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## Promoting positive youth development in Hong Kong: A participatory action approach to youth-led and art-based learning

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### ABSTRACT

In this study, the effect of positive youth development on collaborative fashion design programmes was examined through the example of the ‘Stitchable Chinese Art’ fashion design competition and fashion show 2024, co-organised by the Arts Education Section of Hong Kong Education Bureau’s Curriculum Development Institute and the School of Fashion and Textiles of Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Student attitudes were quantitatively evaluated before and after participating in the competition’s workshops and fashion show. The results indicated that collaborative fashion design activities had a positive impact on youth development, particularly by enhancing the confidence and caring domains of the 5Cs framework.

**Keywords:** positive youth development, youth-led art-based learning, participatory action research, 5Cs framework, fashion design.

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### 1. Introduction

In 2024, the ‘Stitchable Chinese Art’ fashion design competition was co-organised by the Arts Education Section of the Hong Kong Education Bureau’s Curriculum Development Institute and the School of Fashion and Textiles of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University to promote positive youth development. This study was conducted to determine whether adolescents in Hong Kong experience positive youth development during collaborative fashion design activities and how they perceive these experiences. Youth development programmes are designed to facilitate a positive and healthy adolescence, enabling young people to gain support and recognition by increasing their opportunities to interact with various stakeholders and learn new skills, broadening their horizons in an empowering

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environment. This study evaluated positive youth development through two key frameworks: the 5Cs model (Lerner, 2009), which refers to competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring; and the three quality dimensions of youth programmes, namely youth engagement, youth community participation, and youth retention (Jones, 2006). The specific objectives of this study are:

- to explore the concept of art-based participatory learning,
- to define positive youth development and review the 5Cs framework,
- to review the notion of youth-led collaboration,
- to introduce the collaborative fashion design programme ‘Stitchable Chinese Art’ Fashion Design Competition 2024, and
- to evaluate the youth positive development among Hong Kong adolescents based on the 5Cs framework and the 3 quality dimensions – youth engagement, youth participation, and youth retention.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Art-based participatory learning

Art is a medium through which individuals shape their identities, serving as a vehicle for self-expression that enables community members to process their relationships (Akimenko et al., 2017). Art can serve as a tool for data collection and analysis during research, as well as a problem-solving or knowledge-building activity (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2018). Research findings can also be presented through artistic mediums, which encourages the exploration of the effects generated by participants’ embodied experiences (Lafrenière & Cox, 2013). Recently, the popularity of art-based research has increased. In such research, drawings, collages, photographs, videos, environmental art, and other expressive media are used to explore, understand, and represent experiences.

Art-based research primarily comprises two domains. The first domain includes the art-making process, during which participants provide ideas and feedback throughout the stages of conception, planning, and execution, producing artistic works that become research materials, which can convey forms of knowledge different from those attained through traditional research methods (Kunt, 2020). The second domain comprises participatory methodologies that function as an intervention designed to empower participants (Nathan et al., 2023), with particular attention paid to the potential of art-based youth programmes (Ballard et al., 2023).

Participation in creative arts programmes promotes positive outcomes, such as empowerment, mental health, and skill-building, and prevents negative outcomes, such as school dropout (Charmaraman & Hall, 2011; Zarobe & Bungay, 2017). These programmes enhance youth confidence, art skills, and interpersonal abilities, with a particular focus on fostering a sense of social belonging (Ballard et al., 2023). Participatory action research increases youth well-being and community engagement through cyclical implementation that ensures flexibility, adaptability, and methodological development based on practical experience. It also fosters healthy relationships between adults and young people and promotes a sense of personal achievement through artwork, which is beneficial for the broader community (Lee et al., 2020).

### 2.2 Positive youth development

Positive youth development programmes focus on strengthening the skills and positive community relationships of young people (Benson, 2003; Lerner, 2009; Shek et al., 2019). These programmes provide systematic support that enables young people to integrate their potential and strengths with available resources over time. Positive youth development can be understood from a ‘relational developmental systems’ perspective because of the mutual interactions between individuals and their environment (Brandtstädter, 2007; Overton, 2010). Fostering cognitive, behavioural, and social relationship skills during adolescence can significantly and positively contribute to individual and societal development and transformation (Lerner, 2009).

