. The Activity Agreement is provided by all 32 Local Councils in Scotland for young people aged 16 to 19 who were disconnected from formal education. It offers an individually-tailored programme of learning and development based on the young person's needs and interests. Moreover, the levels of engagements in the programme, unlike school and further education, are adaptable according to the readiness and willingness of the young person to participate in society. Initially, at level 1 of the programme, the research participants could be required to only engage in skills training sessions or meetings with an advisor in Local Councils for zero to one day a week. The level of engagement could then be increased when the young person feels ready and agrees with the Council to do so. They could progress to level 2 or 3 of the programme, and hence could be required to attend the programme for four days a week.

The findings were indicative of the underlying nuanced picture of how "hidden" young people were disengaged from work and education. Their connectedness was found to be pertinent to a range of varying descriptions of they participated in the labour market and education.

A quarter of the participants in this research were engaged in level 1 of Activity Agreement. It was highlighted that they were engaging in social participation for only zero to one day every week. Whereas 10 of the participants were in level 3 of the Activity Agreement programme. In recognising the different stages within the programme at which this group of participants were at, the continuing theme of low levels of "being social" and participation were still observed throughout. Two young people in the study were receiving training through work placement in Local Councils.

They learned by being in a workplace as a trainee and received guidance and mentoring in the process. In contrast, eight participants appeared to be engaging in a wide variety of skills training courses. It was shown that they were undertaking training in one or more of the following skills, ranging from welding, to woodwork, joinery, cooking, motorbike mechanics and forestry. Nonetheless, all participants in level 3 Activity Agreement also similarly articulated that they were only engaged in this for no more than half of the week. While they attended skills training sessions for four days, they could also be largely confining themselves in the bedroom for the rest of the week and not have other forms of physical interactions.

Furthermore, the accounts from participants who were in school enlightened the varying degrees that the participants were disengaged further. Only four participants in Scotland had remained in formal education and were full-time high school students. Nonetheless, the interview accounts revealed that they could also feel disconnected from education, but to a lesser extent in comparison to other participants. Instead of going to formal classes in school, they attended skills training sessions in Local Councils one day a week. The participants similarly explained they were recommended by school teachers to undertake skills training because they had poor academic performance in school, thereby were considered unlikely to be able to continue progressing in formal education. In this way, participants who were in school could also be considered as gradually disengaging from school and education.

In addition, one participant in the research was still officially enrolled in school, but had been non-attending school for more than a year at the time of the interview. The participant described becoming disengaged from schooling at the age of 14, after he finished 3rd year of high school and obtained a few Standard Grades qualifications. He also expressed that he did not plan to continue with education and had been confining himself in the bedroom since he stopped going to school. His plan was to leave school as soon as he turned 16.

Therefore, the findings in Scotland supported the argument that the participants could appear to be disconnecting from “being social” in terms of continuing in education, thereby exhibiting low levels of connectedness. Nonetheless, it was revealed that they could also be disengaged from work and education differently. The differences found are exhibited in table 5.1.

Table 5.1 - Distribution of Participants by Disengagement from Education in Scotland

Skills Training (4 days a week)	Skills Training via Work Placement (4 days a week)	Skills Training (0-1 day a week)	Attending School and Training (4 days in school and 1 day in Local Council's training)	Non-Attending School
8	2	5	4	1

In summary, this section highlighted that diverse experiences were found in this study. “Hidden” young people could be disengaged from the “social”, particularly from the labour market and education, to different degrees. The understandings of their connectedness could thus be described by varying levels of disengagements also. This variability was most clearly demonstrated in how the participants were dissociated from continuing in education. The heterogeneity of experiences and levels of disengagement from education of the Hong Kong and Scottish participants are summarised below in table 5.2 and table 5.3.

Table 5.2 - Distribution of Participants by Education and Qualifications Reached in Hong Kong

Left School with No Qualifications (during lower-secondary level)	Left School with No Qualifications (during upper-secondary level)	Left School with Low Qualifications (after HKDSE)	Continued in School
4	1	2	5

Table 5.3 - Distribution of Participants by Education and Qualifications Reached in Scotland

Left School with Low Qualifications (fourth year with some Standard Grades)	Left School with Low Qualifications (fifth or sixth year with more Standard Grades)	Non-Attending School	Continued in School
10	5	1	4

Importantly, the findings demonstrated the potential diversity in which "hidden" young people participate in society in terms of joining the labour market and continuing in education. This diversity includes one's level of educational attainment and also the frequency of participation in skills training or employment opportunities.

Lack of Opportunities in Social Participation

Another aspect of how the participants described their connectedness was the emphasis they placed on lack of opportunities to participate in the workforce and education. All participants in Hong Kong and Scotland similarly suggested that their engagements in these dimensions of “being social” were restricted due to their low skills and low qualifications. Nonetheless, the participants also articulated differences in how they interpreted and understood their opportunities of participation.

This appeared especially remarkable in the participants’ experiences regarding their perceptions and past attempts of finding work. The accounts were helpful in explaining how the participants appeared to be disengaged from society such as being an active member of the labour market. Thus, the following discussion concentrates on describing several young people’s perspectives which were typical of the participants’ accounts. They highlight barriers of joining the workforce and how this could affect young people’s social engagements. Furthermore, the discussion also aims to consider how perceived restrictions of opportunities and barriers imposed by the structural environment in contemporary society may affect the young people’s social participation.

Opportunities Limited by Having Low Skills

The findings revealed that the participants’ job opportunities were restricted. In Scotland, the participants’ common characteristics of having low skills, especially for those who had left school early, were emphasised as imposing a significant barrier for joining the labour market. The following perspective provided by one participant from Scotland, Alan, serves a typical example of how the participants’ opportunities of engaging in the workforce could be limited because of having low skills.

Alan had continued in education for the longest period of time compared to other participants in Scotland, and he was the only participant who had reached sixth year in high school. His journey of not being able to join the workforce after leaving school therefore appeared to be particularly striking and illuminating in the analysis.

Alan was an 18-year-old male who had left school for six months when he was interviewed. He expressed he found it very difficult to enter the labour market and seek employment since he had left school. The following quotation exemplified how he had articulated experiences of finding limited opportunities in the labour market:

Alan: 'I find it stressful trying to find work...But trying to find a job is a lot harder. I went to a couple of interviews. I have been told that I am good at interviews, but they just felt that someone else they interviewed was just that bit better than me. So they gave him the apprenticeship...cos' they also ask me if you've got any customer experience, I say no. That's usually an end of an interview.'

Alan felt unable to join the workforce due to his lack of skills after leaving school. Alan explained further he was often not able to succeed in getting jobs because of little work experiences he had. Thus, while he had made several attempts to engage in work, his attempts had all been unsuccessful.

It also appeared that the participants experience disadvantages in getting into the labour market. Alan was shown to be greatly aware that he could be seen as having low skills, although he had achieved several Standard Grades qualifications in school. He expressed this was the main reason of why he had decided to participate in the Activity Agreement after leaving school, in order to enhance his skills levels through training, and hence his chances of joining the workforce. At the time of the interview, Alan was in level 3 of Activity Agreement and he was acting as a skills trainee in a Local Council's office. Nonetheless, he remained concerned about his opportunities of becoming involved in the workforce. There was a sense of frustration expressed regarding the persistent disadvantages and barriers he was facing in getting into the labour market, particularly in relation to lacking in work experience and qualifications.

Overall, 18 out of 20 participants from Scotland had never been in any employment and had no work experiences. The participants' experience of non-participation in the labour market appeared to be typically shaped by persistent structural barrier imposed by leaving school early and having low skills. Thus, the ways the participants engaged in the "social" could indeed be constrained by having limited opportunities in contemporary labour market. The findings also reaffirmed that the young people could feel dissociated from being involved in the workforce.

The participants' feelings of their opportunities being limited in the labour market were also emphasised in relation to the context of the structural environment in Scotland. The majority of Scottish participants articulated holding a negative perception towards the strength of the local economy, and its effect on the labour market. This appeared to significantly shape how the participants interpreted their opportunities to

become an active member of the workforce in this context. The analysis showed over half of the participants reflected on their disengagement from work in close connection with references to the Scottish negative economic climate. In the words of the participants, it was repeatedly described that there had been large amount of 'job cuts' and there were 'not many jobs going'. This appropriately reflected the prevalent societal concerns on high rate of youth unemployment and unstable labour market conditions in Scotland at the time (Adams 2012). Moreover, it emphasised the participants could be seen as embedded in an environment which had been characterised by "austerity" and precariousness in the labour market, especially after Scotland suffered from a slow economic recovery from the Global Financial Crisis (Antonucci et al. 2014). Hence, the limited number of jobs available appeared to be a particularly significant concern and barrier to the participants' engagements in the labour market in this context. This also showed how the participants' opportunities of joining the workforce could be interpreted as restricted *vis-à-vis* the specific structural conditions in the environment they were situated.

The matter was also discussed by the Scottish participants in relation to the lack of *genuine* opportunities and limited access to the labour market that they experienced. Importantly, the findings revealed that this could have a significant influence on the participants' sociality in terms of becoming an active part of the workforce. It was emphasised that being able to engage in work according to their own aspirations was considered particularly important to the participants and how they were "being social".

This was supported by other scholars' contentions against existing common assumptions in regard to young people who appear to be disengaged from society and the labour market (such as Barry 2005a; Smith et al. 2005; Lister et al. 2005). It was reflected that the participants should not be presumed as lacking in aspirations, but could be lacking in *expectations* for genuine opportunities in the future (Finlay et al. 2010).

The accounts from the participants highlighted that the young people could have clear and attainable aspirations in relation to joining the workforce, in spite of showing low levels of connections and participation. For example, Alan had concrete aspirations and strong understandings of becoming involved in the gaming and information technology (IT) industries. He articulated he had a passion for joining the gaming industry, particularly as a game tester, since 5th year of high school. Nonetheless, he described he was also aware that the gaming industry in the United Kingdom, and

particularly in Scotland, was relatively small. Hence, he acknowledged it was not easy to find work in the sector, as the number of jobs available from the small number of firms could be limited. The findings thus illustrated how Alan had clear aspirations for what types of work he aimed to pursue. It also articulated the participant's aspirations could be vitally important in determining how they engaged in the labour market. According to Alan, his attempts to join the labour market had been strongly influenced by his interest and aspiration to work with computers. Following this direction, he explained he had been looking for work and apprenticeships in the IT sector for more than three months. However, his attempts had turned out to be ultimately unsuccessful, and he described:

Alan: 'I was wanting to do like an IT apprenticeship...Cos' one of my hobby is building computers as well...I was trying to see if I can get a job just building computers or something, like repairing them. There is like no jobs for that.'

The above quotation emphasised a crucial aspect of how the participants felt disconnected from joining the workforce and expressed low levels of engagement in the labour market in the context of Scotland. The structural conditions of a weak economy could be not only lowering the number of jobs available but also linked to restricting the participants' abilities to access jobs which could fulfil what they aspired to do. Instead, the participants found themselves being restricted to precarious jobs, which were low-skills, low-paid and could be unfulfilling, in an insecure labour market (McKnight 2002; Webster et al. 2004).

Alan's account continued to provide an illuminating account. It showed how the participants in Scotland appeared to perceive their opportunities of becoming engaged in work as being stifled. He explained:

Alan: 'It's just nothing for me that I like. Like people say to me, just apply for anything, doesn't really matter. But to me it *does*, cos' I want to do what *I* want to do, not what someone else wants me to do... Like someone will tell me there's a chippy hiring. It's like I *don't* want to work in the chippy, I don't like working with food.'

The above quotation underscored how young people could feel unable to access the types of jobs in the labour market which were fitting to their aspirations. On the contrary, the range of options and how they engaged in the labour market could be constrained, as this could be determined by what were available based on young

people's levels of skills. Thus, their access and engagements in the labour market could be restricted.

This also elicited further how having low skills could restrict access to genuine opportunities in the labour market in this context. It appeared to be possible Alan expressed low levels of social engagement within the workforce due to structural barriers limiting his opportunities and participation. The following quotation typifies such perspectives found in the participants' accounts:

Alan: '[I want a job that is] for what I want to do...Depends on how hard it does become...If it becomes too hard that I can't get a job in IT, I probably would just give up...I prefer to stay at home... It's just more relaxing to stay at home.'

Hence, the findings suggested that the participants could be disengaged from work due to persistent barriers imposed by structural conditions of the contemporary labour market, thereby displaying low levels of engagements in social participation.

It is also important to note that the participants' aspirations were not necessarily only pertinent to careers in high-skills sectors, such as the IT or gaming industries. Only three out of 20 participants talked about having aspirations in gaming-related professions or computer programming in Scotland. Other participants also described aspiring to work in sectors such as retail, childcare, nursery, being a skilled tradesman in welding, carpentry or joinery and also joining the army. Despite the diversity found in their aspirations, the participants similarly articulated having low skills was a significant barrier to how they engaged in work in various sectors. Thus, they expressed feelings that their opportunities to participate in the labour market were limited, and hence they felt unable to access jobs which were fulfilling to their aspirations.

Opportunities Limited by Having Low Qualifications

Another main way that the participants could feel their opportunities to engage in work had been restricted was by having low levels of qualifications. This was particularly clearly highlighted by participants in the context of Hong Kong. Although the number of jobs available were not necessarily the concern, as it was in Scotland, the participants in Hong Kong were found to be more worried about their abilities to compete with their counter-parts in the labour market. Compared to Scotland, Hong Kong had a stronger economy and youth unemployment had been consistently low, especially after a stronger economic growth after the Global Financial Crisis (Social Sciences Research Centre 2011; Commission on Poverty 2013). Nonetheless, the

structural conditions in the labour market in Hong Kong were dominated by a prevalent sense of competition in society (Peng and Wong 2010: 667-8). The rapid transition of Hong Kong into a knowledge-based economy heightened the level of competition, thereby privileged individuals with high qualifications in accessing and succeeding in the labour market (Lung 2012; Research and Library Services Division 2004). In this way, the participants in Hong Kong felt their opportunities to become involved in the labour market were limited because of having low qualifications in this context.

The following quotation from 17-year-old female, Kaman, from Hong Kong typifies how participants in Hong Kong found having low qualifications restricted the ways they engaged in the labour market:

Kaman: 'I haven't got any qualification, so what future do I have?... Because a lot of people with higher qualifications will compete against you, of course...Otherwise, why would so many people want to keep studying and get a good education...Nowadays, even for university [graduates], the only jobs they could get are like cleaning dishes! Or, cleaning the streets! Those kinds of jobs.'

This illustrated how Kaman perceived her opportunities to participate and become involved in work to strongly limited by her lack of qualifications compared to her counter-parts in the context of Hong Kong. Since Kaman had left school the earliest among all participants in Hong Kong, her account of having low qualification being a barrier to join the workforce appeared to be particularly striking. Kaman stopped attending school after only reaching Secondary 1 at the age of 13, and she had been unable to participate in the labour market and confining herself in the bedroom for almost five years at the time of the interview. She articulated that leaving school early had put her in a position where her opportunities were more limited than other people to succeed and engage in the labour market in the highly competitive environment of Hong Kong.

It was explained she could be seen as having significantly lower level of qualifications compared to other young people, and also lack in work experiences compared to the older generation in this context. Kaman illustrated her situation by giving a typical example of her attempt to get a job in a restaurant:

Kaman: 'My qualification is low...and I don't have much work experience... [so] it's like this for me: when someone was hiring for a person to work at the till...I went for it, and I said I have not worked at a till before, then they would

have to waste time to teach me how to do it! So why wouldn't they employ someone who has more previous experience!'

Hence, the quotation importantly underlined how the participants in Hong Kong felt a sense of lack of opportunities imposed by systematic barriers and competition. It reflected the barriers in the labour market could influence and restrict the ways of how they became disengaged in work in this context. It could also limit and reinforce the young people to exhibit a low level of connectedness and disconnect from society as a result.

Furthermore, the findings highlighted the participants in Hong Kong also felt being limited to precarious work as they pursued to become involved in the labour market. They articulated such type of work could be regarded as offering limited genuine opportunities and 'no one wants to do', as described by one participant in particular.

Five out of 12 participants in Hong Kong repeatedly used the term "back-breaking" (in Chinese, "辛苦", *sun fu*) specifically to describe their feelings about participating in the labour market and undertaking precarious, low-skilled employment. The term "back-breaking" is made up by two different Chinese characters at its root. The first character "辛" depicts the taste of hot or spicy literally. Whereas the second character, "苦", translates to the taste of bitterness. The two characters are combined to formulate the term which translates to mean "back-breaking" in the Chinese language. The term is most commonly used to depict something that requires an extraordinary amount of exertion and effort to do and is generally considered undesirable to be carried out. In the interviews, five participants similarly used the term to articulate the routine and demanding nature of the work opportunities they were limited to in their participation in the labour market.

The following account from Kakei, an 18-year-old female participant from Hong Kong, serves an illustrative example of how the participants appeared to find their opportunities to become engaged in work as limited and "back-breaking". She said:

Kakei: 'There are jobs out there, sure there are. But it just depends...whether there is anyone who would go and do them...It's like there are some jobs that could keep hiring and they still can't find anyone who wants to do it—like dish washing jobs. Even for me, I just wouldn't do it. Cos' it's just so "back-breaking"... It's not like the wage is particularly bad, but it just feels *really* "back-

breaking”, that’s all! [chuckle]...The work routine is “back-breaking”, and the work environment is not great either. Like imagine, you have to clean dishes in places that you don’t even know what it is! Like a back alley or something.’

Therefore, Kakei expressed she had been disconnected from the labour market and physically shutting herself in the bedroom for three months. Although she was one of the few participants who had finished secondary school education and sat the exams for the HKDSE qualification, she too felt she was unable to become engaged in work in a fulfilling way. She talked about aspirations of working in retail, and yet found herself facing limited opportunities and partial access to the labour market. In this way, it was revealed the young people could find their engagements in the labour market to be unfulfilling and un-meaningful.

It was consistently felt by the participants that they were left with precarious work in particular—instead of being in work that were fitting to their aspirations—thereby joining the labour market could be regarded as not offering *genuine* opportunities to them. This also reflected the participants could thus disengage from “being social” and from becoming involved in work. According to Kakei, she explained:

Kakei: ‘Of course I don’t want to work!...[Sigh] It’s like you are forced to do something that you don’t even want to...who on earth enjoys doing a “back-breaking” job!’

Kakei’s account represented a typical account of how the participants conveyed their sense of “being social” could also be shaped by experiences and perceptions of their opportunities in work and education. Importantly, the findings pointed towards a rich and nuanced understanding of how the young people engage in these aspects of the “social”. It also indicated the ways that “hidden youth” socialise could involve complex personal motivations as well as structural barriers in different contexts, as illustrated by the different contexts of Hong Kong and Scotland. The following section thus turns the focus to examine the participants’ levels of motivation to engage in the labour market and education. It reflects on how the participants could be considered as expressing diverse levels of disengagements further.

Feeling Demotivated to Engage in Work and Education

The findings revealed “hidden” young people could also feel demotivated and a sense of hopelessness towards social participation due to facing a lack of opportunities in the labour market. The account from 18-year-old Kakei continues to shed light on how the participants articulated feelings of hopelessness towards education and work in the context of Hong Kong. Kakei expressed:

Kakei: ‘It’s always going to be like that, like if you are smart and do well in school... of course, you are going to be better off in life...But like me, I am not smart, I didn’t do well in school, and pretty much suck at everything else I do. Of course, I am not going to do as well as they do!’

The quotation importantly underlined how the participants appeared to be highly pessimistic towards their life chances and prospects in society. In the interviews, all participants in Hong Kong articulated losing hope in their future, particularly regarding being a part of the workforce and education, especially in the greatly competitive environment of Hong Kong. Moreover, seven out of 12 Hong Kong participants reflected feeling apathetic and un-interested in thinking about their future in society. It was repeatedly described they felt there was ‘no use’ and ‘pointless’ to think about their dreams and future. Kakei in particular explained her expectations for her future were low:

Kakei: ‘[I will] just see how it goes...I don’t really have a plan for the future. I’ll just have to take every day as it comes.’

The phrase of ‘have to take every day as it comes’ was similarly used by several participants in Hong Kong. Importantly, it conveyed a recurrent sense of hopelessness shared by the participants, in which their future paths and goals in society could seem unclear and out of sight. Thus, young people could feel they did not have a positive future to look forward to. The feeling of hopelessness was revealed as an important aspect of the participants’ disengagements in terms of joining the labour market and continuing in education. The participants were demotivated to engage in such dimensions of the “social” as they felt hopeless towards their future due to lack of genuine opportunities and persistent structural barriers in macro social structures such as the labour market.

