


halogen



beyond the surface

Understanding Youths and their Values



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introduction

The uncertainty and volatility of today's world bring about an increasing insecurity among our youths' about their future. In TODAY's Youth Survey 2021¹, a poll done with respondents between the ages of 18 and 35 about the impact of the pandemic found that 59% of them have become more cautious and fearful, and less than half said they are able to live their lives to the fullest because of the pandemic. **As our youths grow older and take up greater responsibilities, the ability to discern well and solve problems on the go is vital**, but it is easier said than done. Our behaviours and actions are often guided by the things that we value; things that are important to us. However, in a world where values and morals are called into question, **how then does a young person navigate through life and make decisions they are confident of?**

what we did / methodology

Halogen conducted a series of **focus group discussions (FGDs)** with youths to find out what their **core values** are, why these values are important to them, and how these values shape their behaviours and actions.

We invited youths from our network to participate and had **a total of 21 youths who joined us in the discussions**. These youths are **aged 14 to 19 years old**, coming from a mix of education institutions and socio-economic backgrounds. The profile of the youths can be found in the Annexe at the end of the report.

In our discussion, we started with a values-sort activity for youths to identify what their core values are. In a deck of 50 values cards, our youths engaged in a thoughtful process of self-discovery to determine their top 5 core values. After identifying their core values, we asked the youths to share why they picked these values, and explored how their core values influence their attitudes, behaviours, actions, and how they demonstrate these values in their everyday lives.

Naturally, as unique individuals, our youths picked out a range of values as their top 5 but across the groups, three common values themes emerged:

1
growth
competence

Having skills and knowledge to execute tasks, and striving for personal improvement in skills, knowledge, attitudes

2
empathy
communication

Ability to understand and identify with the feelings of another, to listen and express your ideas, thoughts, or feelings to someone else effectively

3
family & friends
love & affection

Being involved in close and affectionate relationships, having and maintaining a circle of friends and caring for the well-being of members of the family

In this report, we will shed light on some of our youths' hopes and aspirations, as well as their concerns and struggles, through the lens of the above three values themes. We will draw information from the discussions we had with the youths, as well as other news and research on youths in Singapore.

growth under pressure: navigating judgment and expectations

For a young person growing up in a world that is in a constant state of flux, the values of Growth and Competence are described as key ingredients for one to stay relevant and successful. Our youths are aware that they are currently living in a hyper-competitive environment. With rising news and stories from their peers about youth unemployment, failed university and job applications, the need for continuous learning and self-development situates at the forefront of their minds.

There is a looming sense of fear that they may not achieve their aspirations due to the increasingly high competition which adds pressure for them to do well. Despite the recent removal of mid-year exams as an effort to move away from an overemphasis on academic grades and inculcate a joy of learning², some of the youths we spoke with highlighted that this did not do much to alleviate the structural realities that they observe or face in their day to day. **They still hold a fairly fixed perception of grades being the key to unlocking favourable career opportunities in the future.** These youths hold a very practical view of the 'utility' of grades, citing that for certain occupational paths such as a doctor or a lawyer, institutions ultimately make selections based on one's academic ability. We also spoke with the less academically inclined youths and found that **there is a heavy focus on building an impressive extracurricular portfolio to elevate their resumes.** They are also not excluded from the highly competitive environment and recognise the necessity to excel in other areas outside of their academic studies.

Competence is important to me as we need jobs in the future and in our lives, competence and growth can aid and help us get there. Singapore is a competitive place, competence and growth can give us a better edge in life.

- Male, 17, Tertiary Student



Very realistically, good grades are important for a good future. Everything is labelled with academics, our grades are our currency.

- Male, 17, Awaiting University

Social norms dictate that better grades lead to more choices in life.

- Female, 18, Tertiary Student

A few of our youths also hold the perception that the narrative shift towards building up a portfolio simply adds an additional layer of stress and expectation for them. As their mindset towards grades remained unchanged, introducing the concept of chasing one's interests and passions to build up a portfolio then feels like an additional checklist item they have to complete to boost their profiles, rather than an alternative route to success.

It's important to have a good GPA and a good portfolio. Can't say that grades don't matter. As much as we want to believe that, in reality, we don't. On top of that, they are now looking for stuff other than grades, like your portfolio, which just adds to the stress.

- Male, 18, Tertiary Student

I feel lost in this situation because what are we supposed to focus on then? (Grades or portfolio?) If grades aren't important anymore, why is it that some people who get 90 rank points but still only get one university offer?

- Female, 18, Awaiting University

To youths, it makes them feel as though they are constantly being judged by others. Previously, their sense of worth or value was tied strongly to their grades, but the shift over time is now on how well they are able to build their portfolio. **Their perception is that other people are always coming up with new markers to assess them.** These compound into additional stress and anxiety over achieving their goals and aspirations, which can lead some to feel a sense of inadequacy over the various items they need to check off in their resume.