In recent years, positive youth development has received increasing attention as a philosophy and practical approach that fosters healthy development among adolescents (Abdul Kadir & Mohd, 2021; Wong et al., 2022; Ballard et al., 2023). The Interagency Working Group on Youth Programmes defines positive youth development as an intentional, prosocial approach that productively engages youth in their communities, schools, organisations, peer groups, and families. This approach recognises,

applies, and builds upon young people's strengths, fostering positive outcomes by providing opportunities, nurturing positive relationships, and offering the support needed to develop leadership skills (Youth.Gov, 2019a). The Interagency Working Group on Youth Programmes devised a simple and easy-to-understand formula that describes how positive youth development can be achieved: *Positive Experiences + Positive Relationships + Positive Environments = Positive Youth Development* (Youth.Gov, 2019b).

Although the concept of positive youth development has been applied in various contexts, several key elements have been consistently emphasised, including young people's strengths, developmental plasticity, and internal (e.g., psychosocial competence) and external (e.g., community influence) developmental assets. Positive youth development is characterised by three core features: fostering positive, sustained relationships between young people and adults; providing activities that build essential life skills; and creating opportunities for young people to apply these skills as both participants in and leaders of meaningful community activities (Shek et al., 2019).

### 2.3 5Cs of positive youth development

Lerner et al. (2000) categorised the desired outcomes of positive youth development into five Cs: (i) *competence*, the ability to manage challenges, tasks, and stresses encountered throughout life in academic, social, and vocational settings; (ii) *confidence*, a positive self-identity and belief in one's worth and efficacy; (iii) *connection*, positive relationships with others, including family and community members and peers; (iv) *character*, standards of behaviour that promote social functioning through positive values, integrity, and moral commitment within society; and (v) *caring*, a sense of sympathy and empathy for others. These 5Cs are grounded in an ecological perspective that reflects the core concept of positive youth development. They are closely related to the mutually beneficial relationship between individuals and their surrounding environment, which contributes to the ecosystem and mitigates risky behaviours among young people.

The 5Cs framework (Lerner et al., 2005) serves as a universal model for measuring and understanding the outcomes of positive youth development. Many studies on positive youth development have confirmed that the components of the 5Cs framework are positively associated with various positive indicators, such as community contribution, school engagement, self-regulation, mental health, national pride, and well-being. Several studies have also examined various dimensions of the 5Cs framework and the weight distribution within it (Abdul Kadir & Mohd, 2021; Urke et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2023).

### 2.4 Youth-led collaboration

Youth-led collaboration refers to activities in which young people primarily generate ideas and make decisions, with adults offering assistance when required (Jones, 2006). This collaborative relationship between adults and young people has a major influence on the effectiveness of youth programmes and, thus on positive youth development. When adults follow the leadership of young people, foster a culture of engagement, supervise and create intermediate steps for task management, and challenge youth to reach their full potential, positive outcomes can be achieved (Larson & Angus, 2011).

Jones and Perkins (2005) developed the Involvement and Interaction Rating Scale to assess the quality of youth–adult relationships within community-based youth programmes. They examined the perceptions and experiences of young people and adults in relationships within community projects, with participants in youth-led collaborative projects expressing the most positive attitudes towards their involvement (Jones, 2006). During youth-led collaboration projects, adults intentionally minimise their involvement to maximise youth participation, with young people expressing positive views regarding their interactions and adults supporting their leadership potential and responsibility for the project.

Research suggests that young people can gain a sense of purpose and hope, experience self-discovery, find new ways to express themselves, gain social respect, and learn how to create inclusive communities through youth-led participatory art activities (Lee et al., 2020). These activities enable young leaders to work together on projects, creating positive outcomes through youth involvement.

Young people can bring fresh perspectives and creative solutions to problems and may express positive emotions stemming from their passion for the artistic products they create and the meaningful roles assigned to them. These opportunities empower young people to take charge and make decisions, fostering leadership skills and confidence.