The participants feeling demotivated to be “social” also appeared as particularly striking in the context of Hong Kong because of its prevalent social norms and values underpinned by Confucianism. It has been emphasised that being actively involved in the labour market and education could be considered a moral obligation of an individual in Hong Kong's Confucian society (Yu 2008). Thus, dedication to engage in such forms of “being social” could be seen as a crucial aspect of an individual being “good” and being an active, contributing member of society. This is also believed to reinforce one of the fundamental principles of Confucianism, *ren* (in Chinese, “仁”), which means expressing benevolence and being responsible for not only oneself but also others in one’s behaviours (Fan 2010). One being engaged in key participation in society and carrying out the virtue of *ren* could hence be regarded as vitally important to the harmony and cohesion of the wider society (Qing 2011).

In this way, the participants feeling demotivated to join the labour market or continue in education were particularly conflicting with the prevalent social expectations in the context of Hong Kong. The following account from a female participant, Waiyan, provided a typical example of how tension could be apparent in regard to the participants’ disconnections from “being social” and the social expectations and norms dominant in Hong Kong.

Waiyan was 20 years old and had left school for more than four years at the time of the interview. She expressed she had felt being put under a large amount of pressure, especially from extended family members and older relatives, for being demotivated to engage with society after leaving school. She said:

Waiyan: ‘I just hated it when they kept hassling me about not having a job yet!...They just kept going on and on, for a really long time...that’s why I don’t like talking to adults about it...Cos’ every time they ask, the uncles and stuff, they are not just talking to me but like *lecturing* me about what I should be doing!...They just kept telling me about the principles I should be keeping to and stuff...[it’s] just like being challenged by a teacher really!’

Waiyan also talked about facing similar tension and pressures from her parents and elder sister at home but to a lesser extent. Therefore, Waiyan appeared to be highly aware that she disconnecting from participation in society which was considered as widely important particularly in the Confucian context of Hong Kong. Furthermore,

this emphasised that how Waiyan felt disengaged from the “social”, as she felt demotivated to participate in work and education in. Waiyan highlighting the following:

Waiyan: ‘If I don’t have to get a job, then of course, I don’t want to get one!...Cos’ to me, getting a job or not makes no difference. I will just be the same as how I am doing now...I am just not that bothered about all these stuff in the first place!...I just don’t really mind nor care whether I am working or not... I mean, what’s the point of thinking about it?...It’s not like everything is going to pan out the way I want anyway!...I’ll just take it as it comes.’

The above quotation articulated further how, for this participant, could feel demotivated to participate in society in Hong Kong. As expressed by Waiyan, she felt becoming involved in the workforce would not offer genuine opportunities for her life or future, despite this form of social participation being seen as highly important in society. This societal importance then increases the pressure felt by Waiyan due to comments from friends and family. Yet, interestingly, Waiyan continues to retain her perspective of a lack of meaningful opportunities.

Aspirations Being the Most Important Motivation

Waiyan’s experience of feeling the labour market could be unfulfilling for her aspirations was also important for other participants. Over two-thirds of the Scottish participants articulated feeling hopeless about their future in society. The interviews highlighted that young people could feel unable to fulfil their aspirations as their perception was of a limited number of jobs and opportunities available. Nonetheless, the fulfilment of aspirations was also consistently described by the participants as being of paramount importance to their motivations to engage with the “social” in regard to being a part of the workforce and education.

The following section returns to present the perspective provided by Scottish participant Alan, which opened this chapter in the beginning section. His account continued to serve an illustrative example of how aspirations could be seen as an important motivation for participants to be engaged in the labour market and education.

18-year-old Alan emphasised being able to find a fulfilling future where his aspirations could be met and grown was particularly important to how he was “being social”. Thus, his engagements in the “social” could also be determined by how meaningful and relevant they were to his aspirations. For example, Alan expressed being able to fulfil and reach his aspirations was the most important aspect which gave

him motivation to join the workforce. Otherwise, it was described he ‘won’t enjoy it’ and ‘sit around bored all the time’ if he had to do work which was un-meaningful and unfulfilling. This would make him feel demotivated and a sense of hopelessness as he found himself being restricted and unable to pursue his aspirations. Hence, the findings underlined the attainment of aspirations and having a fulfilling path could be considered the most crucial source of motivation. According to Alan, he said:

Alan: ‘I really don’t want to work with customers, unless it’s, you know, something that I am interested in...I am not interested in serving people chips really. But if maybe someone wants me to help them fix their computer, I will be fine with that...I want to be able to do something I like doing...I don’t really mind how much money I am earning.’

In here, Alan expressed being disinclined to engage in work which required high levels of customer interactions. He was concerned of other people’s judgements and opinions of him in such work environment, particularly in the way he looked and acted in front of customers. Nonetheless, if the work allowed him to pursue his aspirations, he was willing to compromise and engage in the work.

This illustrated how being able to fulfil their aspirations could be a highly significant motivation which determine how the participants engaged in the labour market and education. This was reflected by two-thirds majority of participants to engage with the “social” in terms of being involved in the labour market and education. Furthermore, it was emphasised at the end of Alan’s quotation that having an income and earning potential could be not necessarily an important source of motivation for the participants to become involved in work and engage in this aspect of the “social”. This was revealed to be true for several participants who were from non-low-income family backgrounds, but also for more than half of the participants who came from low-income families, as was the case of Alan. It showed although participants from low-income backgrounds appeared to have limited financial means, potential increases of incomes and financial resources could be considered by the participants as not essential to determine how they participated in the labour market and education. This also suggested the low-paid aspect of being limited to precarious work could be less significant than its low-skills and unfulfilling aspects in giving little motivation for the participants to become involved in work or progress in education.

Feeling a Sense of Hopelessness towards Being in Education

The interviews with research participants who were in school were similarly revealing in the analysis. It was shown that they could also feel a sense of hopelessness towards engaging in the “social” in terms of continuing in education and joining the labour market in the future. In particular, the participants articulated feeling hopeless and demotivated to continue to advance to higher or further education because of having poor academic performances.

For example, 18-year-old male participant from Hong Kong, Hoyin, had completed compulsory education and stayed in formal schooling to progress to Secondary 4. In here, it was interesting to note Hoyin was only able to start Secondary 4 at a later age. He was slightly older than his peers who normally started upper-secondary education at the age 15 or 16, and began preparing for the HKDSE qualification exams for entry to universities. Nonetheless, his account gave important insights into how the participants could feel hopeless towards their future despite staying in school. Hoyin explained:

Hoyin: ‘If I can keep staying and progressing higher in education, it will really help me to find jobs and give me a better opportunity in life...[but] I am really worried that I can’t keep progressing, cos’ I am doing particularly poorly in English, and also in other subjects...If I want to continue [to higher education], I need to at least pass English.’

The quotation emphasised the Hoyin’s concerns in academic performances. This could also lead to negative perceptions of his prospects and future opportunities to engage in the workforce as well as continuing in education. Thus, he could feel demotivated to engage in school and began to disconnect from this aspect of “being social”. Moreover, how he continued to participate in education could shift accordingly and he could show low levels of connectedness while he was in in school. He described the following:

Hoyin: ‘[When I’m] in school, I normally just “zone out” during class...I am not so motivated to pay attention anymore, cos’ I just get bored...[and] I know other people are more capable to progress and compete in society than I do, cos’ I am not doing so well in school...I am definitely going to lose out to people who are performing so much better...plus, I am not really working hard anymore...So I just try not to think about the future, cos’ I don’t hope or expect anything for myself really.’

Hoyin's perspective provided an illuminating account of how the Hong Kong participants appeared to be disconnecting from socialising with people in school. This articulated how the young people expressed low levels of expectations and hopes for their future in education and the labour market, thereby reflected their weak engagements in these aspects of the "social". Furthermore, the findings revealed the heterogeneity of how disengaged they could feel in different dimensions of the "social" also.

The account from Gary, who was a 15 years old male participant from Scotland, similarly articulated how the participants who were in school in Scotland could be disconnected from education but to a more intense extent. Gary expressed he had become strongly demotivated to stay in education, and hence started to be non-attending school, for over a year at the time of the interview. He stopped attending school after 3rd year of high school as he felt remaining in formal education was no longer meaningful to him. Importantly, this articulated the participants could feel they would not have a positive future if they continued in education. The following quotation from Gary served a typical reflection in the participants' account:

Gary: 'I started getting really bored...[after] I've done my exams in third year...Then they told me about exams for 4th year...I just thought to myself there's no point of going back...I wouldn't be working towards anything. So then, I just left.'

This underlined Gary felt continuing in education would only offer little meaningful and genuine prospects in his future. All four participants in Scotland who were full-time school pupils and attended skills training for one day a week instead of school also expressed similar feelings about their future in formal education. Hence, the participants could be driven to feel demotivated to engage in school and education at large.

In Gary's example, he eventually lost motivation and stopped attending school, although he was still officially registered as part of school. Furthermore, Gary articulated feeling hopeless and dissociated towards engaging in education more broadly, thereby felt little motivation to engage in alternative routes of formal education. He said the following about the possibility of engaging in further education colleges:

Gary: 'I don't know [about] college...it's just basically getting up early again, and like all the education and that...basically...[education] is not really my kind of thing.'

Therefore, he was demotivated and felt a sense of hopelessness to participate in society in terms of being involved in education and the labour market. This also importantly elicited how young people could express low levels of connectedness in the macro social structures such as schools. In Gary's account, it was emphasised:

Gary: 'Since I left school, I have not done anything...Because like I'm young, right, people like me should be active and that. But... because I'm so lazy! I don't really see much stuff anymore. I don't hardly go out anymore!... I just sit in the dark and don't go out, nobody sees me anymore.'

Thus, the findings underlined the participants could be seen as disconnecting from being a part of the labour market and education. It was also shown that they could be regarded as expressing weak connectedness to these dimensions of "being social". The ways of how they engaged in society could be driven by the sense of hopelessness and being demotivated to engage due to the lack of opportunities influenced by structural barriers in contemporary macro structures, such as schools and the labour market.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has focused on understanding the participants' engagements in society in terms of being involved in the workforce and education. The discussion importantly revealed that there were variations in how disengaged the young people were in these dimensions of the "social". This was found within as well as across the sites studied. Moreover, this was especially reflected in the eclectic experiences of the participants' disengagements from education (including formal schooling and less formal skills training opportunities). Hence, the explanations of "hidden" young people's connectedness to the "social" involve a range of varying components and descriptions. It contests that the young people's experiences of engaging in the "social" could be more heterogeneous than previously assumed.

The participants' experiences also offered a nuanced account of how they come to be disengaged from work and education. This was emphasised with their perceptions of lack of opportunities to become involved in work and continue in education. It provided a useful extension to understand the young people's personal experiences of encountering structural barriers in contemporary labour market and education. The differences found in the contexts of Hong Kong and Scotland were also considered, particularly regarding the competitions and weak demands in the labour market respectively. This was found to affect the young people's motivations to participate in

work and education. The participants described a strong sense of hopelessness and feeling demotivated to engage in these dimensions of the “social”. There were enlightening accounts of how young people’s disengagements from work and education were influenced by their past experiences as well as perceptions of the future.

The focus so far has been placed on dimensions of “being social” which were associated with a sense of collectivity based on historical continuity and participation in macro structures of society (Stone 1995). The next chapter turns to discuss other dimensions of “being social” which were also highlighted as important to the participants’ sense of connectedness. This helped develop a more nuanced depiction of how “hidden” young people engage in the “social”, particularly through digital media inside the bedroom.

Chapter VI — ‘PC is So Much Better than Going Outside’: A Different Picture of “Hidden” Young People’s Engagements in Digital Interactions

The previous chapter considered the participants’ engagements in the labour market and education. It focused on highlighting the young people’s experiences of connectedness in these dimensions of the “social”. This chapter shifts the focus to explore the participants’ perceptions and experiences of “being social” through digital social structures.

New forms of interactions facilitated by technologies, as highlighted by digital sociological literature, were found to be also important to how “hidden” young people engage in the “social” (Jamieson 2013). The following discussion unpacks their experiences of socialising through digital media, particularly with friends, peer groups, and families. This thereby uncovers how the young people’s engagements in the “social” could be pertinent to more diverse, fluid and loosely-knit digital networks (Rainie and Wellman 2014). Furthermore, this chapter will reflect how the participants described contrasting aspects in their experiences of “being social”. It will be considered how they showed stronger levels of connectedness in digital forms of interactions than in physical social interactions and participation.

Understanding Digital Dimensions of “Being Social”

This section depicts in detail how the participants had interactions with others through digital means of socialising. The findings revealed that young people could feel a sense of connectedness by interacting with people through a range of digital media and technologies. Hence, this created new opportunities and expanded the ways that “hidden youth” may engage with the “social” while they were inside their bedrooms. Digital interactions could be important, and even dominant, in how they experience a sense of connectedness. This was especially found in the participants’ interactions with

communities such as friends and peer groups. The findings showed that 10 out of 12 participants in Hong Kong and 15 out of 20 participants in Scotland appeared to have higher levels of connectedness through digital media, as opposed to traditional interactions in person.

High Levels of Connectedness in Digital Social Interactions

One of the key ways that the participants were engaging in the “social” digitally was by connecting with people online. There were striking similarities found in how the participants in Hong Kong and Scotland talked about having digital interactions with friends and peers through various digital platforms, rather than interacting with them face-to-face in person.

The following account of 16-year-old male Yatchung from Hong Kong served as a typical example of how the participants describing using digital platforms, such as massively multi-player online (MMO) games, to connect and socialise with their friends and peers. Yatchung was a full-time student and one of the few participants in the research who had continued engaging in education. Hence, he had to go outside of his bedroom and be in physical social settings, such as school, more often compared to other participants. Nonetheless, he described he had limited interactions and communications with friends in person while they were at school.

Conversely, his group of friends had more frequent interactions with each other through digital social means. Yatchung expressed he spent at least a few hours at home every day interacting with his friends from school on MMO gaming platforms. He was always on his laptop PC while he was not at school, including after-school, weekends and school holidays. He articulated that he and his friends would rush home as soon as school finished so they could connect with each other and play online games together. Whilst on days with no school, they could interact with each other through MMO gaming platforms for over 10 to 12 hours a day. Yatchung explained he and a group of 10 friends from school had been regularly interacting with each other in this way for over three years. Hence, digital interactions could be an important way of how the participants interacted with others socially, even with people they saw regularly in person. Yatchung described interactions on MMO gaming platforms could thus be particularly dominant and significant to his social interactions with friends, and said:

Yatchung: ‘I rarely go [outside with my friends]...for me, I just like staying in my room and play online games really...[In the game], everyone is split into

teams, and two teams of five are up against each other, so you can play with four friends together in one team... We usually play against some opponent teams on the Internet... Just any people on the Internet.'

The quotation highlighted that although Yatchung spent most of his free time at home, he could be interacting with large groups of people and experience a strong sense of connectedness through engaging in MMO gaming platforms. The description of interactions on the MMO gaming platform, *League of Legends*, provided in Yatchung's quotation was also a particularly typical account of how participants interacted with people through digital media in the context of Hong Kong. Seven out of 10 Hong Kong participants who played online games also played the *League of Legends*.

This game was commonly referred to by the participants by its acronym "LL". It is a multi-player battle strategy online game, which is free-to-play. As in a typical MMO gaming platform, a large number of users are able to connect and interact with each other in the same gaming world simultaneously. The design of the game play of "LL" requires online users to be grouped in teams of five and play against each other in teams. In each round of a game, two teams would be engaged together as opponents in a battle. Moreover, the mix of people who constituted the teams could be changed in each round of game. Yatchung explained he normally formed teams with his group of friends from school, but he also sometimes formed teams with people he had met in the online gaming platforms whom he had never met face-to-face in person. Whereas the opposing team in a game could consist of any player who was online using the same gaming platform, therefore often unknown to the participant. In this way, Yatchung described he could be interacting with hundreds of people regularly every week through this digital gaming platform, with varying degrees of attachment to them. Nonetheless, the period of time he interacted with people who he had met online could also vary. One round of game normally lasted one hour according to the participants' accounts. Hence, they could interact with each other only for an hour, but they could also play multiple games together over a longer period of time. Yatchung explained he could also add other online users he liked playing with or he particularly got along with on a "friends list" in the MMO gaming platform. They could more easily find each other and form teams when they were online together again.

Therefore, this account highlighted that young people could have extensive and frequent interactions with large, diverse groups of people through digital networks. Moreover, this reflected that the participants could appear to have stronger digital social

interactions in contrast to their engagements in physical interactions. Digital dimensions of the “social” could indeed play an important role in how the participants connected with society while they were "hidden" inside their bedrooms.

The importance of voice communications

The use of voice communications through Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) software was also consistently described as a particularly important element of how the participants interacted with each other digitally. VoIP software, such as Skype which was commonly used by participants in Hong Kong and Scotland, and also Line and RC which were alternatives found in the context of Hong Kong, allowed participants to share multi-media content and communicate with various groups of people using voice audios, texts or videos over the Internet. The participants talked about using VoIP software either on their computers or smartphones as well. Hence, this importantly provided further understandings of the ways the participants could interact with people through digital interactions.

Yatchung's account continued to provide an enlightening example elucidating how VoIP software could be significant to the participants' connectedness and how they interacted with different groups of friends and peers using a range of technologies. He explained while he was occupied with interacting with people and operating MMO gaming platforms with his hands, he also frequently talked to other people in his team in the game through VoIP software Skype. They could thus be communicating with each other constantly with their voices using headsets or microphones and speakers while they were playing online games. Yatchung described he felt it was necessary to be talking and communicating with his teammates throughout the game. They had to talk about strategies in the game as a team, what to do and where to explore together in the gaming world, which opponent teams to pick for their battles and general happenings of the game. Hence, in addition to interacting with people in the MMO gaming platform itself, Yatchung could also use VoIP software to communicate and have group calls among five friends at the same time. In this way, Yatchung was able to interact and socialise with people continuously for a long period of time through multiple digital media. Voice communications could play a particularly significant role to facilitate and enhance their social interactions while young people were in the bedroom.

Conversely, seeing other people's faces could be seen as unimportant and unnecessary to the ways that the participants interacted with people through digital means. In the interview accounts, none of the participants in Hong Kong or Scotland

described using webcams to show their faces or see the faces of the counter-parts live while they interacted with people on digital platforms. Also, none of the participants exchanged pictures or videos of themselves with people who they had met online and had never met each other face-to-face. This articulated knowing what each other looked like could be seen as non-essential to how the participants developed their interactions and relationships with people digitally.

In addition, it appeared that seeing other people's facial expressions and non-verbal cues, such as body language, could be considered as not necessary to how the participants developed connectedness in digital forms of interactions (Walther 1992). As Walther's work illustrated, voice communications, as well as text-based communications alone, could also create strong levels of connections between people in digital platforms, especially when the interactions were sustained over a long period of time. Yatchung expressed using voice communications in digital interactions could incite a similar sense of sociality as having physical interactions with people in person. He explained:

Yatchung: 'there are one or two people [who I met online] I became better friends with, so we sometimes open voice chats to just have a conversation... The people are like anyone on the Internet, and it's just you can't see their faces. But we still talk about the same kind of stuff. To me, it's just the same as talking to my friends in school, we all talk about the same stuff anyway.'

Hence, it was highlighted that interactions in digital platforms could be considered by the participants as equally significant to other forms of face-to-face interactions in regards to their connectedness, especially with friends and peers. Seeing each other's faces and non-verbal cues were not necessarily considered as being enhancing to their connections with people. On the contrary, several participants expressed switching on their webcams could lead to significant slow-down of their Internet connection speed and negatively affect the functionality of other digital platforms they were interacting in. Therefore, seeing each other's faces could in fact be seen by the participants as a hindrance to their interactions. One participant in Scotland in particular described it could feel 'weird' to ask to see other people's faces on digital platforms. 17-year-old Michael explained:

Michael: 'It's not that I don't want them to see what I look like. It's just not really necessary. Like nobody really goes, "Oh, can I see your face?" That would

be really weird...if you go on cam, it's really just your face. And just looking at each other...So it's not really necessary, the point is just voices, and you don't really need to see each other. I mean, the only reason you see each other in "real life" is because you are actually there.'

In here, it was emphasised how seeing people's faces and non-verbal cues, such as face-to-face physical interactions, could be felt as unimportant by the participants' in relation to their sense of "being social". The quotation also reinforced that voice communications, particularly in digital interactions, could play a significant role to create a sense of connectedness for the participants. This finding therefore illuminated the importance of digital interactions in how "hidden" young people engaged in the "social".