I have the resources to achieve my goal (of being a doctor), but the difficulty is taking the step forward as potential failure is daunting and makes me consider whether I want to push myself or not. It's a mental block, a fear of failure, judgement, and incapability. I struggle between thinking I'm delusional or am I chasing pavements or is this actually something I can work towards.

- Female, 18, Awaiting University

Thinking about my financial situation, GPA, and portfolio, it is very demoralising for me. I'm thinking, is it even worth it to put in that much effort for a role that I might not even be able to achieve?

- Male, 18, Tertiary Student

The age of youth is meant to be a period of exploration to uncover one's interests and purposefully dream about one's future. However, with the perceived judgement faced by present-day youths, it can often leave them with a crippling sense of helplessness, hindering them from fulfilling their truest potential.

Valuing Growth and Competence is a good, and even necessary, to keep up with an ever-evolving world. However, the approach that our youths seem to be taking towards personal development is driven more by fear of losing out, compiled with stress and pressure from others to succeed. It is done less so from an intrinsic motivation or joy of learning and growing. In the long run, this fear-driven mindset may not be sustainable or healthy, as youth can get burnt out or discouraged when they encounter failure, resulting in the value of Growth and Competence becoming a burden to them.

2 building bridges: the call for empathy and respect in a fragmented world

With access to information at their fingertips, our youths have some degree of awareness and understanding of the geopolitical issues happening around the world today. **Against the backdrop of global tensions underscores a desire for peace, understanding, and empathy across borders.**

On a more personal level, access to social media has enabled our youths to interact with people from numerous cultures and communities. Coupled with living in a globalised country like Singapore, our youths get to regularly engage with people from other cultures. As they age and expand their socio-cultural interactions, they also encounter more people of diverse backgrounds who face challenges different from them. Whether it is meeting someone from a different culture, or socio-economic status, or someone who has a developmental or mental disorder, **the youths in our discussion groups highlighted the importance of valuing Empathy, Respect, and Communication** to learn and better understand others different from them.



We live in a world where we have to communicate with all kinds of people, so we have to treat others with respect even if our values conflict with each other. We still need to find a common ground, agree to disagree.

- Male, 19, Awaiting University

I would like to see more equality in the future but it is in human nature to want more for themselves in life, so this is going to be a difficult thing to break down.

- Male, 15, Secondary School Student

People need to start caring more about what is happening around them. We should be more concerned with those in and outside of our society, to be intentional in caring for things outside of their own problems and their own life.

- Female, 19, Awaiting University

Among our youths, there is a desire for peace and understanding amidst this complex landscape. They believe that the value of Empathy and Respect are not just virtues, but essential tools for fostering understanding, resolving disputes, and building bridges across divides. It helps them navigate the complexities of the world with insight and compassion. However, it is not always easy for our youths to live these values out. Some of the youths we spoke to have the perception that both people and nations are becoming increasingly selfish and individualistic. The prevailing narrative of a competitive world has a tendency to foster a mentality of self-preservation, at both national and individual levels. The recent conflicts and wars echo a heightened sense of nationalism among countries, each fighting for their nation's interests. Similarly, at an individual level, the increasing competition also leads to our youths feeling like they are living in a "dog-eat-dog" world and thus feels almost natural or inevitable that people now appear more self-centred and disconnected from values like Empathy and Respect for others.

Moreover, living in a digital age also presents unique obstacles. It is easy for online spaces to turn into echo chambers, amplifying certain perspectives while marginalising others. The youths we spoke to shared that oftentimes, they find it hard to sieve through what is true or false online, and are mindful of falling into the trap of misinformation. As much as they want to gather information to understand these conflicts, they struggle to discern fact from fiction and it hampers their ability to engage with diverse viewpoints critically different from them.

We have a lot more access to resources now thanks to tech, but it might lead us to feel disconnected from other things in life. May lose a sense of humanness like empathy towards others.

- Female, 18, Awaiting University

There are conflicting echo chambers on social media, and it looks like we are getting further and further away from living in harmony.

- Male, 19, Awaiting University

Trust is very important in today's society when we have to interact with each other, when we need to discuss feelings. If there isn't a safe space, or if you don't trust someone, it's hard to even enter a conversation with them.