### 3. Data and methodology

#### 3.1 Data collection

In this study, quantitative methods were adopted to evaluate positive development among Hong Kong adolescents during a collaborative fashion design programme. The analysis was conducted on the basis of the 5Cs framework and the three quality dimensions of youth programmes, namely, youth engagement, youth participation, and youth retention. The participation criteria were: (a) youth from aged 12–18 studying in the Hong Kong primary/secondary schools; (b) recruited by the school teachers and endorsed by the school principals; (c) competent to read and write (to comprehend all instructions and instructional materials); and (d) be able to be evaluated independently and be willing to contribute data for research. Those who had only recently learned art and design techniques within the previous six months and were unwilling to supply data for research were excluded.

Paper questionnaires administered both before and after the programme required approximately 15 minutes to complete to avoid boring the participants. All questionnaires were delivered to students during the first and last workshops. Content was presented in both traditional Chinese and English to ensure that the questionnaire could be easily understood by students from different educational backgrounds. The questionnaire recorded the names of the schools that the students attended to prevent the participants from attempting to answer the questionnaire more than once. The survey data were reviewed and carefully cleaned to ensure that no errors were present. This process was monitored by the research team to ensure data quality. All questionnaires were sent to the research team immediately after completion.

Before the study was commenced, ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of Hong Kong Polytechnic University. All programme participants were informed that their data would remain anonymous and would only be used for research purposes. Only the data of students who indicated their willingness to participate in the study by signing an informed consent form were included for analysis. This study was conducted in the absence of any conflicts of interest.

#### 3.2 Questionnaire design

The first part of the questionnaire contained questions on the students' physical and mental health within the 5Cs framework, along with criterion variables in the form of supplementary questions and scales examining whether the components of positive youth development were valid and consistent in the programme. The second part of the questionnaire was adapted from the assessment tool developed by Jones and Perkins (2005) and aimed to assess youth involvement, engagement, and retention to determine how shortlisted students participated in the programme, whether they became more engaged in their communities, and whether specific strategies increased their retention after the programme. These dimensions can ensure that students have quality experiences and remain fully engaged as active participants (Jones, 2006). The questionnaires measured the participants' thoughts and feelings before and after the workshops through a 5-point Likert scale. The scale's endpoints ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 2 (*disagree*), 3 (*neutral*), 4 (*agree*), and 5 (*strongly agree*). Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, and t tests were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 27.

#### 3.3 Programme - 'Stitchable Chinese Arts' fashion design competition

In 2024, the 'Stitchable Chinese Arts' fashion design competition was held to promote positive youth development in Hong Kong through fashion and textile design. This programme was designed to foster students' interest in Chinese art and culture, develop aesthetic awareness, and strengthen creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving skills. During the competition, students created fashionable clothing inspired by traditional Chinese art and culture. Through workshops on traditional Chinese clothing and the use of digital fashion tools and multimedia platforms, students explored the vibrant and rapidly changing fashion industry.



Fashion reflects how individuals perceive themselves and wish to be perceived by others. Both individuals and groups acquire fashion items and engage in fashionable lifestyles to express their identities and sense of belonging (Kalbaska et al., 2018). Participants in fashion design and textile creation have unique opportunities to express their values and potential while connecting with their communities through co-created products (Li et al., 2023). Crafts enable individuals to experience self-empowerment by acquiring skills and evaluating materials, ultimately promoting self-determination through the ability to exert control over one's life (Maidment & Macfarlane 2011). Additionally, fashion-related activities and performances serve as effective social design and intervention tools aimed at creating positive social change (Sarantou & Talavera, 2022).