Other forms of digital social interactions

There were additional important means that the participants socialised with others through digital media in addition to MMO gaming. The findings showed some of the participants could have digital interactions that were related to a range of interests and sub-cultures. In the site of Hong Kong in particular, four out of 12 participants described using Internet forums, chatrooms and websites that were dedicated to certain sub-cultures. They talked about being interested in one or more of the following sub-cultures which are particularly popular in Hong Kong: Japanese anime, Japanese and Korean pop music and Korean television programmes (Delwiche 2006; Yiu and Chan 2013). The four participants thus appeared to have frequent communications and exchanges of information related to the sub-cultures with other fans and followers on multiple digital platforms. The interview with Meifung from Hong Kong provided an account that exemplified how the participants talked about having digital interactions with other people who shared their interests in a sub-culture.

Meifung was a 16-year-old female who had left school early and been "hidden" in the bedroom for four years. She explained that when she stayed in the bedroom, she liked to play online games, watch Japanese anime, and in particular, talk to other fans of a Japanese pop girl-band she liked. Meifung thus had regular communications with other fans whom she met through online platforms, particularly on the Internet forums for the girl-band. The mode of interaction she had with them was characterised by posting and replying to text-based messages on the forums. Although they had not met each other in person, and not necessarily being geographically close to each other, they were brought together by their shared interests, facilitated by digital platforms. They

were able to interact with each other, particularly in sharing information, web-links, videos and pictures of the girl-band they liked. They were also able to each other about their interests in the girl-band broadly. Technologies had opened up opportunities for Meifung to continue and form deeper friendships with some:

Meifung: 'The kind of friends I have are people who are also fans of the girl-band. Just like me, they also don't go out of their homes very often, and like to talk to other people through the computer screen... We like to chat on Skype... We usually just talk about the online games stuff, anime, and more frequently, stuff about the girl-band we like... and they are people who I've never met before, and we also have no intentions to meet each other in "real life" at all.'

The quotation illustrated the importance and preference of digital interactions in how Meifung was "being social", in stark contrast to traditional physical means. Meifung's interactions in Internet forums and VoIP software were particularly important to how she formed and sustained friendships with peers. She first chatted with people through text-based communications in the Internet forums, then she progressed to having voice communications with whom she particularly got along with through VoIP software Skype. She described feeling more enabled to interact with people who she shared common interests with through digital platforms. In this way, she made seven close friends online and expressed that they were more inclined to interact with each other through digital interactions only.

Meifung's example thus also showed the participants could have contrasting levels of connectedness in digital interactions and physical interactions. Meifung explained the only close friends she had were friends she met and interacted with through digital media. She was not in touch with any of her old friends and peers from school, and had not wanted to continue her friendships with them since leaving school. Hence, she had hardly gone outside of her bedroom for four, and was one of the participants in this study who had the lowest levels of engagements in physical interactions with others in person. On the contrary, she appeared to have a higher level of connectedness in social interactions facilitated by technologies.

Other participants in both Hong Kong and Scotland also articulated that digital interactions were important to how they engaged in the "social", particularly with friends and peers. It appeared that the use of social media and instant-messaging

applications on smartphones, such as Facebook, Facebook Messenger, Instagram, Twitter, FaceTime, WhatsApp¹³, SnapChat and WeChat, were significant for their social interactions. Among the Scottish participants in particular, the use of Internet-enabled games consoles such as X-box and PlayStation 3, as opposed to online gaming platforms on PCs, appeared to be especially dominant in how the participants interacted with friends and peers. 9 participants in Scotland described having extensive interactions with people through X-box or PlayStation 3. How they interacted through the Internet-enabled game consoles worked similarly to a MMO gaming environment. They were able to interact by playing games with any users online, and also had voice communications with people through the console's in-built VoIP software, but to a more limited extent than an MMO game on PC. They were developing regular interactions with some people online by adding them to a "friend's list" on the console, and they could play games and chat together regularly. Furthermore, there was one participant in Scotland who described having interactions with hundreds of people through Internet forums dedicated to computer programming. He talked about being able to connect with people who also shared interests in programming from all over the world. In addition to communications in Internet forums, he also had voice communications through a VoIP software with 30 people who were part of the forum on a daily basis. Moreover, he had text-based communications—what the participants called "type chats"—with a further 200 people in a VoIP software regularly.

Such accounts therefore highlighted that when the participants talked about their daily lives in the bedroom, they expressed a sense of sociality instead of seclusion or solitary experiences. It was shown that their engagements in the "social" could also be shaped by interactions through digital technologies. They described many experiences of socialising and communicating with friends and peers regularly, despite them being physically confined in the bedroom. Thus, when digital interactions were taken into account, the social engagements of the participants appeared to be a more complex picture that could pertain to differing levels of interactions. In addition, their connections to others through solely digital means varied from one-off interactions with strangers to deeper friendships developed over time. Digital interactions could therefore

¹³ WhatsApp is an instant-messaging smartphone application that allows users to exchange multi-media content, such as text messages, images, videos and recorded audios to communicate with each other through the Internet.

dominate and play an important role in how the participants interacted with society as a whole.

Motivations of Engaging in Social Interactions through Technologies

The findings also revealed that the participants had multiple positive perceptions towards digital interactions. The following section focuses on exploring how the participants felt more motivated to interact with people through digital platforms. Five recurring themes were found in the participants' feelings towards such dimensions of the "social": digital interactions provide more excitement, variety, flexibility, convenience, and fluidity in socialising. The discussion thus aims to reflect on the participants' high levels of engagements in digital means of "being social". It highlights how young people felt about interacting with people through technologies.

Digital Interactions Provide Excitements

22 out of 32 participants consistently expressed that they were more inclined to interact with people through digital interactions than physical interactions in person. One of the primary motivations expressed to interact with people through technologies was that the participants found digital interactions more exciting and stimulating. The following quotations from Nathan gave an illuminating perspective of how the participants found intense excitement and hence felt more motivated to interact with people through digital means.

Nathan was a 17-year-old male from Scotland. He had left school in fourth year and been partaking in the Activity Agreement (Level 1) with the Local Council for over one year when he was interviewed. He had been attending skills training and meetings with youth workers for 0-1 day a week since leaving school. Nathan spent the remaining majority of his time at home, inside his bedroom. Nonetheless, while being inside, he was extensively engaged in digital social interactions. He described spending at least 12 hours a day playing MMO games on his PC with people online. He called the people he met in online gaming platforms as his "online friends", to distinguish from friends he met in what he called "real life", meaning face-to-face physical environments in person. He made this distinction because he particularly enjoyed interacting with his "online friends". Nathan also felt some of his friendships with "online friends" were much deeper and more genuine than those of friends in so-called "real life", such as from his old school. He articulated that the closest friends he had were all "online friends", and

one in particular, his “best friend”, he had hours of online voice communications with daily. They had been close friends for several years and only interacted with each other through digital media.

It was also emphasised that he found more excitement and stimulation when he interacted with “online friends”. He explained the virtual and simulated environments created in the digital world provided more pleasurable and thrilling experiences of social interaction than physical spaces:

Nathan: ‘To be honest, going outside can just be really boring. You go outside, you walk about, you are like wow, it’s sunny. It’s warm. I like this feel[ing] of the sun on [my] skin. But man! I could really be killing some space marines right now! [laugh].’

It was highlighted here how digital media could be more exciting because of the out-of-ordinary, imaginative and immersive settings for social interactions that technologies could create. His social world was thus no longer bounded by what or who was *physically* inside his bedroom. It was augmented with a wide variety of virtual environments, characters, creatures, stories, myths and legends, fantasies and adventures. Many of such experiences would not have been possible in physical environments, thereby reinforced the appeal of the digital world further:

Nathan: ‘It’s definitely a lot more exciting to play games. It takes you to some place that you can’t actually get to in “real life”. Like for instance, Super Mario. You can never jump down a sewage pipe and come out the top of another one, while you [are] not being covered in sewage in “real life”... It’s [also] a lot of things...things that you think would be good. It’s like, man! I really think that it would be cool to survive in a zombie apocalypse. You have got a zombie game! You never have to release zombies upon the world to find out how!’

In this way, digital technologies could create not only a very stimulating environment but also a very exciting way to socialise with people. Furthermore, it was particularly highlighted by Nathan that being able to interact with others from geographically near and afar could also be a novel and exciting experience.

He described how technologies broadened the scope of his connections with people, and his interactions were no longer limited to being with neighbourhood communities or people who he was geographically proximate and co-present with. He had novel opportunities to interact with people from many different parts of the world in

online platforms. This was particularly true in the context of Scotland, where English is the official language spoken. Nathan found speaking English was an advantage in interacting with people online because many people in online platforms usually spoke English with each other, regardless of the countries they were from and languages they spoke. In addition, Nathan described a strong sense of community bond and solidarity could be felt when having digital interactions, especially when interacting with a big group of people online. Through interacting in virtual environments and digitally simulated avatars, a strong sense of connection could be achieved (Schroeder 2010). This could make interacting with people through digital means more positively perceived than social interactions in the physical world. Nathan explained:

Nathan: ‘Once in a blue moon, you will find this really good team, which communicates really well, and it just makes playing in that game completely worth it! Because you have got this guy who takes charge, and it feels really badass...[because you are] charging into [a] battle or whatever. And all of you are following him, and like, argh! [laugh] Some guy who is a little too into the game is [also] cheering down his microphone as he charged on towards the enemy or whatever. Oh, it really just makes it—[it’s] just icing on the cake!...It feels a lot more like, I could be in this game rather than in “real life” right now.’

This quotation elicited how this participant felt more motivated to interact in digital spaces, rather than in so-called “real life” and traditional physical environments, because of the excitement and pleasure that digital interactions could offer. This also reflected, despite being physically confined in the space of their bedrooms and showing lower levels of connectedness in face-to-face interactions, the participants could have higher levels of connectedness through digital interactions. Importantly, the two contrasting aspects of their sociality could be interlinked, thereby depicted a more nuanced picture of their experiences of “being social”.

Nathan’s following quotation highlighted he could confine himself at home and disconnect from physical social interactions, because he felt more motivated to connect to digital social interactions and more pleasure could be found:

Nathan: ‘[If I am] leaving the house, I tend to play a lot less PC before I go out...Because if I start playing before I go out, I will just never get out...I just sort of start playing, [and] I will be like: PC is so much better than going outside. [laugh]’

Thus, motivations to socialise digitally could be an important indication of the participants' comparatively high levels of connectedness and "being social" through digital aspects of interactions.

It was also discussed in other ways by the participants in Hong Kong that they could be more motivated to interact through digital media from within the bedroom. They found physical interactions outside made them feel irritated and pressured. The account given by 16-year-old Meifung from Hong Kong continued to serve a typical example.

Meifung explained the climate in Hong Kong was part of the reason that made going outside and having face-to-face interactions with others in person to be unpleasant. Hong Kong has a sub-tropical climate, which meant the temperature could get particularly hot, especially as Hong Kong is one of the most densely populated cities in the world. Meifung highlighted how she felt demotivated to socialise with others in physical environments:

Meifung: 'I really prefer to stay at home more, because going outside is a huge hassle! There is a lot of people, it's really hot and really crowded...then it just gets super annoying...[and] I will get really irritated, and I'll just want to leave!...Also, going outside comes with a lot of troubles. I've gotta put make-up on, and then sort this and that out. I have got to wake up so much earlier as well, then it would mean I get much less sleep...[but] when I stay at home, I can still do the stuff I like!...Basically, I just don't want to go outside, so I stay at home. If I can choose, I'd definitely choose not to go out.'

It was clearly illustrated here how some physical spaces outside could be negatively perceived, notably as not worth the effort. The participant could therefore be more disinclined to have face-to-face interactions with people. Moreover, the quotation also importantly highlighted how some participants consider interacting with people in person and seeing each other's faces as a form of pressure in itself. This was articulated in Meifung's account that she had to think more about her appearance and looks when she was in face-to-face, physical forms of interactions with people. It made her feel concerned about other people's opinions of how she looked.

Another participant from Hong Kong, Kaipong, expanded on this aspect of feeling pressured in face-to-face social interactions with peers in particular. Kaipong was a 17-year-old male who stayed in school for upper-secondary education, and he was in

S4 at the time of the interview. He talked about how he observed a striking contrast of “being social” in physical and digital environments in his everyday interactions with friends from school. Although they saw each other at school in person, it was emphasised that he and his friends had much higher levels of connections in digital platforms, particularly through MMO gaming environments. They became considerably more engaging than how they behaved when they were in school. Kaipong explained interacting with each other through technologies helped them to feel less pressured and more at ease, because they did not have to see each other face-to-face:

Kaipong: ‘In “real life”, they are actually really shy and not that outgoing at all. It’s like they don’t really say anything. But when they start playing online games, they become really lively and excited.’

Kaipong’s account underlined the importance of digital interactions in how he interacted with others and hence influencing their connectedness with communities. It particularly revealed the differences of how young people interacted in physical and digital environments, as they could feel more motivated to interact with people through technological platforms. Kaipong described how a digital screen, such as one on a computer, represented an invisible “wall” between himself and those whom he interacted with. Nonetheless, the screen created a sense of safe distance that made him feel more relaxed rather than being a hindrance to the interaction. Digital forms of interactions could thus be perceived to impose less pressure than face-to-face interactions in person by the participants. Kaipong said:

Kaipong: ‘It’s just a computer screen more. But it adds a screen in front of you, and you don’t have to see the other person in “real”. It creates a sense that there is less pressure. Cos’ when you see the person in “real life”, you would feel nervous when you see them.’

Hence, socialising through digital means could be thought of as allowing a different form of interaction with people, without the pressure and concerns associated with traditional physical interactions. The participants could thus feel more motivated to engage in digital social interactions from inside their bedrooms, thereby appeared to have different experiences of connectedness in comparison of digital and physical environments.

Digital Interactions Provide Variety

Wide-ranging digital technologies were also seen by the participants as providing more variety in their social engagement, particularly with peers and friends. There was also a strong similarity found in the range of technologies that were used by the participants in Hong Kong and Scotland.

This ranged from devices such as desktop and laptop PCs, to smartphones, tablets, Internet-enabled game consoles, and also media such as online gaming platforms, VoIP software, instant-messaging services, live streaming video platforms, social media, Internet forums, chatrooms, and other various applications (“apps”). It thus underscored the variety of ways that participants could socialise digitally and connect with many different groups of people through technologies. Importantly, the most striking example was a more introspective form of sociality conveyed in digital environments (Papacharissi 2011). It involved higher degrees of self-reflection and self-expression, the voicing of thoughts and opinions to larger audiences, and observations and listening to other people. In this form of sociality, direct interactions and communications were not necessarily required.

For example, 16-year-old male Kaiho from Hong Kong described how using social media on his smartphone had opened up new opportunities of feeling connected to people and society outside whilst being in the confines of his bedroom. He had been staying at home for over three months after leaving school early a few years ago and having worked casually at the time he was interviewed. Although he rarely went outside to interact with people in person, he described looking at content uploaded by other people and uploading content himself onto social media as being highly important to his experiences of socialising with people. In particular, he used social media, such as Facebook and Instagram, every day to find updates on what his friends and peers were doing, how they were feeling, what they were thinking, and what they were interested in. Kaiho explained how reading the social media updates allowed him to feel in touch with his friends and to understand them more, without necessarily directly talking to them.

Similarly, he found writing status updates on Facebook and uploading photos to Instagram were very important to his experience of “being social”. It involved a sense of self-expression and reflection of his thoughts and feelings which could be directed to himself as well as shared with many different groups of people simultaneously. On Facebook, the content uploaded were typically visible to any one that he was connected

to and were “Facebook friends” with. On the contrary, on Instagram, the photos and text captions were shared and visible to all Instagram users, regardless of whether he knew them or not. Hence, Kaiho felt the contents he shared on social media could enable expressing himself and communicating his thoughts with multiple, loosely-knit digital social networks. The interaction through exchange of content online therefore did not have to be directed to a specific person nor a specific group of people, unlike traditional forms of face-to-face interactions.

It was also remarkable in Kaiho’s account that he was able to express himself and interacted with people through multi-media, including texts, photos, videos, emoji, web-links, and sometimes a combination of the above. Another distinctive feature of interactions in social media was getting “likes” on content uploaded and personal profiles being followed by other people. Kaiho talked about the importance of getting “likes” on Facebook and Instagram in particular, because it made him feel that what he shared was appreciated and acknowledged by other people. It also made the content shared being more meaningful because there was an exchange of feelings and responses with each other. It was important to Kaiho that what he felt was significant at a specific moment—whether it was an emotion, incident, interesting encounter or humour—was being communicated and recognised by other people through social media.

Thus, social interactions through digital means could provide alternative modes of interactions compared to physical face-to-face interactions. Digital interactions could pertain to different forms and patterns of socialising that were also important in shaping the participants’ experiences of connectedness to communities (Rainie and Wellman 2014). Introspective forms of digital interactions in particular appeared to be important to how the participants interacted with people and sustained social relationships. Moreover, it reflected on the range of possibilities of how the participants could be “social”, particularly through digital environments whilst being secluded within their bedrooms.

Digital Interactions Provide Convenience, Flexibility and Fluidity

Another important way that the participants could feel more motivated to engage in society digitally was how they found digital interactions more convenient and flexible. Yatchung’s account, which opened the chapter and appeared in the first section, continued to enlighten a typical view of how the participants perceived digital interactions as being able to provide more convenience and flexibility than face-to-face interactions in physical settings.

Yatchung from Hong Kong felt the main advantage of digital interaction was that it offered endless opportunities to connect and interact with a large number of people. He explained, through MMO gaming platforms, for example, he was able to interact with many people at any time he wanted. He felt he did not have to worry about needing to organise when and where to meet with people, and whether they were available or not, because he felt he could always find someone who was online. Unlike in physical interactions, digital media allowed Yatchung to connect with people in different locations and different time zones, thereby significantly extending the possibilities of when and whom he could interact with. Thus, digital interactions could be regarded as convenient, because as soon as the participants were connected online, they could instantly find a wide range of communities and diverse types of interactions to engage in. There was little restriction on geographical proximity, time, availability and little requirement of effort in planning to be able to interact with someone. Additionally, there was a large amount of flexibility in digital forms of social interactions. Yatchung articulated if someone he was interacting with suddenly became unavailable and went offline abruptly, he could easily find another person to fill in and continue the interaction. This meant he could engage in the same form of interaction and remain in the same social space constantly over a long period of time. Furthermore, the person he interacted with could be changed constantly and easily. Whereas in traditional forms of face-to-face interactions, if the counter-parts left the interaction, that would usually mark the end of the interaction at that point in time. Hence, Yatchung expressed he could exercise more control of when his interactions end in digital environments, and he could engage in social interactions for as long as he wanted. The start and end points of interactions could be flexible and could vary merely at the end of his finger-tips. This highlighted how the convenience and flexibility of digital social interactions could make a more appealing form of interaction, thereby made the participants feel more motivated to socialise in this way.

In addition, the participants found interactions in digital platforms to be more fluid and transient than interactions through face-to-face means. They described how digital interactions could be more ad-hoc and dynamic, especially because the groups of people they interacted with could be changing constantly (Rainie and Wellman 2014). They were not limited to interacting with the same, small group of people who were co-resident or co-present in their local community—or the “significant others” as Berger and Luckmann (1966) described. The participants could be interacting with diverse communities of people online, and interacting in different networks for different

purposes. Moreover, the interactions and relationships could be more temporary and sustained for only a short period of time.

For instance, 17-year-old Michael from Scotland gave an illuminating example of how he found digital interactions to be more fluid and ephemeral. In his interactions with people on an Internet forum dedicated to computer programming, he described he could be engaged in a thread of conversation on a specific topic with a group of people at a time, but their interactions and relationships could be ended there and then when the conversation finished. Their communications could be asynchronous as well, which meant their responses to each other were not necessarily instant. People could be posting and joining the conversation at different times. There was thus less expectation and commitment to sustain the interactions and relationships than interactions in local communities.

Michael articulated entering and exiting digital interactions could be more casual than face-to-face interactions in person (Schroder 2010). This made Michael feel that forming friendships and interactions with people through digital means could be easier:

Michael: 'The initial friendship step that you need to take is much easier when online. So like if you are in school, then you need to go up to someone, start talking to them, and it's really awkward at the start, before you get to actually know them. But, if we're just chatting [online], it's not really awkward...because you are not face-to-face with them...[and] like nothing matters about that conversation...So, it's basically just there and then what you talk about. So it's easier to get to know people and talk to them...If you don't like the people, you can just leave.'

This was importantly indicative of how Michael could feel more motivated to interact with people, especially friends and peers, through technologies.

In short, it was strongly felt by the participants that they were motivated to engage in digital forms of interactions than interactions through physical environments. The findings revealed that the participants found digital interactions more exciting, varying, convenient, flexible and fluid. It reflected on how the participants could express higher levels of connectedness and "being social" through digital interactions in comparison, and their patterns of sociality using digital media could also differ.