- Male, 17, Tertiary Student

Despite these challenges, some of our youths expressed interest in participating in dialogues and discussions to openly talk about the issues surrounding the world today and to hear perspectives shared by other fellow youths. **A few of those who joined our focus group discussion were motivated by these dialogues, and are actively seeking out spaces or opportunities to engage in conversations on topics that matter to them.**

Recognising that our youths are our future, there has been a rise in the number of panels and dialogue sessions hosted for youths to discuss key societal issues while providing them with a platform to voice out their thoughts and ideas for policy planning. One such opportunity is the National Youth Dialogues organised in partnership between the National Youth Council (NYC) Singapore and the Global Shapers Community, where a series of seven dialogues are held for youths to have conversations with the goal of strengthening Singapore's social compact³. **As our youths navigate the complexities of living in a world that feels increasingly disconnected, providing them with safe spaces to come together to share, discuss, understand, and work together becomes vital to help them achieve the Respect and Empathy they desire in their interactions with others.**



3 anchored yet adrift: balancing relationships amidst complexities



Underpinning the competitiveness and conflict that our youths face in their lives are the values of Family, Friends, Love, and Affection. Even though they may be living in a world and time where they feel stretched, stressed, or scared, **several of our youths shared that their main source of comfort and security lies in relationships close to them.** It is the relationships that they build and maintain with their loved ones that keep them grounded and provide them with the support they need, to navigate the challenges of growing up. As they shared about the value of their relationships, they also expressed a desire to spend more time with their loved ones, recognising that they are people most important to them.

My family is the group of people that I fall back on and go to in the good and bad times. There's no other group of people who loves me unconditionally like that.

- Male, 19, Awaiting University

Family is the most important to me. They provide me with a home to stay in, without them I'd be nothing.

- Male, 18, Tertiary Student

However, in some of the groups, our youths shared that they often struggle to find time for quality interactions with their loved ones, largely due to their busy schedules filled with academic, extracurricular, and at times, work commitments. **The pressure to excel in the various above-mentioned areas leaves little room for spending meaningful time with family and friends.**

I don't spend a lot of time with my family because I am home alone a lot. One of my brothers stays in a dorm in university and another is serving in National Service, so I don't have a lot of time to catch them. I also spend a lot of time on my 2 CCAs, and I am also the head of counsel. I only have weekends to spend with my family and this teaches me to treasure the time with them more.

- Male, 19, Awaiting University

This is a prevalent struggle that everyone, not just youths, faces. Although, the implications may be greater for a young person as they are at the stage of life where forming connections, creating notable memories, and having good relationships with others, take precedence in their lives. Hence, they may feel more of a struggle to find balance across their various commitments.

Another dilemma that some of our youths brought up was the mode of communication. **When asked about their digital spending habits, a few of them acknowledged that they spend an excessive amount of time online and a fairly large portion of their online usage is to communicate or interact with their family and friends.**

I feel like we are too connected. On one hand, there are so many options for us to choose from and we have a lot of access to information and updates, but at the same time, it doesn't feel like we are truly connected because the relationships are all very surface level and shallow online.

- Male, 18, Awaiting University

I did a dopamine detox for 2 months, abstained from all social media except for Whatsapp and Telegram because I need them to talk to my friends.

- Male, 18, Tertiary Student

This, in part, was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic which isolated youths from their peers, and relegated interactions with one another to a square on a screen⁴. While digital platforms provide youths with a convenient way to stay connected, the quality of these engagements is limited and adds to their alarming amount of screen time.

Recognising the potential adverse effects of excessive screen time on their health and well-being, some youths have also expressed their concern and intention to cut down their screen time. Despite that, some are hesitant to do so because they view the time spent on social media as a form of connecting with their peers - whether it is to chat with their friends or to stay updated on news and trends which serve as conversation topics. It leaves them struggling to maintain balanced, yet meaningful relationships.

I see social media usage as a time to connect with my friends. I do feel I'm using it a bit too much and try to limit it, but it's still a necessity.

- Female, 18, Tertiary Student



I love spending time with friends and family, and I especially value real-life interactions.

- Male, 18, Tertiary Student

Though our youths desire to communicate in a deep and meaningful way, various tensions hinder them from living out the values of Family, Friends, Love, and Affection in their everyday lives. With relationships being the core of their comfort and security, their struggle to juggle multiple commitments and worry over excessive screen time highlights a need to support them in effectively managing their priorities in life.