In the first 'Stitchable Chinese Art' workshop, teachers provided information on basic fashion design approaches, the appreciation of Chinese art and cultural elements in fashion design, and the use of fabrics, colours, and garment shapes. This knowledge provided students with a more profound understanding of the materials and techniques that they could apply to their designs, enabling them to share ideas on how Chinese art and cultural elements can be integrated into fashion design. During subsequent workshops, participants were paired with fashion design students to discuss the steps required to transform their design drafts into a complete set of clothing. The garment-making process was conducted with instructor supervision, and professional advice was provided only when required, enabling the students to gain knowledge and complete their work more professionally and efficiently. These workshops followed a youth-led collaboration model, wherein young people take the lead in generating ideas and making decisions, with teachers providing support only when required (Jones, 2006). During the workshops, the fashion design proposals were student-driven, and the participants were actively involved in the garment-making process. Teachers and students, as key community members, collaborated as partners, enabling the students to gain technical skills and leadership



Figure 1. Student works showcased at the 'Stitchable Chinese Art' Fashion Show 2024.

training. Both parties worked together to frame design solutions in a partnership-driven cooperative model in alignment with the workshop model recommended by Youth.Gov (2019a). The final designs were publicly showcased in a fashion show held at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre on 29 August 2024 (Figure 1).

#### 4. Results and discussion

This study was conducted to determine whether a positive relationship exists between positive youth development and collaborative fashion design projects. A total of 20 primary and 30 secondary school students participated in the study, including 42 girls and 18 boys. Data were collected before and after the workshops to determine the effectiveness of fashion design as a medium for promoting positive youth development. Paired-samples *t* tests were used to determine the differences between the mean scores of the pretest and posttest questions on the 5Cs (competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring). A *p*-value of 0.05 or lower was considered statistically significant (Rietveld & van Hout, 2017).

#### 4.1 Students' thoughts and feelings before and after the workshops

The first part of the questionnaire revealed positive outcomes regarding the students' thoughts and feelings before and after the workshops. Specifically, the confidence and caring domains of the 5Cs framework exhibited significant improvements (Table 1).

The results indicated a significant enhancement in the confidence domain ( $t(49) = -4.543$ ,  $p < .05$ ), with means of 3.31 ( $n = 50$ ,  $SD = 0.983$ ) and 4.08 ( $n = 50$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ) at the pretest and posttest stages, respectively. Sufficient planning for success can improve confidence among young people, who often require confidence-boosting mechanisms. Confidence can positively affect students' willingness and enthusiasm to learn and practice new skills. Fostering a combination of self-efficacy, self-control, and self-regulation contributes to success. When young people can control their actions in new situations and feel competent enough to handle new tasks, their adaptability builds confidence (Snowman & McCown, 2015). Training motivates young people to practice new skills and increases their confidence (Clanton et al., 2014). Confidence enables young people to develop resilience, which in turn enables them to navigate challenges and setbacks more effectively. A participant from a primary school said that:

*"Through the workshops, I learned how to work with others to create something beautiful and meaningful. It was exciting to see how our ideas could come to life in the form of fashion. This experience helped me become more confident in sharing my thoughts and working as part of a team".*

The results also indicated a significant enhancement in the caring domain ( $t(49) = -4.330$ ,  $p < .05$ ), with means of 3.45 ( $n = 50$ ,  $SD = 0.867$ ) and 4.14 ( $n = 50$ ,  $SD = 0.764$ ) at the pretest and posttest stages, respectively. Students who feel sympathy and empathy for others and care about their peers are likely to become community leaders. Caring has a long-term ripple effect in providing students with support and understanding and enabling them to feel important, thereby improving their physical and mental development throughout their lives. After receiving this support, young people imitate others and assist them when required. This behaviour fosters the development of social skills, including communication, teamwork, and conflict resolution, which are essential for personal and professional success. These skills enable young people to care for others, requiring them to take initiative and responsibility, which are essential for effective leadership. A participant from a secondary school said that:

*"I learned that fashion is not just about aesthetics; it's a universal language that can bridge cultural gaps and foster meaningful relationships. Working with others helped me develop my communication skills and opened my eyes to the potential of collaborative creativity. I am grateful for the opportunity to be part of such an inspiring programme that empowers us to make a difference in our communities and beyond".*

Table 1.

Results of a Paired-Samples t-Test.