Perception of the Role of Digital Interactions

The following section discusses how the participants perceived the role of digital interactions in their engagements in the “social”. It was consistently shown that interactions through digital media were described as playing a “mediating” role in their sense of “being social” (Bennett and Robards 2014). The section hence reflects on the importance of digital interactions in “hidden” young people’s experiences of connections. It also considers how the links between different aspects of “being social” could be complex.

Mediating and Managing Social Interactions

The empirical accounts revealed that the participants felt more able to adapt how they socialise with different groups of people in digital interactions. It was emphasised that they could alter and control the ways that they interacted with different audiences through technological platforms more easily, thereby managing whom and how they had social interactions with. The following account from 18-year-old Kakei provides an example which epitomised how the participants saw digital interactions as enabling them to manage and mediate their social engagements, especially in terms of interactions with friends and peers.

Kakei was an 18-year-old female who had left school and been locking herself in the bedroom for three months when she was interviewed. Although she had stayed in school until completing S6, she articulated that she had started to become more inclined to interact with people in digital environments. This was especially the case since she started to play MMO games and developed strong friendships with several people she met online three years ago. Kakei also expressed that she gradually became more interested to spend time with friends she met online than friends she saw in person every day whilst at school. This feeling continued and grew even stronger after she had left school, and digital interactions played an important role in allowing her to manage her interactions with two different groups of friends.

Kakei expressed that she wanted to keep her distance from old friends from school, and wanted to have as few interactions with them as possible. Hence, she would only keep them on her “friends list” on MMO gaming platforms and occasionally played rounds of online games with them. She also talked about having brief phone conversations with a few of them on her smartphone, but she would not initiate a call to them nor would she want to see them in person. Kakei only wanted to maintain

minimal and infrequent interactions with them through digital means. On the contrary, she wanted to have more frequent and deeper interactions with friends she met online. She described talking to one of her closest friends she met online almost every day for hours, and sometimes the whole day from the moment she woke up until she went to bed. Moreover, the ways they interacted involved multiple digital media and environments. Kakei noted that she would talk to her closest friend using VoIP software Skype if they were playing online games together on a PC. Alternatively, they called each other through their smartphones sometimes if they were not playing a game.

Thus, Kakei account illustrates how digital interactions could be important to young people's sense of connectedness and important to how they managed their interactions with different social groups. Various technologies could be used to help the participants in adapting the levels and intimacy of their social interactions with different groups of people. It was also emphasised by the participants that they could exercise a higher level of individual autonomy and control in digital spaces. This contributed to how they could feel more motivated to interact with society through digital technologies as opposed to traditional physical means.

Digital interactions therefore could be suggested to play an important role of mediating the participants' interactions with society. Kakei described that interactions facilitated by technologies enabled her to feel more connected to people and society, despite being physically confined at home. Digital interactions helped to her to feel that she had companions while she was staying at home, and this could help her feel less lonely and secluded:

Kakei: 'Because I don't like being alone by myself...So when I am playing online games at home, I will also use Skype to chat with people... it doesn't matter whether we see each other's faces or not...I just want to be together with friends, especially when I get to chat with them online.'

Therefore, digital interactions could be considered as acting as a link to society for the participants while they stayed at home. Socialising through digital means could serve the purpose of being an intermediary of social interactions and reinforcing a sense of connectedness to various communities.

Another way that digital interactions could be seen as an intermediary of "being social" was that the interactions in digital platforms could be connected to initiating other interactions in physical environments. Rather than being separated from other

forms of social interactions, digital interactions were revealed to be perceived as interlinked with them.

In the empirical accounts of this study, digital interactions appeared to have complex connections with the participants' face-to-face forms of interactions with people. For instance, Kakei talked about initiating face-to-face interactions with people she met online. In addition to playing online games together on MMO gaming platforms almost every day, Kakei also occasionally met up with a few of the closest friends she had online in person. She said they liked to go to "Internet bars" together, normally from late evenings till dawn. They would play online games together when they met in person:

Kakei: 'We do occasional get out of our homes, but just to play online games together as well though. We go to an internet bar...then normally when we finish playing, we will get something to eat as well...then we go home and get some sleep...and then we play [online] together at home again!...But I usually just do this with 2 or 3 of the closest friends of mine! Otherwise, with the friends who I am not the closest with, I might as well just play online games [with them] at home...I won't want to meet them outside!'

The setting of "Internet bars" commonly features a large dark room filled with numerous high-specifications computers and fast Internet connection which were specifically optimised for online gaming, particularly in terms of its quality for graphics and speed. This draws interests from young people to visit, as they get opportunities to use high-end computers that could provide a better gaming experience than using general home-use PCs. It is also typical that most "Internet bar" customers would visit in late evenings, and each customer is charged at an hourly rate for using the computer facilities. Nonetheless, it is not uncommon for people to visit "Internet bars" alone, but some also go with groups of friends, and they could either engage in online games with each other or with various users online in MMO gaming platforms.

Kakei's account showed how interactions and relationships which had primarily taken place through online means could occasionally cross-over into face-to-face social interactions. Four participants from Hong Kong described similar experiences of going to "Internet bars" with friends to play online games together. It was demonstrated that how the participants socialise in digital interactions could be connected to their physical interactions. Nonetheless, it was strikingly highlighted here how interactions in different

social contexts could be intertwined in a complex relationship. The boundaries between digital and physical worlds were not always clear. Social interactions in “Internet bars” exemplified this complexity, as the participants went from interacting with people digitally, through to meeting up in person in physical spaces, and then immersing themselves into interactions through digital technologies again at the same time. Hence, interactions facilitated by technologies could be inextricably linked and integrated with their physical forms of social interactions.

Another example that the participants’ digital interactions were seen as inseparable from their interactions in physical environments was several accounts of romantic relationships. Only two participants in Hong Kong and two participants in Scotland were found to have boyfriends or girlfriends. Although this was not the focus of this study, and potentially influenced by this not being the focus, it was striking to find that the majority of participants did not talk about romantic ties being important to them or their sense of connectedness.

Kaman was a female from Hong Kong whose boyfriend was a person she met online. They met through Facebook and started to chat with each other through Facebook messages three years before when she was interviewed. They became “online friends” and had only interacted with each other through social media initially, but as their relationship grew and turned into a romantic relationship, they started to see each other face-to-face in person. Yet, Kaman described her interactions with her boyfriend in physical environments outside were dominated by going to “Internet bars” and playing online games. This sometimes not only involved her boyfriend but a few of his friends also. However, Kaman described her boyfriend was one of the few people she had regular face-to-face interactions with. In the day time, while her boyfriend went to work, Kaman would normally either be inside her bedroom or her boyfriend’s home playing online games with her “online friends” on a PC.

Kaman expressed she was more inclined to play online games inside either bedroom rather than going outside such as an “Internet bar”. This has led to some frictions in her relationship with her boyfriend. For example, they sometimes argued over whether to go out, and she was often late in meeting her boyfriend outside because she was playing online games and not wanting to leave her bedroom. Therefore, the links between digital and physical interactions could be complex. Digital interactions could act as an important link to young people’s interactions with society in various ways. Kaman’s account highlighted that digital interactions could be dominant and play

an important role in her social interactions and romantic relationships also. Other participants similarly described how digital interactions played a mediating role in their interactions with people. Their digital interactions were linked to their physical forms of social interactions in person also.

Risks Associated with Cross-Over of Digital and Face-to-Face Interactions

In the context of Scotland, the participants also described their digital and physical interactions together, rather than seeing the two forms of interactions as independent from each other. How the participants socialised with people in digital platforms also shaped how they socialise in physical environments. However, the connection here is considered to be a negative one. Cross-overs of interactions from digital into physical environments in particular were perceived differently than it was in Hong Kong. Seven participants in Scotland expressed they were cautious and reluctant to have face-to-face interactions with their “online friends”. It was revealed that there were more concerns about online safety and “risks” associated with digital interactions in the context of Scotland (Livingstone and Brake 2010).

The quotations from 17-year-old Nathan continued to illustrate how the participants perceived interactions with online communities in relation to physical interactions in person. Nathan articulated that he had a strong awareness of potential risks of meeting up with “online friends”. He felt particularly sceptical about other people’s dishonesty around their identities, as they could lie about who they were, how old they were or what intentions they had in the interactions. It was emphasised that no matter how long he had known people for, he would feel unsafe to meet with his “online friends” in person. He particularly described feeling cautious to have face-to-face interactions with people he met in MMO gaming platforms:

Nathan: ‘[I] don’t like to let that happen...Cos’ typically a lot of the people who are a player on the [game] server are between the ages of like 10 and maybe like 30. So, [it’s] not the best thing to organise a group meet up or whatever in “real life”.’

It was also highlighted that there could be a level of anonymity maintained in interactions in digital platforms. People did not necessarily have to know each other in the same way they did in traditional physical interactions. They could know nothing at all about each other and yet be interacting through a game or a conversation in an

Internet forum for example. Conversely, this could also be seen as a convenience and flexibility that digital forms of social interactions may offer, thereby making participants feel more motivated to interact in this way. Hence, there could be tensions in young people's motivations to socialise through technologies. From Nathan's point of view, he explained how he associated anonymity in digital interactions not only with risks but also a degree of freedom and flexibility:

Nathan: 'I guess I just enjoy the anonymity of playing online. Nobody sees your face, nobody knows you. You can talk trash to people...you can teach other people to play the game without them looking, without them knowing that you are you, or...judging you on whatever you are, whoever you are.'

Anonymity in digital interactions could therefore pertain to multiple motivations in Nathan's sense of "being social". It could limit his face-to-face interactions with online communities. On the other hand, anonymity allowed a more flexible way of socialising with people. Digital interactions could hence be seen in different lights and being linked to how he socialised with people in traditional physical environments, as digital media allowed a more anonymous way for him to connect with people and society.

This complicated account highlighted that digital interactions were seen as playing a "mediating" role in the participants' engagements in the "social". Digital interactions could also be complexly linked to other face-to-face social interactions in physical environments. Hence, it also reflected the underlying complexity of the participants' experiences of connectedness and "being social". There was evidence to suggest that their connectedness could be shaped by differing motivations and mutually-influencing forms of social interactions.

The Importance of Digital Interactions in Family Connections

In the final section, this chapter turns to illustrate the importance of digital dimensions of "being social" in the ways that participants experience a sense of connectedness. Having observed the participants' interactions with friends and peers through digital media, the following discussion uncovers that their connections with family members were contrasting in similar ways also.

The findings here were particularly interesting because all the participants were living together with their families at the time of the interviews. Thus, their contrasting

motivations in engaging in digital versus physical interactions with family members appeared as particularly striking, because they shared lives in the same physical social space every day. The discussion will unpack how the participants felt more motivated to interact with their families through digital means. Also, it aims to highlight the importance and dominance of digital forms of interactions in the participants' daily lives.

Interacting with Families through Digital Means

It was revealed that the participants could have higher levels of engagements with families through digital interactions. The interview of 17-year-old Hoilong from Hong Kong served to highlight how the participants talked about having deeper and a greater number of communications with family members through digital media (rather than face-to-face interactions in person).

Hoilong was a male from Hong Kong who lived together with both parents in a tenement building apartment rented by his parents. He expressed how digital forms of interactions had enabled him to develop deeper connections with his family. He found it easier to talk about deep and personal matters with them through digital interactions:

Hoilong: "Sometimes it feels like I don't know how to say it out loud, so I would rather send a text message [through smartphones] or private message [through social media]. Just cos' it's more indirect."

This showed that digital interactions could be important to the participants' interactions with families, while they could see and interact with each other in person every day. Hoilong explained digital interactions allowed him to express his emotions and feelings to his parents through other forms of media, such as texts, which he had found easier to do than talking to them face-to-face directly in person. In this way, Hoilong felt more motivated to interact with his family through digital communications. Moreover, having digital interactions in addition to face-to-face interactions appeared to have influenced Hoilong's relationships with his parents in a positive way. They could become closer and communicate otherwise concealed feelings with each other more easily.

To complement Hoilong's account of digital interactions with his parents, the following quotations from interview with his father, Szekiu, provided further details of how technologies were used and enhanced their interactions. Szekiu similarly articulated how he felt Hoilong was more willing to 'open up' and talk about personal feelings through digital forms of interactions. Szekiu hence adapted his parenting and

communications with his son Hoilong, and he made efforts to interact with Hoilong through digital interactions more, especially if the conversations were serious or emotional:

Szekiu: 'If it's about giving some parental guidance, or some stuff that is more emotional, then I'll probably use WhatsApp to say it... Cos' we write a lot more down in texts in WhatsApp, and he is gonna actually take his time to read it as well. But like if I say it to him [face-to-face directly], he is not really gonna sit there, and have a lot of patience to listen to me...actually, we are more used to just typing it now...So, like if he loses in a basketball match, then I'll probably type something to cheer him up.'

Thus, interactions with their families could change from the families' side also. It was shown in the quotation that Szekiu was actively interacting with Hoilong and expressing emotional support through digital media rather than face-to-face interactions in person. Thus, the use of digital interactions to communicate deep and personal feelings could be reciprocated by the parents also. This elicited how digital interactions could be important in the participants' interactions within families.

In addition, Szekiu found the use of social media provided a different, less direct form of interaction with his son Hoilong that was instrumental to their relationship. Szekiu was able to read about Hoilong's feelings and daily encounters that Hoilong had posted on social media, particularly Instagram, and the posts revealed important insights about Hoilong's personal life and thoughts. It helped Szekiu to understand his son Hoilong on a deeper level, and also gained understandings of emotions, incidents and thoughts that Hoilong did not talk to him about in person. Moreover, Szekiu expressed that it was also helpful to be able to read Hoilong's friends' responses to the social media posts, as their interactions could often shed more light on what had happened or what had triggered the emotions. Thus, social media could play an important role in Szekiu and Hoilong's interactions, Szekiu explained:

Szekiu: 'We usually know most of the things that he's happy about. But, if it's something that he's upset about, then we usually read about it through Instagram...some of his friends probably know. Cos' we can see his friends' replying on his posts, and we can see that they know what's going on. And actually, it's just us who don't know about it...So we sometimes, only sometimes, ask him about it. Otherwise, we just say something general like,

“we’re standing by you!”, or “keep going!”, and just give him a [general] reply like that and leave it.’

Digital interactions could thus be important for family connections in terms of helping to unveil self-reflections and emotions which could be difficult to be communicated or not communicated in physical face-to-face contexts. Digital interaction provided alternative forms of interactions that could enhance Hoilong’s and Szekiu’s communications and mutual understandings, although they lived in the same physical space and had other interactions with each other face-to-face in person. This also reflected a sense that young people could feel more motivated and showed stronger connections with their families through digital forms of interactions.

Furthermore, in Scotland in particular, the participants’ accounts highlighted that digital interactions could be important to not only family interactions that were personal and emotional, but also to the mundane day-to-day interactions. Five participants in Scotland described frequently interacting with family members they lived with through technologies. Also, the five participants all expressed feeling more motivated to interact with families through digital interactions than through face-to-face interactions. For example, 18-year-old male participant Alan lived together with his mother and three siblings in a house privately rented by his mother. Alan explained that he most often talked to his mother among all family members in the house. They regularly talked about housekeeping and household chores duties through social media, Facebook. He said:

Alan: ‘my mum...[and] my sisters [are] sometimes on that...it’s usually just easiest... Like maybe mum asks me to do something like help cleaning or something. I’ll message her say, “sure”, and she will usually ask me over Facebook.

This account illustrated how digital media dominated the participants’ connections and day-to-day interactions with their families. Moreover, it conveyed a sense of convenience and instant-ness that were perceived by the participants in regard to digital interactions with family members. Participants found it more convenient to interact with their families through digital media, while they were in their bedrooms and family members in different parts of the house. Importantly, the participants could see being in their bedrooms as being in a distinctive space divided from other parts of the house. The participants did not necessarily see the house as one, undivided social space.

Another example from a Scottish participant, Gary, articulated how the participants perceived their bedrooms. Gary was a 15-year-old male who lived with his mother, mother's partner and two younger sisters in a council housing. He had been non-attending school and been confining himself physically in the bedroom for more than a year at the time of the interview. Nonetheless, he described he had very few interactions with his family members whilst at home, because he was always inside his room. He gradually had less communication with the family while he was in his bedroom and they in different parts of the house or outside:

Gary: 'I see my mum...[but] cos' I've been in my room, I don't talk to her as much as I ought to...I hardly see my sisters, because they go to school...cos' I used to be like downstairs all the time... [But now,] nobody sees me anymore...in the last couple of days, I have been in my room, without playing PS3 or watching TV. I have been just sitting in the dark, texting my pals and that.'

It was shown here that the participants could have weak states of connectedness and minimal face-to-face interactions with their families although they lived together. The home was not necessarily one whole physical social space where all members of the household interacted together, it appeared to be divided into distinctive social spaces. As Gary described, as soon as he stopped going downstairs to the living room and only stayed in his own room, he could have very few day-to-day interactions with his family.

Conversely, it was shown in Gary's example that digital interactions could also be important to the participants' interactions with family members whom he did not live together with. Gary talked about interacting with his elder brother regularly through social media. His brother had moved out and found another house to live in six months before the time of the interview, and the house was only a short distance away, as it was on the same street as the family house. He explained his brother was the person he felt closest to in the family and had interactions with most frequently. Nonetheless, Gary described he did not see his brother in person often. Their communications were instead dominated by sending messages on Facebook to each other.

This showed another way that digital connections could have a significant importance on how the participants interacted with their families, particularly with family members who they were not living with. It thus reflected how digital environments could shape the participants' sense of engaging with the "social", and the

participants could feel more motivated to interact with family members through digital technologies than communicating with them directly in person at home. Also, Gary's and Alan's examples together highlighted how the participants had high levels of engagements through digital media with their families further. On the contrary, they could lack socialising with families through face-to-face forms of interactions.

Feeling less motivated to interact with families through face-to-face interactions

Another way that the participants felt less motivated to interact with family members in person was they did not have a close relationship with their families. This was a particularly striking observation in the context of Hong Kong, as 10 out of 12 participants described not having a close relationship with family members they lived with. Whereas 11 out of 20 participants in Scotland also described not having a close relationship with family members. Hence, this highlighted one of the reasons that the participants could have limited interactions with their families while they remained in the family home.

18-year-old Kakei in particular gave an illuminating account of how she described feeling 'indifferent' towards communicating with her parents face-to-face:

Kakei: 'I don't really talk to my parents that much. It's just sometimes they say stuff at me... Our relationship is not really totally that bad, but it's just not that good... Like I just feel rather indifferent about it, but I don't treat them particularly bad or anything... We live together, yes, but there's not much that I want to talk to them about.'

This account typified how the participants experience a weak sense of connection with people in their families. Kakei described her parents only talked to her sometimes about doing household chores or asking her to clean her room. She would also not choose to talk to her parents about deep and personal matters, and would rather keep personal matters to herself. It was interesting to note, like the majority of the participants, Kakei did not describe that she did not get along with her family. Indeed, only two out of 12 participants were revealed to have conflicts or regular arguments with family members they lived with. This articulated how the participants had minimal sense of connectedness with their families. Moreover, the interactions they had appeared to revolve around mundane and impersonal communications only, and the relationships they had were not close. In this way, the participants could feel less motivated to interact with their families face-to-face although they were physically in a home together.

The participants' expressions of feeling distant from their family members also appeared as particularly remarkable in the context of Hong Kong, because of its prevalent social values on family unity underpinned by Confucian principles. Central to all Confucian-based societies is the virtue of filial piety (“孝”, *xiao*, in Chinese). It promotes the importance of love of the family in one's social conduct. One's relationships with the family (especially the parent-child relationship) is considered as the most important social relationships to be developed in this context (Fan 2010). Furthermore, a Confucian society assumes moral obligations for an individual to love, obey, respect and care for their parents as a life-long duty as a son or daughter, and vice versa (Bell and Hahm 2003). This helped to elucidate further how the Hong Kong participants in this study lacked close relationships with their families, and that family interactions and connections were not considered the most important to be developed. It also demonstrated that young people could have weak connectedness with family members although they had social expectations to be in a close relationship. The participants could, nonetheless, feel low levels of motivations to interact with their families while living together.

The Importance of Other Forms of Interactions with Families

The findings enlightened another important aspect of the participants' connections with their families. It was shown that indirect, and often unspoken, interactions based on expressions of love and support could also be important to the ways the participants interacted with their families. Such interactions did not necessarily involve direct communications with each other, but was represented by the families' provision of housing for the participants.