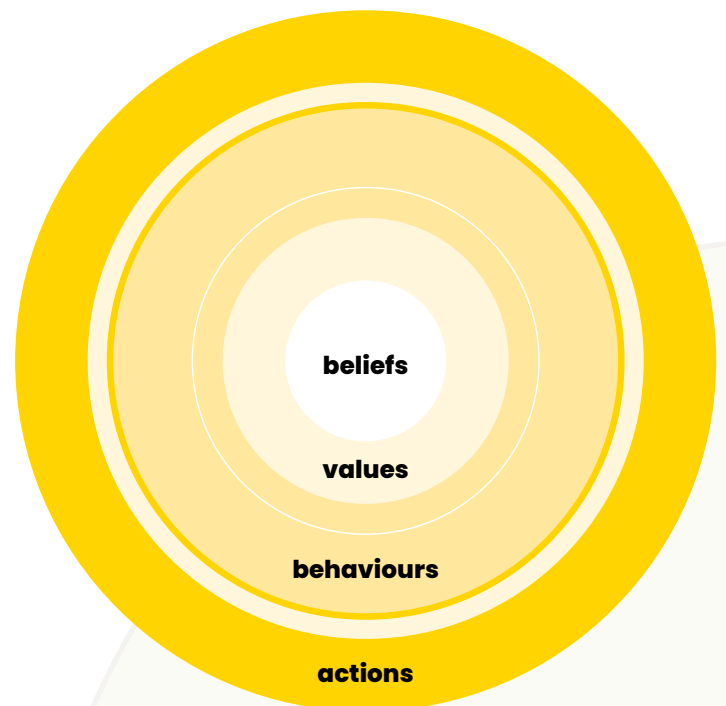
4 engaging beyond the surface

This report has highlighted the 3 core themes of values that our youths of today hold close to and unpacks how their values and beliefs about the world shape their aspirations and actions. **At Halogen, our approach to engaging young people is rooted in the Beliefs, Values, Behaviours, Actions (BVBA) Model.** This is an adaptation from cognitive behavioural psychology, and the rationale behind it is that **our actions and behaviours are driven by our values and beliefs.**

Everyone is made up of their beliefs, values, actions, and behaviours. One's beliefs about themselves and the world around them will form their values, and it is through what they value that will shape their behaviour and determine the actions they choose to take. Though it may be easier or more intuitive to judge or learn about someone based on their actions alone, if we know what they value instead, we can speak and engage with our youths on a more meaningful and deeper level.

In our discussion with the youths, through learning what their core values are, we sought to unpack their beliefs to get a deeper understanding of why they choose to behave or act the way they do. However, we recognise that as our world continues to evolve, the beliefs and values of our youths may change as well.

As youth developers, it is important that we keep pulse on our youths to understand them and uncover patterns of potentially negative thoughts or misconstrued beliefs about themselves or the world. This allows us to target mindsets and characters that can support and guide them to build a strong foundation and embark on a path where they can flourish in the future. With these insights, we hope it brings new perspectives to how we view the youths we engage, as well as our approach to understanding youths.



If you are interested in learning more about how we use values as a means to engage and develop our youths, scan the QR code below to indicate your interest and we will get in touch!



references

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³National Youth Council Singapore. (2022). National Youth Dialogues. <https://www.nyc.gov.sg/research-engagement/national-youth-dialogues>

⁴Ong, J. (2023, March 19). Relationships weakened, passions lost: Teens reveal why they were hit harder during pandemic, analysts share how youth can move on. Today Online. Retrieved June 6, 2024, from <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/how-covid-19-restrictions-impacted-teenagers-2132761>

annexe a: youth profile

#	Gender	Race	Age
1	Male	Chinese	14
2	Male	Chinese	15
3	Male	Chinese	15
4	Male	Indian	16
5	Male	Chinese	16
6	Male	Indian	17
7	Male	Chinese	17
8	Female	Chinese	17
9	Male	Malay	17
10	Female	Chinese	17
11	Female	Chinese	17
12	Male	Filipino	18
13	Male	Mixed Chinese Malay	18
14	Female	Chinese	18
15	Male	Chinese	18
16	Female	Chinese	18
17	Female	Chinese	18
18	Male	Chinese	18
19	Male	Chinese	19
20	Male	Chinese	19
21	Female	Chinese	19

annexe b: list of values

#	Value	#	Value	#	Value
1	Wisdom	18	Freedom	35	Beauty
2	Open-Mindedness	19	Decisiveness	36	Risk-taking
3	Power	20	Creativity	37	Harmony
4	Quality	21	Intelligence	38	Competence
5	Prosperity/Wealth	22	Communication	39	Competition
6	Family	23	Challenge	40	Diversity
7	Patience	24	Spirituality/Faith	41	Equality
8	Loyalty	25	Variety	42	Curiosity
9	Service	26	Effectiveness	43	Dependability
10	Autonomy	27	Friendship	44	Discipline
11	Growth	28	Health	45	Innovation
12	Love/Affection	29	Respect	46	Happiness
13	Truth	30	Security	47	Teamwork
14	Hope	31	Honesty/Integrity	48	Humour
15	Independence	32	Trust	49	Simplicity
16	Flexibility	33	Empathy	50	Productivity
17	Strength	34	Achievement/Success		

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