		N = 50			Paired T-Test		
	Pre/ post	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error of the mean	t value	Degrees of freedom	Significance (two-tailed)
Competence	Pre	3.27	0.908	0.13	-3.508	49	0.0010
	Post	3.88	0.726	0.104			
Confidence	Pre	3.31	0.983	0.14	-4.543	49	0.00004
	Post	4.08	0.64	0.091			
Connection	Pre	3.59	1.019	0.146	-1.245	49	0.2193
	Post	3.84	0.921	0.132			
Character	Pre	3.94	1.029	0.147	-2.875	49	0.0060
	Post	4.43	0.645	0.092			
Caring	Pre	3.45	0.867	0.124	-4.330	49	0.0001
	Post	4.14	0.764	0.109			

## 4.2 Views of the collaborative fashion design process

The second part of the questionnaire revealed that the students had a positive view of the collaborative fashion design process, with high overall satisfaction (Table 2). A mean score for each category between 1 and 2.4 was considered low, whereas scores between 2.5 and 3.4 were classified as average, and scores of 3.5 or higher were classified as high (Jones, 2006).

The scores for youth involvement, engagement, and retention were all high, reflecting an optimal outcome for positive youth development, as evidenced by the majority of participants expressing their willingness to remain active in the programme. This finding highlights how youth-driven programmes empower young people to lead and drive change (Jones, 2006). Art-based participatory programmes, such as the fashion design programme in this study, enable young people to develop active skills, contributing to their empowerment (Larson & Angus, 2011). In such programmes, young people assume decision-making roles and are provided with opportunities to improve their skills instead of merely participating in an activity. Participation in these programmes enables young people to practice and refine their leadership skills over time in a consistent and sustained manner (Jones, 2006).

*Youth involvement:* Strong involvement reflects the active participation of young people and their ability to collaborate with others, to assume leadership roles, and to perceive a sense of belonging, which makes them comfortable in sharing their ideas and welcoming others' opinions (Jones, 2006). The human effect is linked to meaning-making (Wetherell, 2012). In this study, all participants expressed positive attitudes towards youth involvement, and all students had full access to information designed to develop their social, intellectual, and leadership skills.

The fashion design programme enabled the participants to demonstrate ownership over their projects, fostering a youth-led learning approach. The students were motivated to embrace their programme responsibilities, taking advantage of the opportunity to ensure their ideas were heard, considered, and implemented (Jones, 2006). The study results indicated that primary and secondary school students felt comfortable with their peers of similar ages, which reduced the levels of discomfort during the workshops. A participant from a secondary school said that:

"Fashion lets me merge my personal story with our shared struggles. It is how we reclaim our voices together".

*Youth engagement:* High engagement refers to young people actively applying their learned life skills and seeking opportunities to participate as influential decision-makers in youth-driven programmes and initiatives, thereby contributing to their overall development (Jones, 2006).

During the fashion design programme, adults purposely minimised their involvement to bolster student participation. Students positively rated their interactions with adults because they were allowed to play a major role in project development. Likewise, adults expressed positive attitudes towards students exercising responsibility and leadership potential (Jones, 2006). Notably, some students perceived their decision-making roles as minimal and did not indicate that their projects involved partnership. A participant from a secondary school said that:

"Co-designing fashion products with other teammates improved my problem-solving skills, and collaborating with diverse teams prepared me for future real-world challenges".

*Youth retention:* High youth retention indicates success in retaining young people in programmes, demonstrated by young people consistently returning to their programmes on a daily, weekly, monthly, or even yearly basis (Jones, 2006). Programmes with high retention involve participants who choose to continue their engagement even when they have other options, such as similar programmes. Key factors include the attendance of enough but not too many caring and supportive adults throughout the programme, the participants' interest in the topics being addressed, and the opportunities presented to connect with different stakeholders to gain recognition for their efforts (Jones, 2006). These programmes also enable participants to make decisions, a challenge that some enjoy. A participant from a primary school said that:

"The fashion design programmes gave us a solid foundation in fashion and textile making, which proved to be incredibly helpful. I was recognised by my teammates for my contributions to the design project. It was a breakthrough moment that has left a lifelong impact on me".