All participants in the research in Hong Kong and Scotland indeed appeared to be receiving support from their families through staying in the family home. This section aims to discuss the participants' experiences of staying in the family homes, particular in regard to the emotions, negotiations and expectations involved, thereby underlines the importance of indirect forms of interactions in their connectedness to families.

Receiving family support in housing in Hong Kong

The interview accounts revealed that there could be differences in how the participants in Hong Kong and Scotland received support from their families through the provision of housing. In the context of Hong Kong, the participants had consistently high levels of expectations of intergenerational support from older family members. Housing was seen as a particularly important form of support provided by the family.

Continuing with the interview of 18-year-old Kakei from Hong Kong in the previous section, her account showed a typical perspective of how the participants received a sense of support and experience a sense of solidarity with families through their parents' provision of a home.

Kakei had left school and had not been in employment for three months when she was interviewed. As she had no sources of income, she could not afford to get her own housing. She described how she had to stay dependent on her family. She was able to continue to stay with her parents in an apartment privately rented by them in an old tenement building, despite her parents also having limited means. They lived in one of the poorest areas in Hong Kong, where rent was comparatively low. Both of her parents were also not in work, after her father suffered from an injury and had to stop working. The family was only living on a limited amount of savings they had. Thus, Kakei lived in poor socio-economic circumstances and her family had limited financial resources to be able to support her.

Nonetheless, Kakei was found to experience a sense of support from her parents, although her family had not much resources, especially financially. The family's provision of a home for her was crucial to her living. She therefore found the support in housing from her parents especially important. Kakei explained:

Kakei: 'They'll just have to keep taking care of me for now, right?...If I really can't find a job, they would still be okay with it. They would still have to provide for me, it's just gotta be like that.'

The high levels of expectations of provision expressed here also reflected the predominant Confucian values in intergenerational family support in Hong Kong. It was highlighted that the participants could hold strong expectations to receive support and depend on their families, as the family was seen as the most important and life-long source of support and care within Confucian principles of filial piety in Hong Kong (Peng and Wong 2010). Hence, it was not outwith the norms for young people to stay in their family homes and be dependent on their families for an extended period of time beyond childhood. There is a lifelong moral duty assumed on the parents to support and provide for their children in this context.

None of the participants in Hong Kong expressed feeling pressured from their families to become independent from them or to move out of the family home. Kakei talked about how family support became particularly important to her as she found

barriers in continuing her education as well as joining the labour market. As she struggled to find financial income to support herself, the provision and care provided by her parents could be a significant form of support and care.

In this, there was a different aspect of Kakei's interactions with her family being illustrated. There was an underlying expression of love through the provision of a home from the family. Moreover, although there was not necessarily any direct communications or conversations involved, the sense of support could be experienced by an unspoken interaction and sharing of material resources. Kakei described feeling a sense of family connection and solidarity in being able to depend on her parents and stay in her family home for as long as she needed, without any pressures or conditions from her family. In addition to provision of housing, the participants in Hong Kong also talked about receiving significant support from families in terms of food, clothing, and in some accounts, financial resources such as pocket money. This reinforced the finding that indirect interactions, particularly through providing support and care, could be important to the participants' connectedness with families.

Receiving family support in housing in Scotland

In the context of Scotland, there appeared to be more diverse experiences of receiving intergenerational support, particularly in provisions of housing, from parents. The participants were also shown to have more varied expectations of receiving support from their families compared to Hong Kong. Moreover, there were differing experiences in negotiations and emotions in regard to staying in the family home beyond childhood. In particular, the Scottish participants consistently described complex emotions in their experiences of being asked to pay a contribution—or what the participants called 'rent' or 'digs'—to their families for staying in the family home after they turned 16 or as soon as they left education.

12 out of 16 participants who were no longer in education were asked to pay 'rent' by their families to compensate for the family's provision of housing. The following discussion considers how family support could also be received but in a different way in the context of Scotland. To illustrate the variety of accounts described by the participants, three different accounts were chosen as examples to reflect the differences in the young people's experiences.

The first example 18-year-old male, Alan, who had completed high school and been looking for a job for six months. Also because of a lack of financial income, he was unable to afford to start a home of his own. He had to stay in his family home that was

privately rented by his mother. His mother worked part-time as a cleaner in a super market, and he had three sisters also living in the house. The family was struggling to make ends meet. Since leaving school, Alan was asked by his mother to start paying 'rent' to contribute to the running of the house. Alan explained the 'rent' was regarded as a compensation for the cost of his dependence on the family and the provision of a home since he was no longer in education.

There were expectations for him to become independent from the family after leaving school and being able to support himself financially without support from the family. Nonetheless, as he had found difficulties in finding work, he was only able to pay his mother a partial 'rent', out of the money he received from the Education Maintenance Allowance in Scotland for being in the Activity Agreement. He explained how he felt about wanting to pay 'rent' to his mother:

Alan: 'She wants me to pay her digs...[but] because I don't get that much from the training courses [in Activity Agreement], I can't pay all that she wants. Like she wants £50 a week, I can only give her £25 right now...I just do what I can...I want to give her more money, but I can't.'

The quotation also illustrated the expectations to pay 'rent' for receiving support from the family could be mutual. Alan agreed with his mother and wanted to pay a compensation to the family for her provision of a home. Moreover, it was interesting to note that neither his family nor himself had much financial resources, yet he still attempted to pay back his family as much as he could for receiving their support. It also appeared that there was room for negotiations in how much compensation was required and mutual understandings of each other's circumstances and positions were established.

In a similar way, 17-year-old Michael had also been receiving support from his family for housing for over 9 months. He too had left school and struggled to join the labour market since leaving school. He talked about wishes to live independently and have his own home, but with no financial means, he could not move out of his family home. He also described he would not be able to afford becoming independent from his family's support, such as by renting a place of his own, for 'quite a lot of years from now'. This was indicative of a sense of hopelessness from Michael towards becoming independent and not needing to depend on the family, especially for a home. Hence, intergenerational support from the family was especially important to his living also.

Coming from a middle-class family, Michael lived with his mother, mother's partner, two siblings and a sibling's partner in a privately owned house. Michael described his family lived well and were not under any financial pressures. However, although his family was financially able to allow him to depend on the family, he was asked by his family to either start paying 'rent' or move out. He said:

Michael: 'If I don't get a job, then my mum is gonna kick me out. So, then I'll have no house!...[but] if I get a job then I will be able to pay rent, [but] not give her a "rent" rent... I'll need to pay £15 a week just to live there.'

The interview showed how negotiations and emotions could intensify in receiving family support. Furthermore, this also suggested the 'rent' asked to be paid by the family for providing support in housing could be not necessarily because of financial concerns. The distinction made by Michael, which described the contribution to the family as not being a "'rent" rent', was particularly illuminating.

The compensation for receiving family's support and provision of a home could be not necessarily a financial transaction *per se*, unlike paying a formal rent in a housing rental or house-share context. In Michael's account, it was revealed that the notion of 'rent' for family support could be more emotionally-laden and mean more than a financial payment. He explained that the 'rent' was also about taking responsibilities and growing up from childhood. It was felt by being asked to pay a compensation for receiving provision and support from the family, he was encouraged by his family to become more independent and more like an adult.

Therefore, although there appeared to be higher tensions and more negotiations in Michael's experience, there were also underlying expressions of love, care and guidance in the way that he received family support in housing. The expectations of a 'rent' appeared to be a particularly important element of how guidance and support were expressed between the participants and their families. This also enlightened different ways compared to Hong Kong in how intergenerational support could be important to the participants' interactions with families.

The participants' accounts of receiving family support and provision in housing was more varied in Scotland than in Hong Kong. For example, the account of 17-year-old Nathan from Scotland alone provided differing perspectives of how family support was experienced from his mother and father. Nathan had left school and had no income for over a year at the time of the interview. A few months before he left school, his

father and mother separated and he lived together with his father initially. However, as soon as Nathan turned 16, his father kicked him out of the home and insisted on Nathan paying rent although he was still in school. Nathan then moved to live with his uncle for a few months while he was in school, and eventually moved in with his mother when his mother received her housing from the Local Council. At the time when Nathan moved into his mother's house, he was not in school. Nonetheless, his mother did not ask him to pay 'rent', unlike his father. Nathan explained:

Nathan: 'My dad was very much like the sort of person who is like, once you turn this age, I am gonna ask you for digs. You're gonna be paying towards electricity and internet and whatever. And my mum... She doesn't even take digs from me [for] staying past 16. Meanwhile, a lot of other parents would demand like a monthly rent or something, and I have offered to give her money for things, but she refuses to take any of it... So I have become to depend a lot on her being there and being able to support me.'

The quotation articulated his contrasting experiences in receiving family support from different parts of the family. It illustrated the variations in how he received support and provision from family members. The quotation also reinforced how he was aware of the norms around provisions of family support, especially in regard to expectations of paying 'rent' for staying in the family house passed childhood.

This was a common dilemma for the participants in Scotland as they struggled to enter the labour market or continue in education, and at the same time, had to depend on family support. Hence, there could be varying tensions and mixed emotions experienced by the participants in receiving provision of a home from their families.

This also importantly highlighted intergenerational support could play a vital role in the participants' connectedness and interactions with their families. It could appear to be an interaction based on care, mutual understanding and exchange of resources. Conversely, it could also be a highly emotional and intense interaction underpinned by negotiations and conflicts, particularly in the Scottish context.

Therefore, findings in Hong Kong and Scotland reflected the participants' engagements in interactions with families could be complex and diverse. The findings pointed towards suggesting that the young people could also interact with their family members in a less direct, communicative way. Their interactions could be unspoken and expressed in actions. Such forms of interactions were revealed to have an important

influence in shaping the participants' level of connectedness with members of their household.

Chapter Summary

This chapter showed a detailed analysis of the participants' engagements with friends, peer groups, families, and other social groups including online communities and digital networks. It importantly reflected how digital dimensions of the "social" could also be significant to the young people's sense of connectedness.

The findings elucidated how "hidden youth" in Hong Kong and Scotland felt more motivated to socialise with others through digital media in the bedroom. Digital environments were considered as offering more exciting, various, convenient, flexible and fluid forms interaction than face-to-face interactions. The role of digital interactions in how "hidden" young people engage with the "social" was also examined. Digital media and devices allowed the participants to *mediate* how they socialised in different contexts and with different social groups. Moreover, interactions through technologies and face-to-face means were suggested to be considered as interdependent. Describing the young people's connectedness could therefore be more complex than previously thought. This complexity was also observed in accounts of the participants' interactions with families in both contexts. There were tensions found in young people's motivations to engage in different dimensions of the "social". Hence, explanations of the young people's engagements with families and other communities should be more heterogeneous.

The next chapter will discuss the findings further, and bring empirical and theoretical insights gained from the chapter V together with this chapter. The connections of how the participants engaged in different aspects of "being social", and the interplay of differing motivations experienced by the participants, will be interpreted further. It will be shown how the findings offer a more nuanced perspective of "hidden" young people's engagements with the "social".

Chapter VII — Discussion

The findings showed that “hidden” young people in Hong Kong and Scotland display a heterogeneous pattern of socialising. The level of digital interactions of the majority of participants did not necessarily mirror their levels of physical and face-to-face interactions. Although they could be representing a minority experience in society at-large, it emphasises that making their experiences heard and understood even more important (Castells 2005). This study reveals that how they socialise could be characterised as being more asymmetrical and imbalanced than the majority of people in society (Castells 2001; Rainie and Wellman 2014). Digital means of socialising play a more predominant role in how “hidden” young people are “social”. They are significantly less likely to have face-to-face interactions with communities including friends, peer groups and families. Hence, there could be contrasts in their engagement with the “social” which had been previously under-researched. This should be addressed more fully when describing and analysing the sociality of “hidden youth”. Future research should also avoid reducing complexities in how the young people socialise and “being social”.

This chapter first illustrates how analysing the young people as “socially withdrawn” could be problematic. The variations of how they engage in the “social” are important to be considered. The chapter then discusses the divergence of the findings from the “social withdrawal” framework (Wong 2009b). It is highlighted that the fluidity of social connections in the digital age should also be taken into account (Papacharissi 2011). The third section turns to reflect on the concept and construction of the “social” in this context. It concludes by focusing on the tensions in young people’s motivations. The connections of their engagements in different dimensions of the “social” is discussed further.

The Heterogeneity of How “Hidden Youth” Engage in The Social

The findings suggest “hidden youth” should not necessarily be thought as a homogenous group. There could be diversity in their sense of “being social”. Chan and Lo (2014) distinguish the different levels of withdrawal, primarily based on the young people’s length of seclusion. This study echoes that thinking of their disengagement as being on a spectrum could be useful (Chan and Lo 2010; 2014). The young people are

also not necessarily disengaged from the same types of interactions nor to the same degree. However, the differences in their levels of loneliness and solitude are not only dependent on the length of seclusion. Other variations within the group are also observed and should be taken into account.

The participants reflected that they were not necessarily being reclusive nor self-secluded. 29 out of 32 participants did not describe themselves as being isolated, despite their *physically* confinement in their bedroom. The accounts of their everyday lives showed that they did not necessarily want to be alone and “cut-off” from society (Furlong 2008; Saito 1998). The majority of participants also did not show inclinations to reject interactions with people. Only one participant in each context self-identified as feeling reclusive and lonesome. This questions further the assumptions that “hidden youth” choose to live in solitude and withdraw from being social (Wong and Ying 2006). Conversely, how they interpreted and described their process of socialising involved illustrating a multiplicity of aspects; such aspects also shaped their sense of being “social” in varying ways. For example, two-thirds of participants gave differing perspectives of socialising with peers versus non-participation in the labour market. The more detailed analysis of such accounts will be returned to later in this chapter.

It does, however, suggest that “hidden” young people could *not* be reductively imagined as being socially isolated. Their engagements in the “social” should not be assumed as being lacking by the observation that they are not being outside of the bedroom. This challenges the concept of “hidden youth” as being “socially withdrawn” (Wong and Ying 2006). It does not fully capture and describe the multiplicity of how they socialise. The concept of their engagement in the “social” has to be approached and analysed as being more complex and nuanced (Baym 2010).

The study also found different degrees of young people’s disengagements from the labour market, education, families and communities such as friends and peer groups. Although the participants were “hidden” in the bedroom, there were variations in their levels of disconnections. Participants who had been “hidden” for longer in both sites (from 1-5 years) were more disengaged from the labour market and education. Nonetheless, this subgroup of participants also showed different degrees of “being social”. All but two of the participants were found to feel a strong sense of connectedness. Conversely, participants who had been “hidden” for less than a year could feel more strongly disconnected. Despite being disengaged from work and education to a lesser extent, they felt a stronger sense of loneliness and not being social.

This observation was particularly remarkable in the participants who were in school. Five participants from Hong Kong and four participants in Scotland were attending school full-time. Nonetheless, their sense of “being social” could also be limited. This raises questions about the process of socialising (Hall 1997; Stone 1995). Although the participants were present in social structures in the physical world more frequently (particularly education), they did not necessarily feel a stronger sense of collectivity and connectedness (Blumer 1986). The participants repeatedly described how they had limited direct communications and interactions with others in school. The young people thus feel a strong sense of isolation, despite being having stronger participation in education.

The individual differences found in this study make analysing the participants as “socially withdrawn” in a rigid, monolithic way particularly difficult (Teo 2010; Wong and Ying 2006). The heterogeneity in their sense of connectedness and how they engage with the “social” are important to be recognised (Chan and Lo 2014). Although the young people share characteristics of being “disengaging” and living in the bedroom on end, they could have different levels of interactions. This variability within the group is indeed an important evidence; it was found that the participants display a range of aspects of “being social”. By drawing attention to the young people’s personal perspectives, their sense of being “social” could in fact be considered as diverse across sites. It also suggests that “hidden” young people could be at different stages of disengagement from interactions and participation in society. Hence, this created tension to the concept of the young people being “socially withdrawn”; describing how young people socialise is not as clear cut as previously assumed (Wong and Ying 2006).

Difficulties of Mapping The Findings to The “Social Withdrawal” Framework

Analysis focusing on the micro-level also helps suggest a number of divergences to the existing understanding of “hidden youth’s” engagements in the “social”. The framework of “social withdrawal” focuses on four aspects: i) being disengaged from participation in the labour market; ii) disengaged from participation in education; iii) disengaged from interactions with family, and; iv) disengaged from interactions with communities, particularly peer groups and friends (Wong 2009b). Nonetheless, a more complicated depiction emerged in this study and challenges this framework. The findings add nuances and expand this concept in two ways.

Participation in Labour Market and Education

Firstly, the analysis provides further insights on how young people become disengaged from the labour market and education. More than two-thirds of the participants articulated perceptions of hopelessness and lack of opportunities. In the context of Hong Kong, this was emphasised in relation to competition based on skills and qualifications (Lung 2012). Whereas in Scotland, the young people were concerned about the lack of job opportunities due to an economic downturn. This significantly affects their motivation to participate in the labour market and education; they feel unable to fulfil their aspirations and thus become de-motivated. Because of this, they could become disengaged from work and school. Their accounts reflect a strong sense of loss of both motivation and confidence that their participation in the labour market and education would be meaningful. This adds new insights to their lack of participation in these forms of socialising (Furlong 2008; Wong and Ying 2006). Moreover, when they engage in work and school, it does not necessarily mean they would have a fulfilling experience and meaningful sense of “being social”. Half of the participants appeared to have taken steps towards becoming more engaged in in the labour market or education, such as through skills training and casual employment. However, there was also a sense that these engagements were only temporary. They did not necessarily feel fully fulfilled, particularly as they felt trapped in precarious work and felt uncertain about their future. Hence, they could be in and out of participation in the labour market and education with a sense of lack of meaning in their lives (Nudzor 2010). This was most clearly illustrated in the context of Scotland: although 15 participants were engaged in skills training at the time of the interview, each training they could get via the Activity Agreement only lasted for 12 weeks. As a result, they could be in a cycle of having many various training opportunities, but lack continuity and a clear pathway of staying engaged in work or education. Furthermore, the Activity Agreement is only offered up to age 19. The young people felt a loss of control in their future and unsure how they would continue to participate in the labour market and education beyond this age limit. In this site, it showed young people could become disengaged when they perceive their future to be uncertain and precarious (Adams 2012; Furlong and Cartmel 2007). As suggested by Finlay et al. (2010), they could lack expectation for the future and perceive a lack of security in their participation in society.

Further studies are needed to fully understand how various aspects affect “hidden youth’s” motivations to participate in work and education. The interviews highlighted it was not only about increasing incentives for young people, particularly

financially. Moreover, there is not necessarily a lack of aspirations; the participants did not lack vision of what they wanted to do and become in society (Finlay et al. 2010). Their aspirations were also not unrealistic nor unclear as to how they could be achieved (Furlong 2008). Despite that, there was a deep sense of lack of fulfilment and motivations which drives the young people to not being fully engaged. The evidence suggests that the young people's individual perceptions of work and education could affect how they engage in these domains of social life. The interplay of structure and agency observed here will be returned to in the final section of the chapter. It will discuss this further by considering it together with different dimensions of "being social" together.

Interactions with Families and Other Communities (Friends and Peer Groups)

Secondly, the micro-level approach was also useful to highlight more nuances about how "hidden" young people socialise with friends, peer groups and families. Describing the young people as disengaged from these communities became more complex and problematic. Two major insights are important to consider in this: i) the young people could be more interconnected with these communities in the digital world, and their interactions could be fluid, and; ii) the space of the bedroom is an important site where such social interactions could occur.

The findings revealed that all 32 participants had some forms of interactions with groups of people through digital media. For example, 10 out of 12 participants in Hong Kong regularly used massively multiplayer online (MMO) gaming platforms to interact with peers and friends. Similarly, nine out of 20 participants in Scotland used Internet-enabled game consoles to socialise with networks of online gamers. Such interactions, however, were not necessarily only related to gaming; an eclectic range of technologies and digital platforms could also be used. This included instant-messaging services, social media, social networking sites, online blogs, Internet forums, chatrooms, and other applications or software on smartphones, tablets and computers. The sheer variety of technological devices and media described by the young people was in itself remarkable. It also reflects that the young people could be highly interconnected in a range of social networks and communities through technologies.

This adds another dimension to the understanding of how "hidden" young people interact with communities like peer groups, friends and families. It shows that they are not necessarily isolated and disengaged. Digital interactions may also be

significant to how they experience a sense of connectedness. All but two participants showed attachments to some form of communities through digital interactions. Hence, analysing how “hidden” young people engage with communities like families and peer groups could be more multi-faceted; various aspects of socialising with these groups have to be taken into account (Jamieson 2013).

This also emphasise that the young people could interact with a range of groups and communities, particularly through digital media. It is useful to think of the young people as positioned and connected to a constellation of networks, and not necessarily fixed to a single, local environment or community (Castells 2001). Hence, how “hidden youth” interact with families, friends and peer groups could require a more nuanced analysis. It needs to recognise differing aspects of their interactions with various networks. Hence, *how* they socialise with different groups of communities may be heterogeneous. This multiplicity of socialising is highlighted by Papacharissi’s (2011) notion of the “networked Self”. This is useful to illustrate how “hidden” young people could be interconnected to a variety of networks of people. Their sense of “being social” could thus be underpinned and shaped by multiple networks and groups. They could also socialise with families, friends and peers through different types of interactions. This makes analysing how the young people socialise with these communities particularly complex. Indeed, how they socialise in these contexts could involve considering multiple, differing descriptions. Hence, the process of how the young people interact with friends, peers and families could be *far from monolithic*; instead it involves various interconnected elements mutually influencing one another.

From this perspective, digital and physical social interactions could also be understood as inextricably linked; how the young people interact with others digitally could be linked to how they socialise in physical environments, and vice versa. This was most clearly highlighted in the participants’ accounts in Hong Kong regarding their interactions with peers and going to “Internet bars”. This offers an illuminating example of how young people’s digital and physical interactions could be intertwined (Wynn and Katz 1997). Visits to “Internet bars” is a common youth sub-culture particular to the context of Hong Kong as well as other East Asian countries such as Japan; it is a popular venue for young people, especially gamers, to go for leisure and entertainment (Bax 2014). In this study, a quarter of the participants in Hong Kong described occasional gatherings with friends and peers in “Internet bars” where they play online games together. An interesting characteristic highlighted here is that the young people

could be meeting face-to-face with other people, and yet the primary purpose was to interact through technological platforms. Furthermore, one participant talked about going to “Internet bars” with friends she met online. She met them through MMO gaming platforms initially and became close friends after playing online games together for two years. Since forming close friendships, they decided to meet with each other in “Internet bars” once a month. They could spend very long hours together there, typically starting from late in the evening until dawn. Afterwards, they would return home to rest and connect with each other again online from their bedrooms. Such experiences suggest that the boundaries of physical and digital interactions are blurry and these interactions are not necessarily separated from each other. Baym (2010: 110) argues that digital interactions are in fact ‘far from free-floating...[but] enmeshed’ with physical, face-to-face interactions. In this study, the participants’ face-to-face social interactions could indeed be initiated by digital forms of interactions and networks.

All of this subgroup of participants also conveyed they were more willing to meet with peers and friends to go to “Internet bars” specifically, and less so for other leisure activities and locations. This marks the “Internet bar” as a distinctive space, which is different from traditional experiences of socialising (Bax 2014; Berger and Luckmann 1966). According to the participants, they seldom talked with friends they went with nor had much face-to-face communications directly. On the contrary, they would be focused on interacting online and through the computers. Hence, while they were being in the physical space together, they are sitting side-by-side and mainly using and facing computers (instead of each other).

Conversely, the connection between digital and physical interactions could also be a negative one. The Scottish participants situated in a context where risks were more associated with such overlaps. There are growing debates and concerns about online safety, particularly in relation to young people meeting up with people they had met online in face-to-face situations (Livingstone and Brake 2010). Seven out of 20 Scottish participants conveyed a sense of caution and reluctance towards having interactions with online friends and communities in person. Whereas in Hong Kong, none of the participants expressed concerns. This remained true regardless of how long they had been interacting with each other and how close their relationships were. One Scottish participant in particular talked about becoming “best friends” with someone he had met online a few years before. They had been communicating with each other through various digital media on a daily basis. Despite this, he still felt uncomfortable and did

not intend to meet his “best friend” face-to-face. This perspective illustrates how digital interactions could also shape and affect how the young people socialise with friends and peers in physical environments. In particular, their perceptions of online networks are important to consider. Therefore, the analysis of how “hidden” young people socialise should not overlook the interconnections between different aspects of their social interactions (Loveless and Williamson 2013).

The fluidity of digital interactions and communities

Digital sociology literature also helps consider an important quality of digital interactions and networks: their fluidity (Miller 2011). As observed in this study, young people’s engagements with communities (like friends and peer groups) through technological platforms is highly fluid and ephemeral. Schroder (2010: 172) argues that ‘social encounters in online worlds are often fleeting...unlike offline...it is possible to enter and exit these spaces and encounters more easily’. Over half of the participants in Hong Kong and Scotland emphasised the flexibility of initiating and ending connections and relationships with people online, in comparison to face-to-face contexts. One Scottish participant in particular highlighted the dynamics of networks forming and re-forming constantly on Internet forums. Networks could be organised based on conversation threads and replies to messages. These conversations could last from a few days to many months. It was also easy to enter and exit these threads of messages based on their interests in what was being discussed. The participants also sometimes extended the conversations on a specific topic by communicating with other users through VoIP software. Hence, an individual could belong to many temporary social groups at the same time, as argued by Baym (2010). The young people could interact with different groups of people for different purposes and for varying lengths of time. Rainie and Wellman (2014) describe this as the “on-demand” characteristic of digital networks and communities. This could make the young people’s interactions with communities online particularly fluid.

Social groups that the young people engaged in through digital platforms could also be especially large and diverse. They could interact with multiple loosely-knit networks of people, and not necessarily restricted to interacting with small, dense groups of local friends and families (Rainie and Wellman 2010). This also makes interacting with people who are distant from them geographically more convenient (Barney 2004). Hence, they are not confined to “being social” with people in their local communities only. Moreover, the interviews revealed that they are not necessarily only interacting with other “hidden” young people online, as Chan and Lo (2010) argue. The

participants in this study showed they could have many interactions with various groups of people who are not necessarily also “hidden” in the bedroom. This reflects online communities could be made of a wide range of people, especially with digital media becoming more wide-spread as part of a social life in the “digital age” (Lupton 2015). Therefore, “hidden” young people could socialise with diverse types of networks and communities, particularly through technological platforms.

The bedroom as a space for “being social”

It also emerged that the participants could develop a sense of collectivity and “social” despite being in their bedrooms alone. They were not necessarily secluded from people and the “outside world” while being *physically* confined indoors (Furlong 2008; Saito 1998). Conversely, they could develop a sense of connectedness with communities, such as friends and peer groups, through virtual platforms (Schroeder 2010). Moreover, this highlights how boundaries of the “public” and the “private” are increasingly blurred due to connectivity offered by personal digital devices (Hodkinson and Lincoln 2008; Papacharissi 2011). The concept of the “bedroom culture” proposed by Livingstone (2009), and together with colleague Bovill (2001), is particularly useful to reflect this. It sheds light to understand the previously overlooked social dimensions of this seemingly private and secluded space.

Livingstone (2009) highlights that the space of the bedroom is increasingly “media-rich”; it is augmented by a range of technologies and digital social networks. Young people could thus use various personal devices (such as smartphones, tablets, PCs and Internet-enabled game consoles) inside this space to socialise with people. All but two participants in the study (one in the context of Hong Kong and one in Scotland) had digital interactions in their bedrooms, particularly with peers and friends but also with family members. Hence, the focal point of young people’s engagement of the “social” is argued to be shifting to the private domestic space, and away from public and outdoor spaces. It is suggested ‘a relatively privatised bedroom culture is...developing because of the perceived failures of a more public, outdoor leisure culture (in terms of access, cost, variety, etc.)’ (Bovill and Livingstone 2001: 17). The majority of the participants also reflected that digital interactions in the bedroom offers more variety than the outside world to their interactions with peers and friends. Hence, the bedroom could also be an important space where socialising with these communities takes place.

This emphasised that the conception of the bedroom should not be confined to being a lonely and reclusive space. It also has the potential of “bringing in” interactions

with people who are outside of the bedroom (Bovill and Livingstone 2001). This highlights how “hidden” young people could feel connected with various communities and online networks despite not being *physically* co-present with people for months and years.

Contrasting Aspects of How “Hidden” Young People Socialise

It is therefore difficult to fully capture the empirical accounts in this study with the conceptual framework of “social withdrawal” (Wong 2009b). As illustrated by the differing pictures depicted in Chapter V and VI, young people’s participation in the labour market and education on the one hand and interactions with peer groups, friends and families, on the other hand, could be highly contrasting. Hence, it is not necessarily as simple and clear-cut as thought to define a young person as disengaged from these aspects of “being social”.

The analysis also shows a stark contrast between how “hidden youth” socialise through digital media and physical interactions. 25 out of 32 participants experienced higher levels of connectedness through digital forms of interactions. Moreover, digital interactions and networks appeared to be particularly dominant in how they socialise. Such dominance was particularly striking in their interactions with peers, friends, families and other online communities. On the contrary, only four out of 20 participants in Scotland and one in 12 in Hong Kong had a stronger sense of “being social” in traditional face-to-face interactions. Whereas only one participant in each site felt isolated from both types of social interactions. Therefore, a full understanding of how the young people socialise has to take this heterogeneity into account. This could involve combining varying components of their social lives to portray a picture of contrasts and tensions (Loveless and Williamson 2013).

This finding also appeared to diverge from the emphasis and discussions in the digital sociological literature. It has been a dominant argument that the majority of people in the “digital age” exhibit coherent levels of interactions (Castells 2005). The more digital interactions people are engaged in, the more likely they are to have high levels of physical social interactions also:

‘Contrary to concerns that the Internet would reduce other forms of contact, the evidence shows the opposite: the more internet contact, the more in-person [interactions]... These are not either/or relationships: people use the Internet and mobile phones to keep in touch, to arrange get-togethers, and to follow up

after they meet...The Internet and mobiles help people to bond within their circles by supplementing their in-person contacts' (Rainie and Wellman 2014: 127).

This emphasises the importance of focusing on the complexities and nuances of how "hidden" young people engage in the social, especially inside the space of the bedroom. The participants' interactions also appeared to be fluid and temporary. This was especially the case regarding their participation in the labour market and education, such as casual employment and short-term skills training. Their interactions with various communities and digital networks could also be ephemeral (Schroeder 2010).

Reflecting on The Concept and Construction of The "Social"

The analysis highlights how interactions through digital media are important to "hidden youth's" social lives. Digital sociology has an important implication in thinking about the concept of "social" in this context (Lupton 2015). More than two-thirds of the participants in Hong Kong and Scotland considered digital interactions as highly important to their daily experiences of socialising. The empirical accounts thereby suggest that non-traditional means of socialising could also be significant to their sense of "being social" (Bennett and Robards 2014).

The classic conception of socialising is questioned in this context. It particularly focuses on physical interactions (Mead 1934). Conversely, this study shows how "hidden youth" engage with the "social" is not necessarily confined to face-to-face interactions in person. Their connections with people are also not always based on continuous physical co-presence or co-residence (Berger and Luckmann 1966). In addition, participation in macro structures which reinforce historical continuity and sameness are not the only significant means of "being social" to them (Stone 1995; Wong 2009b). 25 out of 32 participants were also able to connect with multiple groups of people through digital platforms. They could develop a sense of collectivity and belonging through digital social interactions (Rainie and Wellman 2014). This was particularly striking in the participants' accounts of interacting with family members they lived with. In the context of Scotland, a quarter of the participants relied more on technologies to connect with their families than face-to-face means. This emphasises the significance and diffusion of the digital world in the young people's experiences of social

life. Arguments in Science and Technology Studies (STS) offer a useful approach to highlight this concept of the “social” further (Law and Hassard 1999; MacKenzie 2006).

The “sociotechnical” perspective is found particularly useful to explain the complexities of “social” which was observed in this study (Bijker and Law 1992). It highlights the young people’s interactions should be imagined and understood as deeply intertwined with technologies. From this ontological stance, the “technological” have to be thought of as inextricably linked to the “social”—hence the “sociotechnical”. This is identified to play a key role in shaping the participants’ actions and social interactions. Therefore, emerging social structures in the digital world should no longer be neglected when analysing “hidden youth’s” social interactions (Chan and Lo 2010). It is argued technologies are ‘quietly sitting in the background...[shaping society’s] unconscious...and structure life’ (Thrift 2005: 213-223).

Technological platforms, like social networking sites, exemplify how digital structures could offer new options to socialise based on ‘datascares on the screen’ (Latour 2011: 804). One participant in Hong Kong in particular articulated how posting status updates and pictures about himself on social networking sites could be important to feeling socially connected. Although this did not involve direct communications with a specific set of people (as one normally would in traditional means of socialising), it was important to him that the posts were read and “liked”¹⁴ by as many people as possible; this included strangers online he did not necessarily know. Not only does this highlight the diversification of “audience” on digital platforms, new forms of interactions based more on introspective reflections and self-expressions are also emerging (Couldry 2000; Papacharissi 2011). The empirical insights highlight this has to be taken into account when analysing how “hidden youth” socialise. The construction of social in this context should be understood as shaped by and integrated with technologies as well as physical interactions (Wynn and Katz 1997).

The Similarities of Digital Interactions in Hong Kong and Scotland

The concept of the “social” being intertwined with technologies on a global scale is also useful to explain this study’s observations in Hong Kong and Scotland (Castells 2001). Both contexts showed remarkable similarities in the young people’s interactions through digital media. The influences of technologies on the process of

¹⁴ Being “liked” here refers to other users pressing the button “like” on a post on a social networking site. It is a common practice on social networking sites to show appreciation to the person who wrote the post.

socialising and their sense of “being social” are also striking. The commonalities found in the two different contexts help consider the dominance of information and communication technologies (ICT)—and globalised digital networks and platforms—especially among well-developed countries (Barney 2004). The concept of “network society” helps suggest that the process of “hidden” young people socialising and connecting with people could be less bounded by orthodox hierarchical macro structures—such as cultures and nation states (Castells 1996). In this way, the means of socialising, particularly through digital media, are regarded to be increasingly similar across the world.

The participants in this study are indeed identified to be using the same and similar digital platforms and devices for social purposes. For example, over two-thirds of the participants in Hong Kong and Scotland were engaged in digital interactions through the same social networking sites (such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram). Moreover, the Hong Kong and Scottish participants shared access to similar technological devices like smartphones, tablets and computers from global brands and manufacturers. Therefore, it suggests that how the participants socialised could be shaped and influenced by increasingly globalised technologies. The processes of engaging in the “social” inevitably appeared to be very similar despite they were located in different parts of the world (Osgerby 2004). Moreover, this perspective exposes how the options and means of “being social” through technologies could be very similar for young people in Hong Kong and Scotland, and in some cases, overlapped. How digital interactions become central and dominant in the construction of the social of “hidden” young people could therefore also unfold and develop in a similar manner.

To sum up, emerging dimensions of “being social” in the digital world could also be significant when understanding “hidden youth”. Digital sociology provides a useful perspective to highlight the previously ignored aspects of their construction of the “social”. Moreover, it helps highlight a much more nuanced perspective of their social engagements. Previous studies such as Saito (1998) and Wong and Ying (2006) focus on analysing the young people’s face-to-face interactions in person and their participation in the labour market and education. This study demonstrates that digital interactions and fluid digital social networks are also important to their sense of connectedness and collectivity. Hence, explaining the sociality of “hidden youth” could be not necessarily as simplistic as assumed previously. It could involve addressing a range of aspects of

their social interactions, thereby makes analysing the young people as “socially withdrawn” more difficult and complex.

Influence of Structural Barriers, Young People’s Agency and Motivations

It is also important to consider the interplay of structural barriers and individual agency in how “hidden” young people engage with the “social” in this study. Other digital sociological work highlights the significance of young people’s agency in determining their social interactions (Weber and Mitchell 2008; Wellman et al. 2006).

In this study, “hidden” young people’s agency also played an important role in the process of their engaging in the “social”. The findings highlighted that the participants could manage and adapt how they socialise in different contexts of interactions. This was particularly found in their digital interactions (Rainie and Wellman 2014). This also emphasises the importance of analysing young people’s engagements in the “social” with a focus on the *individual* (Castells 2001). It draws the analytical viewpoint to: i) explore the extent which young people could exercise autonomy and control in how they interact, in addition to how structural environments determine their actions, and; ii) recognise the young people as autonomous agents. Based on this perspective, the potential differing motivations (the “pulling” and “pushing” factors) are crucial to understand in order to fully explain how they engage in the “social”.

22 out of 32 participants found digital forms of interactions in the bedroom more exciting than physical interactions outside. This is emphasised in relation to the variety and thrilling experiences that the digital world could offer; they could engage in diverse virtual worlds—including imaginative environments, characters, fantasies and adventures—which they may not be able experience in physical environments (Schroeder 2010). Hence, the young people could find digital interactions more exhilarating and stimulating than face-to-face interactions (Bovill and Livingstone 2001). Conversely, all participants in this subgroup found interactions with people in person to be more stressful. Two female Hong Kong participants, for example, found “getting ready” and making themselves “presentable” (in terms of appearance, clothing and make-up) in face-to-face social contexts particularly stressful. One interview in Hong Kong articulated how young people could feel more pressured and shy in face-to-face interactions. On the contrary, digital interactions could be more asynchronous and

more focused on text and voice communications (Walther 2006). Hence, this allowed the participants to process information and craft interactions with others at a pace which they were more able to control. The sense of control and autonomy was also significant to the participants feeling freer and more open to express themselves online (Miller 2011; Walther 1992).

This helps highlight that the qualities of digital interactions could reinforce young people's motivations and lead to the drive of socialising online and staying inside the bedroom. In addition, the flexibility and convenience of digital interactions could also be a "pulling" factor. More than two-thirds of the participants found interactions through technological platforms appealing because they could constantly connect with different people. They also found fewer restrictions on geographical distances, time differences, and less involvement of planning and co-ordination to interact with people. One Scottish participant in particular highlighted interactions through digital media allowed him to connect with other people with similar interests easier and quicker, because he was able to interact with people not only in his local neighbourhood but also across the world. Hence, the findings reflected that how "hidden" young people engage in the "social" could be shaped by personal autonomy, motivations and exercise of control on the one hand.

On the other hand, there are "pushing" factors that could drive young people to not engage in other aspects of the "social", particularly outside the bedroom, also. This was emphasised in relation to experiences of barriers and disadvantages in employment and education. This also reinforces the discussions around the influence of structural conditions of contemporary societies on young people, but highlights the issues in a different light (Furlong 2008; Wong and Ying 2006; Wong 2012). The thesis argues that the structural environments which young people are embedded in and their senses of motivation have to be considered hand-in-hand.

The evidence also particularly highlights the influence of being limited to precarious work on young people's motivations to participate in society. All participants' interviews in Hong Kong and Scotland reflected feeling demotivated to engage in work and education because they were restricted to low-skills, low-paid jobs in the labour market (McKnight 2002). This also links to prevalent concerns in the current academic debates around the negative effects of increased precariousness of employment (Antonucci et al. 2014; Eichhorst et al. 2011). Webster et al. (2004) argue that individuals could be discouraged to participate in work as they feel unfulfilled by

precarious work. Standing (2011) suggests a growing number of people across the world are living a precarious, insecure life in society. He argues to describe this emerging social group as the “precariat”. He also highlights the prevalence of short-term and temporary work, and that it offers minimal sense of career and future path in people’s lives. As found in this study, this could lead young people to feel engagement in society to be un-meaningful. Moreover, it could be an important factor which “pushes” young people to seek alternative means of socialising and “hide” in their bedrooms. The relationship between the surge of precarious work and “hidden youth” is however an under-researched area, and it could be a useful avenue to focus on for future research. It would help understand how their agency and autonomy could be undermined by structural barriers and also the environments they are situated in further (Standing 2011).

The Interplay of Different Motivations

This highlights that there is an interplay of “pushing” and “pulling” factors in young people’s motivations to engage with the “social”. The participants’ perspectives suggested that they are demotivated to interact in the labour market and education, thereby relying on digital interactions as an alternative form of “being social”. One interviewee in Scotland particularly emphasised this by saying: ‘it feels a lot more like, I could be in this [online] game rather than in “real life” right now’. This articulates that young people could feel dissociated and pushed to the limit by structural barriers in society, and found solace through other forms of socialising inside their bedrooms.

The link between young people’s engagements in the digital world and non-participation in the labour market and education has been highlighted by Chan and Lo (2010). Their inquiry focuses on concepts of empowerment and disempowerment, particularly in young people’s interactions in online and physical environments respectively. According to Chan and Lo (2010), “hidden” young people could connect with each other more in their interactions in the digital world—as they share common struggles in traditional macro structures like the labour market. Moreover, the young people’s experiences of disempowerment, caused by barriers and lack of opportunities in employment and education, could increase the importance of online interactions to them. The virtual world hence provides a crucial, alternative space where “hidden” young people seek and re-establish their sense of empowerment and personal autonomy (Chan and Lo 2010). In this study, this perspective is found to be useful in explaining how the young people socialise and engage in the “social” also.