Table 2.  
Results of a One-Sample t-Test (N = 50)

Question	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error of the mean	t value	Degrees of freedom	Significance (two-tailed)
<b>Youth involvement</b>						
You frequently took the initiative while participating in this programme.	4.000	0.707	0.101	29.698	49	<.001
You arrived at meetings or events on time.	4.286	0.736	0.105	31.251	49	<.001
You were fully committed to your programme duties.	4.367	0.636	0.091	37.089	49	<.001
You were very excited about your involvement with this programme.	4.490	0.582	0.083	41.991	49	<.001
You were involved at all levels of the programme.	4.592	0.574	0.082	43.773	49	<.001
Overall mean	4.347					
<b>Youth engagement</b>						
You are willing to accept leadership responsibilities in your community.	4.061	0.659	0.094	32.54	49	<.001
You have full access to the information necessary to make decisions.	4.163	0.657	0.094	33.724	49	<.001
You express a genuine interest in your community.	4.102	0.653	0.093	33.235	49	<.001
You seek to help others in their communities.	4.122	0.696	0.099	31.395	49	<.001
You wish to mentor other young people.	4.061	0.719	0.103	29.802	49	<.001
You take part in community discussions more frequently than before you participated in this programme.	3.980	0.803	0.115	25.962	49	<.001
You apply what you learned in this programme by getting involved in other community activities.	4.041	0.676	0.097	31.5	49	<.001
You take pride in your community.	4.265	0.638	0.091	35.814	49	<.001
You are more willing to seek the advice of adults in your community.	4.143	0.791	0.113	27.828	49	<.001
You are more willing to express a sense of belonging within your community.	4.000	0.842	0.12	24.952	49	<.001
You are very concerned about community change.	4.184	0.667	0.095	33.418	49	<.001
Overall mean	4.102					



<b>Youth retention</b>						
Teachers/student helpers had the skills required to serve as mentors to you.	4.571	0.677	0.097	36.927	49	<.001
The ideas of this project were predominantly generated by you.	4.388	0.64	0.091	37.08	49	<.001
You had no difficulty in attending the meetings.	4.020	0.854	0.122	24.767	49	<.001
You recognise your strengths in working as a team member.	4.224	0.654	0.093	34.513	49	<.001
Overall mean	4.301					

In summary, this study suggests that art-based activities can provide novel methods for engaging students in the learning process beyond those applied in traditional teaching practices. This approach can enable students to learn new skills and creatively express themselves, increasing their creativity, critical thinking skills, academic performance, social skills, and self-confidence.

## 5. Conclusion and policy implications

Although this study incorporated reliable positive youth development scales, several limitations should be noted. Given the small sample size and the possibility that certain students may have already possessed an understanding of art or fashion design, some participants may have started the programme with confidence in their artwork, influencing the study results. Future studies should include more diverse samples and mixed-methods designs to gain more detailed insights into similar programmes.

The outcomes of this study were evaluated solely based on pretest and posttest results obtained immediately before and after the collaborative design workshops. These data are insufficient to prove that fashion design is a medium for long-term positive youth development. Future studies should include follow-up interviews or focus groups after a fixed period of time, such as 6 months, has passed since programme conclusion to evaluate participants' feelings, opinions, insights, and experiences regarding the programme.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, this study contributes to the literature on positive youth development through an investigation of psychological development among students attending collaborative fashion design workshops. The study results provide a reference for future research programmes and educational policies related to artistic development among young people. For example, primary and secondary schools can encourage more students to participate in art competitions outside the school to increase their opportunities to establish external connections. Additionally, schools can pay closer attention to the hopes and life goals of students with various talents through multifaceted criteria and perspectives. Systematic plans and other strategies aimed at empowering students can likewise improve their mental health.

Positive effects were observed in students' development after they participated in the fashion design workshops. This finding suggests that learning and applying fashion design concepts contribute to positive youth development by enabling participants to have positive experiences and relationships in positive environments.

Art and fashion design are not major components of primary and secondary education in Hong Kong. In this study, students reported acquiring new professional knowledge in the collaborative design workshops, indicating that learning and practicing professional fashion design skills improved their competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring.

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