Building on Castells' (1997) work on "resistance identity", this thesis argues that "hidden youth" could feel a sense of *powerlessness* towards hierarchical macro structures and *meaninglessness* towards interactions and participation in society. Conversely, they are relying on emerging digital social structures and networks to seek other forms of "being social". This helps them to attempt to re-establish a sense of connectedness and sociality. Hence, their high levels of digital interactions could in fact be a *reaction* to their experiences of powerlessness and meaninglessness in the labour market and education.

In hindsight, this could have been a stronger focus at the design stage of this study, had the digital dimension of "being social" been more evident earlier and in previous studies. Nonetheless, this thesis provides important further insights to expand this area in the debate. This study provides new empirical evidence and elucidates the tension between digital and physical social interactions further, specifically in the context of "hidden youth". Future research should examine the potential impacts that disengagements from traditional social structures can have on increasing young people's attachments to digital interactions. Moreover, the young people being on the brink of the virtual and physical worlds in "being social" is particularly highlighted (Bennett and Robards 2014; White 2014). Further research is needed to fully understand the sociality of a disengaged young person and its complexities in the "digital age"; the largely under-researched interrelation between the two areas should be addressed further (Livingstone 2009).

This also raises reflections regarding the realities of how "hidden youth" socialise and how the "social" is constructed in this context. The thesis draws attention to Castells' (1997; 2001) work and suggests that his arguments could be a particularly useful and relevant resource to look at for future studies of "hidden youth". Moreover, it helps emphasise that the tensions in young people's motivations, as well as opportunities, to engage in digital and physical interactions are important to be considered.

Strengths of The Micro-Level Approach

As illustrated by the nuanced perspective in the analysis, the methodological strategy and focus of this study is crucial in shaping the findings. Examining how "hidden" young people socialise by using a micro-level approach has been found particularly fruitful. It does not focus on analysing a specific, pre-determined set of structures in society (such as labour market and education) and how structural barriers

exclude the young people (Furlong 2008; Wong 2009a). Conversely, it orientates the analysis to explore the young people's individual experiences and their own perspective (Rainie and Wellman 2014). This allows a broader range of interactions and diverse means of being social to emerge in this study. It also helps reflect the construction of the "social" as being more fluid and personalised in the "digital age" (Castells 2001; Miller 2011). A key advantage of this approach is that it avoids focusing on orthodox conceptions of socialising, particularly face-to-face interactions and participation in labour market and education (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Meads 1934). It also does not presume the young people as isolated and marginalised from being social.

Wong's (2009b) model of "hidden youth's" engagements with the "social" was more restrictive. The analysis from this perspective has to be told from the viewpoint of the structural environments and exclusions in the labour market and education. It also assumes the young people as being disengaged from hierarchical macro structures and interactions in the physical world. Nonetheless, the focus of this study is shifted towards the young people's individual lived experience. The analysis highlights how young people experience and feel disadvantaged; the personal struggles and emotions concerning the barriers and lack of opportunities, particularly in work and education, are also more fully illustrated.

This study shows that questions regarding the contemporary social structures and concepts of structural influences are indeed important to understand how "hidden youth" socialise (Furlong 2008). Nonetheless, the focus on observations at the micro-level can also be helpful. The unit of analysis in this approach is the young people themselves, and not necessarily the systems and barriers of "being social". This entails a focus on exploring young people's perceptions, motivations and personal experiences of "being social". In doing so, this study adds an important dimension to understand how the young people come to be "hidden". In addition, the nuances of the processes and their sense of "being social" at the micro-level, especially inside the bedroom, become particularly apparent.

The analysis of "hidden youth" should therefore not only be addressed from the structural perspective; understanding of individual experiences is also important and has to be taken into account. Hence, the young people's sense of "being social" and what they do in their everyday lives should be interpreted at the micro-level also. This allows further dimensions of how they socialise to be effectively brought into the debate. In this study, it was particularly useful in highlighting the multiplicity and individual

differences of “hidden youth” and how their sociality is constructed (Bruns 2008; Knobel and Lankshear 2010). It helps to consider how they are “being social” is more complex than previously thought.

Influences of Structure and Agency: A Pluralistic Explanation

To conclude, this study highlights that there are tensions between young people’s agency and the structural barriers they experience in contemporary society. How they socialise is not only shaped by the structures of society, but also their individual motivations and autonomy. Nonetheless, how they are “being social” in different contexts is not necessarily determined by their agency alone, as emphasised by Rainie and Wellman (2014); there could be deep-rooted, persistent barriers (particularly in the labour market) which also influence how “hidden” young people interact and participate in society. Hence, this study expands the understanding of how “hidden” young people engage with the “social”. It highlights the importance to understand the varying levels of motivations behind how they socialise in different contexts.

This also offers a useful perspective and adds another layer of understanding of “hidden youth”. Previous research has focused on analysing the conditions of contemporary social structures and focused on the macro-level. This study shifts the attention to the young people’s individual experiences and focuses on the micro-level. Using this approach uncovers a much richer understanding of how the young people socialise and develop a sense of connectedness and sociality with others. This thesis therefore argues a fuller picture of how they engage in the “social” and become “hidden” in the bedroom requires an understanding of both levels.

Chapter VIII — Conclusion

This study explored “hidden” young people’s engagements with the “social” in Hong Kong and Scotland. It uncovered a more nuanced perspective of their experiences of a sense of connectedness. Through synthesising several insights from digital sociology, this thesis elucidates the multiplicity of the young people’s sense of “being social” and how this is constructed (Castells 2001; Papacharissi 2011).

In doing so, this study addresses a gap in current debates of “hidden youth”; it highlights that the ways young people socialise needs to be examined in much greater depth. Past studies tend to focus on assumptions that young people are being reclusive from social interactions and are living in loneliness and solitude (Teo 2010; Wong and Ying 2006). Nonetheless, this study adds new considerations to this widely-accepted view and enriches the understanding of their connectedness. This was achieved through revealing empirical and theoretical insights on the variations and heterogeneity of how the young people engage with the “social” (Chan and Lo 2014). “Hidden youth” could feel a sense of disengagement from participation in hierarchical macro structures, particularly in education and labour market. Conversely, they are relying on emerging digital social structures and networks to seek other forms of “being social”.

This final chapter turns to conclude the significance of the findings of this study. Firstly, it outlines what this study reveals about “hidden” young people’s social participation and interactions, and how a more critical understanding of this should be taken into account in future studies of “hidden youth”. Secondly, the chapter considers how the findings connect to emerging discussions regarding the impact of technologies on social interactions (Miller 2011; Turkle 2011). The insights of this study prompt further questions and offer new suggestions for future research in this area.

A Critical Approach of “Hidden Youth”

By focusing on young people’s lived experiences, this study expanded the concept of “hidden youth” and how we think about their social interactions and participation. Critical reflections and debates about the construction of the “social”, particularly from digital sociology, are highlighted as useful (Livingstone 2009; Orton-Johnson and Prior 2013). The research discussed in this thesis offers new insights on what “being social” may mean and shed light on young people’s own interpretations of how they socialise.

This was possible through the emergence and critical analysis of new empirical evidence that reflects on this previously unknown perspective. The study argues that new forms of interactions which are facilitated by technologies are also important to “hidden” young people’s sense of engaging with the “social” (Jamieson 2013; White 2014). While they are largely disengaged from physical interactions and social participation, digital interactions can be especially significant to their sense of connectedness, especially inside the space of the bedroom (Livingston and Bovill 2001). The participants in Hong Kong and Scotland in fact had varying degrees of interactions and connections with others through digital media. Hence, emerging dimensions of sociality in the digital age should also be recognised in future analysis of how “hidden” young people engage with the “social”.

The Increased Fluidity of Social Interactions

Considerations of the complexities and fluidity of contemporary social connections have also been brought to the fore of the discussion (Baym 2010; Suoranta and Vadén 2008). This study suggests that defining young people as disengaged and withdrawn from “being social” can be more complex and difficult in the digital age. Observations that young people are *physically* secluded for a protracted period of time may not necessarily mean they are isolated from social interactions, because of potential connectivity offered by technologies (Chan and Lo 2010). This study also found analysing the participants in Hong Kong and Scotland as “socially withdrawn” problematic, because there were multiple, heterogeneous components of how they engaged with the “social” (Loveless and Williamson 2013). In particular, the young people’s digital and physical interactions were highly contrasting and involved differing interpretations. This diverges from the assumptions in previous studies of “hidden youth”; the reality and explanations of their social connectedness may not be as clear-cut as previously thought (Saito 1998; Wong 2009b).

Hence, this thesis argues that “hidden” young people should not be presumed as being reclusive nor described as isolated from the “social”. Future studies need to address and understand the variations of how “hidden” young people engage in different contexts. A more nuanced perspective is needed to capture and analyse the multiplicity of their social connections fully (Baym 2010). This was particularly highlighted by the participants’ interactions with families and other communities, such as friends and peer groups, in both sites. Papacharissi’s (2011) notion of the “networked Self” was crucial to understand the fluidity of the young people’s interactions and how

they are interconnected. They can be engaged with diverse networks and communities, especially in the digital world. Their interactions can also be more ephemeral and temporary, and do not necessarily involve connections with closely-knit social groups and sustained physical co-presence with others (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Rainie and Wellman 2014). Therefore, it is useful to think of the young people as being interconnected to multiple fluid networks (especially through emerging virtual environments), rather than being bound by interactions in a fixed physical location (Schroder 2010). For example, the participants' connections were not confined to face-to-face interactions with families and others in their local communities. They can also interact with diverse groups of people for different purposes, activities and interests, especially through digital platforms. Furthermore, this study supports that young people's connectedness in different types of interactions should be described and interpreted differently (Chan and Lo 2014). There may be multiple, and not singular, ways of explaining their interactions and participation in society. Hence, it is important for future research in this area to think of "hidden" young people as a non-homogenous group.

Other evolving forms of social interactions and participation through digital media should also be considered in future research. This includes engagements in work, digital economy and education, in which prominence of technologies continues to spread and evolve (Loveless and Williamson 2013; White 2014). Coleman (2014) argues that younger generations have increased experiences of learning and schooling through digital platforms and devices. Hence, despite not yet being observed in this study, further investigations are prompted in these areas in order to address further the gaps in research on "hidden youth". This will continue to test how we understand "hidden" young people and how we think about their engagements in the "social", as the "social" becomes increasingly digitalised (Lupton 2015).

Tensions in Different Motivations and Impact of Technologies

Finally, the interplay of differing motivations for young people to be "social" was also highlighted in the participants' interviews. A combination of "push" and "pull" factors in various types of interactions were identified. This can shape how the young people engage in the "social" differently. There were different structural barriers in the contexts of Hong Kong and Scotland which demotivated young people to participate in work and education. Contrastingly, digital interactions were perceived as offering more variety, convenience and excitement than face-to-face interactions. This was particularly

emphasised in their interactions with friends, peers and families. Therefore, this thesis identifies that there can be tensions in young people's motivations to engage in the "social". They can also have different perceptions and experiences in the different dimensions of "being social".

An important issue to be considered further by future studies is whether young people's disengagement from physical interactions can lead to an increase in motivations to engage in the digital world, *or* if the digital world creates a "pulling" factor that draws people away from physical interactions. This issue is linked to wider on-going debates, particularly in digital sociology and other disciplines such as public and mental health, education, media and communication, and childhood and youth studies (Bell et al. 2015; Buckingham 2008; Couldry 2000; Creeber and Martin 2009; Livingstone 2014; Loveless and Williamson 2014; Turkle 1995, 2011; Wynn and Katz 1997). This would be particularly relevant for further research of "hidden youth" to consider. The debates question the impact that technologies can have on social interactions and human connections. Nonetheless, whether the impact of technological developments is negative or positive remains a highly disputable matter (Norris 2004). There are fearful predictions among sceptical scholars who argue that technologies are detrimental to social connections and threaten to increase loneliness of people (Greenfield 2014; Turkle 2011). Conversely, other voices promote that technologies may create new opportunities for social engagements and connectedness with various communities (Bennett and Robards 2014; Gardner and Davis 2013). These are stimulating and important questions that could continue to be explored not only in the context of "hidden youth", but also for other social groups in the digital age more broadly (Livingstone 2014; Miller 2011; White 2014). This study offers evidence of "hidden youth" being "outliers", who have contrasting (rather than mirroring) levels of "being social" in digital and physical interactions; this is suggested to differ from experiences of the majority of people in more-developed countries (Castells 2005; Rainie and Wellman 2014). "Hidden" young people could thus be a particularly provoking and interesting case which enriches the debates on the social impact of technologies further.

The Contributions of The Research

There are several areas in which this study could make a useful contribution and has the potential to open new avenues of research. Firstly, this study is particularly timely and useful for youth studies. The discussions concerning the digitalisation of everyday life and the "sociotechnical" were especially helpful to understand the nuances

and varied experiences of “hidden youth” (Bijker and Law 1992; Lupton 2015). These discussions can also be useful and make a valuable addition to the general youth literature.

This study offers an indication that linking themes in youth studies (such as transitions and marginalisation) with the digital sociological debates could be highly enlightening (Orton-Johnson and Prior 2013; Rainie and Wellman 2014). Linking these themes more extensively could be fruitful and could potentially challenge existing assumptions about disengagements and exclusions. Therefore, the relationships between “disengaged youth” and the “digital age” are worthwhile to explore more broadly and critically.

The question of the significance and meaning of technologies in young people’s lives can also be considered further. As the use of technologies (such as mobile devices, social media, and online gaming) become increasingly common, we need more research in youth studies that address how this trend affects or alters the visions and experiences of contemporary youth. Future studies can think more about the role of technological platforms and digital devices in social life and how this influences youth experiences. It should be recognised that many aspects of the everyday life of a young person are increasingly digitalised (Bennett and Robards 2014). As demonstrated in this study, the integration of the “digital” in the configuration of social life needs to be addressed and taken into account if we want to understand the experiences of young people and how they are “being social” better.

Conversely, literature in digital sociology could also benefit from various concepts and traditions in youth studies. This research highlights the influence of youth marginalisation and individual responses to structural barriers (such as precarious and insecure employment conditions) in relation to how a young person is “being social” and manages connections with people online *and* offline. The concern of the relationship between technologies and human sociability has been debated in the field of digital sociology (Baym 2010; Miller 2011). The emphasis has been on examining how technological advances are transforming society and shaping people’s relations and associations with one another (Rainie and Wellman 2014; White 2014). The focus of previous work is also on the impact of fast-growing digital networks on people’s connectedness and sociality in the offline world—and less often *vice versa* (Buckingham 2008; Greenfield 2014; Turkle 2011).

The findings in this research provides evidence that “hidden” young people who are disengaging and experiencing disparity and lack of fulfilment in work and education (in the offline world) are particularly attached to digital interactions. Social exchanges through technological platforms and personal devices become especially significant in how they feel connected with people. This study therefore makes a useful contribution to the digital sociological debates and reinforces a dialogue that brings together concerns of individual sociability and wider structural settings. In particular, this thesis identifies that increased precariousness of youth experiences in the global context is significant (Macdonald et al. 2013; Standing 2011). This study foregrounds discussions about how these conditions and processes may vary young people’s connections in the digital as well as offline worlds.

The question of how this extends to human interactions more generally could be considered further by digital sociological work. This thesis supports future studies to explore the structural contexts more and critically reflecting how this links to issues of individual sociability (Castells 1997; Elias 1939). There is also an argument to be made for the “reverse” relationship of the offline structural contexts and physical disconnections on how people use technologies and interact through digital media. As illustrated by this study, this is particularly important to address to understand better the construction of social connectedness in the “digital age”.

Another area that the findings of this research can contribute to is the social exclusion literature. This study illuminates important insights about young people’s behaviours and responses to being marginalised; they do not necessarily conform to the predominant imaginings and assumptions of the social exclusion debates. Conversely, this study shows that the concept of being “hidden” can be useful and adds to the understanding of diverse experiences of young people who are marginalised and excluded.

The concept of “hidden youth” highlights that young people may become secluded in the bedroom and disengaged from “being social” to varying extents, as illustrated in this study. This finding reinforces the need to broaden how we approach and understand the impacts and meanings of marginalisation on youth disengagement. This requires the discussions of social exclusion to be extended and to consider experiences of “hidden-ness” more directly. This study illuminates that taking young people’s points of view into account is important and other possible reactions and social experiences of marginalised young people can be found.

Reflecting on “being social” and “hidden youth”

This thesis showed that bringing deeper and more critical discussions of “being social” together with the concept of “hidden youth” was useful (Couldry and Hepp 2017; Mulqueen and Matthews 2015). It helped underline that the sociability of “hidden” young people is varied and non-homogeneous. This study reflected on the young people’s diverse experiences in forming connections and associations with people; distinguishing the structural-oriented and individual-oriented approaches of “being social” was particularly illuminating. It enabled this research to examine and interpret the young people’s contrasting experiences of connectedness and sociability. It highlights that “hidden” young people can be disengaged from work, education, family, and community relationships to varying degrees.

This research also reflected critically on how young people express sociability and experience a sense of connectedness with people through digital interactions (Jamieson 2013; Orton-Johnson and Prior 2013). It was important to this study that debates of digital means of “being social” was brought to the fore, as the use of technological devices and online platforms was found to be prominent in nearly all interviews. The findings revealed that “hidden” young people are more strongly engaged and connected with friends, peer groups and family through digital devices, despite being secluded *physically* in the bedroom. This contrast was particularly striking among participants who had been disengaged fully from work and school and were more “severely” secluded in terms of not going outside. Conversely, young people who had been less disengaged from school or training felt more disconnected from personal relationships offline, but were also more engaged in digital networks. This underscores that taking different perspectives of “being social” into account had been an important and fruitful approach in this study. This helped construct a more nuanced understanding of “hidden youth’s” experiences of human connections and engaging in the “social”.

Considerations of useful concepts for future studies

Based on the findings, this thesis calls for a more critical reflection on what “being social” means to the young people when studying “hidden youth”. It will be particularly useful to take the heterogeneity and variability of the young people’s sociability into account in future research. It should not be assumed that “hidden” young people are a monolithic group, as they are not necessarily disengaged severely or equally from all aspects of “being social”. Instead, using the concept of the “networked Self” is helpful to examine how the young people are *interconnected* with different communities and social networks, particularly through the digital world (Papacharissi

2011). This is also helpful to illuminate the contrasting levels of connectedness of “hidden youth” in and outside of the bedroom, which has been largely overlooked in previous studies. This study highlights that various technological platforms and devices allow “hidden” young people to socialise with large, diverse networks of online users. The participants showed higher sociability in digital interactions with peers, friends, and family members compared to face-to-face. It will be useful for future research to focus more on what young people do and how they seek solace through digital connection inside the bedroom, and not only what they are disengaged from (Yates and Payne 2006).

Despite the popular depiction of a lonesome and isolated image of “hidden youth” in policy and media in East Asia, it will be useful for future research to challenge and contest these assumptions further. It is of particular relevance to re-consider the imaginings of the space of the bedroom, which is regarded as a private, isolated space. However, recent research shows that a young person’s bedroom is becoming increasingly “media-rich” and offers potentials of wide-ranging social connections through personal and mobile devices such as smartphones, computers, and game consoles (Livingstone 2009; Livingstone and Bovill 2001). This is argued to be increasingly widespread and commonplace; this study shows evidence that taking this into account provides a different portrayal of “hidden-ness”. Research in this area could pursue examining how “hidden” young people might use technologies for other purposes such as learning, skills development, work, and employment inside the bedroom (Coleman 2014; Livingstone 2014; Loveless and Williamson 2013).

This study shows that it is useful to consider seriously the lived experience of young people, and this has contributed to underscore the nuances of the experiences of being “hidden”. Future studies can continue pursuing this approach and promoting the voice of young people to be heard more in this area of research. In addition, future efforts could expand to include the viewpoints and experiences of the parents or guardians and service practitioners of “hidden youth”. This would be helpful to enrich and complement the analysis of young people’s perspectives, particularly on issues such as tensions and emotions of dependence on the family and dealing with social stigma of being “hidden” and disengaged.

By reflecting critically on young people’s own viewpoints and experiences, the concept of “social withdrawal” has also been contested in this study. It was shown that a strict and universalistic framework characterising “hidden-ness” by “severe”

disengagements from employment, education, family, *and* community relationships had a relatively weak analytical hold against the lived experience of young people (Wong 2009b). The term “withdrawal” was particularly unhelpful to make sense of the differing experiences of being “hidden” and neglecting the possibilities of young people having varying levels of connectedness. This study’s working definition and approach to capture “hidden-ness” based on a spectrum was more effective in addressing this.

As reflected by the choice of studying Hong Kong and Scotland, this research highlights the value of considering “hidden” young people as a heterogenous group and contributes to thinking about “hidden-ness” based on a spectrum. It helps underline youth experiences of starting to become secluded in the bedroom and beginning to disengage from work and school on the one end and, on the other end, the more “extreme” situation of being fully secluded and strongly disengaged from work, school, and various social relationships. This study offers evidence that it is useful to consider a young person’s “hidden-ness” along a spectrum, and not a fixed category nor a rigid set of criteria to meet. It is also important to recognise that becoming “hidden” may not be a linear process and does not necessarily occur in clear stages or progressions (Chan and Lo 2014). A young person may experience disengagements and seclusion to varying degrees over time, particularly due to increasingly precarious and temporary employment and skills-training conditions (Antonucci et al. 2014). This approach can be useful for future studies, and more research is required to understand this further and develop fully the construction of a dynamic spectrum to analyse “hidden-ness”.

Policy and Practice Implications

The findings of this study in Hong Kong and Scotland make an important contribution to youth policies and practices in these contexts, particularly in relation to the timely issues of youth unemployment and disengagement. While “hidden youth” has occupied the public and policy debates in Hong Kong for over 10 years, there has been relatively little effort to challenge the assumptions that underpin these discussions. This study stimulates further reflections and controversies about the connectedness and sociability of “hidden” young people. It is suggested that they are not necessarily as lonely and isolated as previously assumed in the public and policy rhetoric. It will be important for policy-makers and youth practitioners to recognise that being “hidden” can be a positive choice for young people, and not necessarily an indication of one’s withdrawal and “extreme” disconnection from “being social” (Wong and Ying 2006). This is especially relevant when considering this study’s findings on “hidden” young

people's extensive digital interactions inside the bedroom. This can shift how policies and practices envision and approach the provision of support for "hidden" young people. They do not necessarily lack willingness or interest to associate and form relations with people, as commonly assumed by policy and media commentators; this study suggests that young people become secluded and more attached to digital forms of social interactions as they are marginalised and lack genuine opportunities in employment and education. As young people become more disengaged from work and education, digital interactions can be especially significant to how they feel connected to society. Policy-makers and practitioners could benefit from considering the interplay of "push" and "pull" factors for young people to become "hidden", as observed in this study.

In contrast to Hong Kong, in Scotland "hidden youth" is a relatively under-researched issue and there is little awareness of the term among policy-makers and the youth work sector. This makes the findings of this study in this context especially relevant. Issues such as "NEET" and social exclusion dominated the recent Scottish policy debates, and the concerns have focused on youth unemployment and poverty (Scott and Mooney 2009). This research offers a useful extension to these discussions and fills an important empirical gap. Prior to this study, there was limited knowledge on the existence and experience of "hidden youth" in the Scottish context. This study provides new evidence and offers a window to begin to consider and discuss Scottish young people who are being "hidden" more. This highlights the need to diversify and expand the current understandings of youth disengagement based on NEET and social exclusion in policies. Conversely, as illustrated by this study, young people who are marginalised and disengaging from work and education could also become secluded in the bedroom. The evidence from this research can have a significant impact in reframing the policy discussions in Scotland about disengaged youth. The concept of "hidden youth" is useful to be considered and discussed further in this context. Nonetheless, it is important to be cautious in its implementation, particularly in avoiding the creation of stigma on being "hidden" or imposing a negative labelling effect on young people. It would be important to not single out certain young people, such as by introducing a specific "hidden youth" policy or fashion a new categorisation of young people who are in need. There is, however, need to recognise the varied experiences and responses from young people who face barriers and precarious conditions to enter employment and education. Using the concept of "hidden-ness", this study identified young people in Scotland who were disengaging from work and school to varying degrees and started to

be more secluded physically and not going outside. Policy-makers and youth practitioners in Scotland could therefore also introduce and address discussions based on this concept; it helps illustrate a range of experiences of seclusion linked to having limited opportunities in employment and education and feeling unfulfilled. A policy brief designed for Scottish policy-makers and youth practitioners has been written to support delivering this research impact (see Appendix III).

To conclude, this thesis argues that young people's different motivations and their experience of "being social" are interdependent. Crucially, the evidence highlights potential cross-over between digital and physical interactions in the process of "being social". Moreover, tensions engaging in the virtual and physical worlds are emphasised. The study therefore concludes that the young people's high levels of digital interactions could be a *reaction* to their experiences of powerlessness and meaninglessness towards engaging in work and education (Castells 1997). Young people could feel pushed to the limit by structural barriers and "precariousness" in contemporary labour market and education, and found solace through digital forms of social interactions inside the bedroom. This study thus offers a more nuanced analysis of the lived experience of "hidden" young people and how they engage in the "social". The multiplicity and complexities of how "hidden" young people are "being social" provides an interesting discussion of the "social" and disengagement in the contemporary world. It highlights the need to develop more critical discussions of how young people socialise, and the need to address the increased complexities and fluidity of "being social" in the digital age.

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Appendix I — Interview Schedules

Interview Schedule—with Young People Who Have Left School

- Brief introduction of interview schedule and participant information sheet, let interviewee ask questions
- Main Question: What do you usually like to do? How do you normally spend your day?
 - Follow-up: Do you prefer doing things on your own, don't want to go out or interact with other people?
 - Hint: like to stay at home, video/online games, sleeping, watching TV, comic books, “hide” in their room
- Why do you like staying at home/your own room?
 - What do you think about getting/finding a job?
 - Lost interest in work—conditions too harsh/money too little
 - Work environment (early mornings, yell at by the boss)
 - Difficult experience in previous work
 - Pressure from fast-changing society and competition
 - Difficult to find work/there is no work
 - Don't know what kind of work to do
 - Feel lost and confused, anxious
 - Issues of low qualifications/poor school results
 - Lack of confidence/feeling belittled
 - Hope and expectation about the future
 - What about going back to school?
 - Why/Do you prefer to stay at home/being alone?
 - Hide from the world, don't want to see others
 - Spending a long-time on video games/digital world
 - Lack of finances to go out, lack of resources
 - Family influence on not looking for jobs
 - Family provision, expectations of support and protection
 - Family situation and independence
 - Who do you live with? Do you have your own space?
 - What do you parents do? How far did they get with school?
 - Do you feel any pressure from your family to become independent?
 - Expectation to find a job, make money, leave family home
 - What do you think about making money?
- Is there anyone you have an especially good relationship with? Why?
 - Is there someone you like to be with or like to see? Makes you want to get out of home more?
 - Different feelings about family, friends, online friends, peers and neighbours/old school mates
 - Prefer to have small group of close friends? Why?
 - Different ways of communicating: face-to-face versus online?
 - Use of technology: smartphone apps, social media, games, tablets, skype
- What about your relationship with the staff at the council/organisation? What's your experience? How does it feel like to interact with them?
 - Anyone else, like government departments, service organisations, social workers, school teachers do you have interactions with?
- Conclusion and ask if there is anything else they want to talk about. Explain and sign the consent form. If needed, can follow-up interviews be arranged?

Interview Schedule—with Young People Who Have Stayed in School

- Brief introduction of interview schedule and participant information sheet, let interviewee ask questions
- Main Question: What do you usually do after-school? How do you normally spend your day?
 - Follow-up: would you prefer doing things on your own, don't want to go out or interact with other people?
 - Hint: like to stay at home, video/online games, sleeping, watching TV, comic books, "hide" in their room
- Why do you like staying at home/your own room?
 - What do you think about getting/finding a job after you finish school?
 - Lost interest in work—conditions too harsh/money too little
 - Work environment (early mornings, yell at by the boss)
 - Difficult experience in previous work
 - Pressure from fast-changing society and competition
 - Difficult to find work/there is no work
 - Don't know what kind of work to do
 - Feel lost and confused, anxious
 - Issues of low qualifications/poor school results
 - Lack of confidence/feeling belittled
 - Hope and expectation about the future
 - What about being in school?
 - Why do you prefer to stay at home/being alone?
 - Hide from the world, don't want to see others
 - Spending a long-time on video games/digital world
 - Lack of finances to go out, lack of resources
 - Family influence on not looking for jobs
 - Family provision, expectations of support and protection
 - Family situation and independence
 - Who do you live with? Do you have your own space?
 - What do you parents do? How far did they get with school?
 - Do you feel any pressure from your family to become independent?
 - Expectation to find a job, make money, leave family home
 - What do you think about making money?
- Is there anyone you have an especially good relationship with? Why?
 - Is there someone you like to be with or like to see? Makes you want to get out of home?
 - Different feelings about family, friends, online friends, peers and neighbours/old school mates
 - Prefer to have small group of friends? Why?
 - Different ways of communicating: face-to-face versus online?
 - Use of technology: smartphone apps, social media, games, tablets, skype
- What about your relationship with the school teachers? What's your experience? How does it feel like to interact with them?
 - Anyone else, like government departments, service organisations, social workers, school teachers you have interactions with?
- Conclusion and ask if there is anything else they want to talk about. Explain and sign the consent form. If needed, can follow-up interviews be arranged?

Interview Schedule—with Youth Workers

- Brief introduction of interview schedule, let interviewee ask questions
- In your experience of working here, what kind of work do you do for young people who are no longer in school? What kind of services do you provide?
 - Hint: Activities Agreement, getting employment, skills training
 - What characteristics do the young people you work with usually have in common?
 - Type of qualification, motivation, family income, family relationships
- Are there any young people you work with have a tendency to hide themselves at home, and appear to be disengaged from society?
 - What are their usual characteristics? How might they be different from other young people you work with?
 - lost interest in working and studying, prefer to stay at home rather than going out, prefer not to talk to friends or family, play a lot of computer games/surf the Internet
 - From your experience, why do you think they shut themselves at home?
 - low qualification, motivation, family income, poor family relationships, addiction to internet/gaming, low social skills
- Do you think there are young people who want to shut themselves at home, but still keep going to school, say in 4th or 5th year, also as well?
 - If not, why do they not want to stay in school? Do they leave school as soon as they can? Why?
 - Are there any reasons that they might want to keep going to school?
- When you identify young people who shut themselves at home a lot, and not working, not studying, how do you deal with that? Can you share your experience?
 - Home visits, outreach, guidance/advice, training courses, activities
 - How do the young people react to you trying to help them?
 - Passive in responding or ignore, not interested to communicate, not know how to communicate with others
 - What do you think the reasons are for them to react this way?
 - Difficult to initiate contact, low self-esteem, difficult to get along with others, limited time and resources
 - Does their reaction improve over time? What changes?
 - Persistent contact, get alongside their interests, increase trust
- What do you think is the best way to build a good relationship and interaction with young people who shut themselves at home?
 - How to communicate and interact with them better?
 - What do you do differently in comparison to other people in their lives, like friends, family? Do you interact with them differently?
 - What do you do to help or positively influence them? Success stories?
- Conclusion and ask if there is anything else they want to talk about. Explain and sign the consent form.

Interview Schedule—with Parents

- Brief introduction of interview schedule, let interviewee ask questions
- Main Question: In your observation, what does your child usually do? How do they normally spend their day?
 - Would they prefer doing things on their own/not prefer to socialise, don't want to go out or interact with other people?
 - like to stay at home, video/online games, sleeping, watching TV, comic books, “hide” in their room
 - Do they tend to stay at home/in their room a lot?
 - Characteristics: not working, not studying, not going out, tend to not willing to interact with friends or family, bedroom door closed often
- How do you feel about your child not going to work/not continuing to study?
 - Finding work/doing work is difficult, doesn't really matter
 - Competition and change in the society is fast, can't do much about it
 - If they don't want to work, can't force them
 - What is your level of expectation for your child to work and make money, and support the family back?
 - Financial burden, pressure
 - There's no need?
 - What if they can't find work for a long time?
 - Provide life-long support and provision for the child (Confucian underpinning in Hong Kong)?
 - Provide support and protection
 - Giving pressure
- How will you describe your relationship with your child? How do you get along?
 - How do you interact with them? Any success stories to share?
 - Communication with each other, deep talks
 - Providing guidance/advice
 - Encourage them to go out/work
 - Any specific ways to interact with them better?
 - What's their relationship with others like (such as relatives, friends, neighbours, social workers, government officials)? How are they different from your way of interact with your child?
- Conclusion and ask if there is anything else they want to talk about. Explain and sign the consent form. If needed, can follow-up interviews be arranged?

Appendix II — Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms

“HIDDEN YOUTH”: UNDERSTANDING SOCIALLY WITHDRAWN YOUNG PEOPLE

INFORMATION SHEET FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

INTERVIEW

We will just talk normally about your daily life and your relationship with others. You just have to talk about your experience and your view. Feel relaxed in the interview.

The interview will last for about an hour. You will be audio recorded anonymously. The recordings will be destroyed after analysis.


PURPOSE

The purpose of this PhD research is to understand the lives of socially withdrawn young people in Scotland and Hong Kong, and listen to their views and experience of daily life.

PROTECT YOUR IDENTITY

The interview is completely anonymous, so no one will know who you are. Your personal information will not be released anywhere in the research. You will not be forced to talk about things you do not want to. But if there is anything illegal or someone’s life is in danger, it might be reported.

The interview will be handled and analysed by the interviewer alone. The findings and quotes may be presented to academics and other stakeholders to understand young people more.

 THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

Mark T.O. Wong PhD Researcher in Social Policy - e-mail: m.t.o.wong@sms.ed.ac.uk - Tel: 07884 230 615
School of Social and Political Sciences, Chrystal Macmillan Building, The University of Edinburgh, EDINBURGH, United Kingdom EH8 9LD

**“HIDDEN” YOUTH: UNDERSTANDING
SOCIALLY WITHDRAWN YOUNG PEOPLE**

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PRACTITIONERS

LOOKING FOR...

Teachers or practitioners who work with socially withdrawn young people (between the age of 16 and 20, who often tend to hide themselves at home, and disengaged from interacting with other people.)

PURPOSE

The purpose of this PhD research is to understand the lives of socially withdrawn young people in Scotland and Hong Kong, and listen to their views and experience of daily life.

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

The interview will be about an hour, in the style of an open, normal daily conversation. You will be asked to talk about:

- 1) The work you provide for socially withdrawn young people.
- 2) Your experience of approaching them and working with them.
- 3) Your relationship with them and good practice of interacting with them.

PROTECT YOUR IDENTITY

The interview is completely anonymous, and every effort will be made to ensure that participants are not identifiable. No personal information will be released anywhere in the research. Interviews will be recorded anonymously and destroyed at the end of the research. The research will only be used for academic purposes to understand young people more.



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

**“HIDDEN” YOUTH: UNDERSTANDING
SOCIALLY WITHDRAWN YOUNG PEOPLE**

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARENTS

INTERVIEW

We will just talk normally about your child’s daily social life and your relationship with your child. You just have to talk about your experience and your view. Feel relaxed in the interview.

The interview will last for about an hour. You will be audio recorded anonymously. The recordings will be destroyed after analysis.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this PhD research is to understand the lives of socially withdrawn young people in Scotland and Hong Kong, and listen to their views and experience of daily life.

PROTECT YOUR IDENTITY

The interview is completely anonymous, and every effort will be made to ensure that participants are not identifiable.

No personal information will be released anywhere in the research.

Interviews will be recorded anonymously and destroyed at the end of the research. The research will only be used for academic purposes to understand young people more.



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

Mark T.O. Wong, PhD Researcher in Social Policy – e-mail: m.t.o.wong@sms.ed.ac.uk – Tel: 07884 230 615
School of Social and Political Sciences, Chrystal Macmillan Building, The University of Edinburgh, EDINBURGH, United Kingdom EH8 9LD

**“HIDDEN YOUTH”: UNDERSTANDING
SOCIALLY WITHDRAWN YOUNG PEOPLE**

CONSENT FORM

Please read the information sheet carefully before completing this section. By signing this consent form, you agree that you will take part in this research and fully understood the following:

- I know that it is up to me whether or not I want to take part in this interview
- I have read and understood the Interview Information Sheet and have been given a chance to ask questions.
- I agree to take part in this interview, which will include being interviewed and recorded.
- My words may be quoted, but my personal details such as name, phone number and address will not be revealed .
- I am not being rewarded financially or otherwise for my participation.
- I can withdraw from this interview at any time

Signature

Full Name

Date

Appendix III — Policy Brief

Understanding Social Disengagement in the Digital Age: 'Hidden Youth' in Hong Kong and Scotland

BRIEFING PAPER

Mark Tsun On Wong, PhD in Social Policy/Research Assistant, University of Edinburgh

Executive Summary

Young people could shut themselves in the bedroom and become attached to online interactions, as they face exclusions in work and school. This paper provides evidence that young people's high levels of digital engagements are a *reaction* to their experiences of un-fulfilment and precarity. The role of technologies is highlighted as crucial and complex for disengaged young people in the digital age.

BACKGROUND

There has been growing interest in youth research about young people who are disengaged and marginalised in society. Issues such as Not in Education, Employment and Training ("NEET"), social exclusion, and rising insecurities in young people's transitions have become dominant concerns not only in youth studies but also policy communities¹.

This paper focuses on understanding **young people in Scotland and Hong Kong who lock themselves in the bedroom** for months and years on end. This emerging phenomenon is commonly referred to as "**hidden youth**" in East Asia. More than 1 million young people are found to be "hidden" in Japan alone². Latest figures in Hong Kong estimate that >41,000 young people (5% of local youth population) are disengaged and "hiding" in their bedrooms³. Research shows that barriers to participate in work and education could lead to young people becoming self-secluded. However, this remains to be a new and under-researched area, especially in western contexts including Scotland.

“
Nobody sees me anymore...I have been in my room, without playing PS3 or watching TV...Just sitting in the dark, texting my pals and that.
—Gary, 15 years old, Scotland
”



Young people "hiding" in the bedroom

RESEARCH DESIGN & RESULTS

This research attempts to address such gap by conducting an exploratory study in Scotland and Hong Kong. The contexts were chosen due to social disengagements being especially prominent but discussed differently. 12 qualitative interviews with

¹ Furlong A. and Cartmel F. (2007) *Young People and Social Change: New Perspectives*, New York: Open University Press, 2nd Edition.

² Saito, T. (1998) *Social Withdrawal: Adolescence Without End (Shakaiteki Hikikomori: Owaranai Shishunski)*, Translated from Japanese by J. Angles, 2013, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

³ Wong, P. W., Li, T. M., Chan, M., et al. (2015) "The Prevalence and Correlates of Severe Social Withdrawal (Hikikomori) in Hong Kong: A Cross-sectional Telephone-based Survey Study", *The International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 61 (4): 330–42.

POLICY & SERVICES IMPLICATIONS

Digital dimensions of social connections will be increasingly important in young people's everyday lives.

The concept of disengagement will change and become more complex in the digital age.

How does this affect the way we think about and work with young people?

Can and should we start talking about "hidden" young people in Scotland?

Is the concept useful in this context—for academics, youth policies and practitioners?

How is it different from previous Scottish policy debates?

What are some of the cautions in implementation, such as introducing another label?

"hidden" young people were conducted in Hong Kong. Similarly, 20 took place in Scotland. The participants were aged 15-20 and were constituted by a mix of genders, socio-economic backgrounds, and degrees of disengagements. Majority of participants had been "hiding" in their bedrooms for 3-12 months, but in some cases were up to 2-4 years. The interviews focussed on young people's own accounts of their lived experience, perceptions towards social interactions and participation, and their everyday lives in the bedroom. The result shows that "hidden" young people:

Felt a lack of genuine opportunities in the labour market and education

The participants felt powerless and found work and education meaningless. Being restricted to precarious work, they faced limited opportunities to fulfil their aspirations. This is linked to economic "austerity" in Scotland and competitive culture in Hong Kong. Young people felt hopeless towards their future in society.

The participants showed **contrasting levels of connectedness** in and outside of the bedroom. Various technological platforms allow "hidden" young people to socialise with large, diverse networks online. They had more digital interactions with peers, friends, and family members compared to face-to-face.

Were more interconnected with different communities in the digital world

Found digital interactions more exciting, various, flexible, convenient, and fluid

Young people in Hong Kong and Scotland felt more motivated to connect with others through digital media. Their engagements with society were revealed as complex.

If I start playing [online games], I will just never get out... PC is so much better than going outside. – Nathan, 16, Scotland

CONCLUSION

While "hidden" young people are largely disengaged from participation in work and education, **digital interactions can be especially significant to how they feel connected to society**. They are relying on emerging digital networks to find solace and seek alternative forms of social engagements, particularly inside the space of the bedroom. There is a complex interplay of "push" and "pull" factors for young people to become "hidden", and yet remain interconnected with people through a wide range of technological devices.