

# Reconceptualising Youth Poverty through the Lens of Precarious Employment during the Pandemic: The Case of Creative Industry

Ngai Pun\* , Peier Chen\*\* and Shuheng Jin\*\*\*

\*Department of Cultural Studies, Lingnan University, Hong Kong, China  
E-mail: [npun@ln.edu.hk](mailto:npun@ln.edu.hk)

\*\*Department of Cultural Studies, Lingnan University, Hong Kong, China  
E-mail: [peierchen2@ln.hk](mailto:peierchen2@ln.hk)

\*\*\*Department of Social Work, Guangdong University of Technology, China  
E-mail: [shjin@gdut.edu.cn](mailto:shjin@gdut.edu.cn)

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*Risks of youth poverty in relation to employment have largely been overlooked both internationally and locally, especially amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Moving beyond the concepts of income, economic factors and in-work poverty as applied to the general population, we examine the multi-scalar employment risk confronting highly educated working youth (aged eighteen to twenty-nine) in Hong Kong by assessing the intersection of precarious employment and in-work poverty, which is crucial to understanding youth poverty. Drawing on in-depth interview research on creative workers, this study calls for the reconceptualisation of in-work poverty through the lens of precarious employment, which is not viewed as a separate economic entity, but as an organic whole encompassing a multi-scalar risk in economic, social, psychological and political terrains generating an existential problem shaping young people's sense of future and work-life meaning. This article sheds light on the policy implications of high-educated youth suffering from in-work poverty in the creative industry.*

**Keywords:** Youth, in-work poverty, precarious employment, social policy, Hong Kong.

## Introduction

'Working but poor' has increasingly garnered attention in social policy and poverty studies (Goulden, 2010; Marx and Nolan, 2012; Kenworthy and Marx, 2018), but we observe a notable lack of concern for the significant number of young people globally who are 'working but poor' or jobless. Work is no longer a route out of poverty for young people, and this new phenomenon calls for change in policy interventions in the so-called workfare regimes (Hick and Lanau, 2018). A workfare society without work or protection contributes significantly to the complexity of youth poverty, especially when employment fundamentally sustains basic survival and daily life. Precarious employment significantly contributes to youth poverty and increasingly includes highly educated youth who have traditionally been considered exempt from poverty. To reconceptualise youth and in-work poverty through the lens of precarious employment, we posit that youth poverty is more than a social problem as it vividly

uncovers a constellation of economic factors and political issues shaping the behaviours of young generations in reflexive modernity (Beck, 2000).

Following neoliberal globalisation, new forms of poverty have emerged in Hong Kong during the rapid economic growth of the past decades (Chow, 1981; Goodstadt, 2014; Saunders and Wong, 2019; Chan and Wong, 2020). While in-work poverty has emerged as a prominent form of poverty, the poverty status of young working people is often unaddressed. The most up-to-date report, the Hong Kong Poverty Situation Report (2019), released by the Hong Kong government, illustrated the in-work poverty situation in Hong Kong and highlighted that over 35 per cent of the increase in the poor population came from working households (Government of the Hong Kong SAR, 2019: ix). The poverty rate of the young working poor has risen to 6.3 per cent in Hong Kong. Many of these poor young people, aged twenty-five to twenty-nine, have completed their undergraduate studies but are subjected to precarious part-time or full-time employment (2019: 49). This indicates the worsening situation of young working people who, despite being highly educated, struggle to make ends meet, especially in certain economic sectors such as the creative industry (Tse, 2018).

Like other developed economies, 'working but poor' is not a new phenomenon in Hong Kong, but we still lack a serious analysis that systematically analyses the relationship between precarious employment and poverty (see Halleröd *et al.*, 2015; Kenworthy and Marx, 2018). In 2007, Hung Wong (2007) wrote the Oxfam Hong Kong Report 'Employed, but poor: Poverty among employed people in Hong Kong', the first local study of in-work poverty situation, emphasising the importance of introducing a 'statutory minimum wage' to help the working poor out of poverty. The concept of 'flexi-employability' further illustrates the work-first principle in Hong Kong's labour market, which forces young people to take up available jobs without addressing the risks triggered by the labour market that undermine their well-being (Wong and Au-Yueng, 2018).

In other words, in-work poverty shared by young workers in Hong Kong and elsewhere is largely affected by their precarious employment (Hamilton *et al.*, 2014; Cheung and Chou, 2016; Wong and Au-Yeung, 2018, 2019). Precarious employment has increasingly contributed to the risk factors of in-work poverty engulfing better-educated youth in specific industries, which cannot be measured solely by income, but by work patterns, contract types, the duration of the job, and potential job loss. It is imperative to reconceptualise in-work poverty through the lens of precarious employment to grasp the changing meaning of work and employment among young working people and fully understand their lived work experiences and their subjective understanding of youth poverty (Chung *et al.*, 2012). Significantly, this research aims to identify in-work poverty among young, highly educated workers in relation to their employment status by exploring the variations in work patterns and job immobility.

Furthermore, in-work poverty and precarious employment are not viewed as separate economic entities but as an organic whole encompassing a multi-scalar risk in economic, social, psychological and political terrains generating an *existential* problem shaping youth's sense of future and work-life meaning (Beck, 1992, 2000). Building on Beck's theory of risk in relation to work and existential crisis in reflexive modernity, we further develop four aspects of this existential problem of in-work poverty risk: a sense of instability (economic risk factor), sense of immobility (social risk factor), sense of insecurity (psychological risk factor), and sense of lacking aspiration and hope (political risk factor),

and study how these interlocking aspects impact in-work poverty among high-educated youth. As a city full of exceptional risks, Hong Kong has urgent social issues in youth poverty and employment, that demand systematic studies and policy intervention.

### **Precarious employment associated with in-work poverty**

Until recently, in-work poverty has been attributed to structural and institutional changes in the labour market and individuals' and households' economic conditions. At the macro level, economic restructuring, the polarisation of labour markets and the withdrawal of welfare are arguably highly associated with in-work poverty (Pradella, 2015; Van Winkle, 2018). At the micro-level, workers' characteristics, job characteristics and households' characteristics are highlighted when in-work poverty is addressed (Snel *et al.*, 2008; Atkinson and Marlier, 2010; Marx and Nolan, 2012). Instead of a high reliance on income as a sole indicator of poverty, current studies on in-work poverty consider precarious employment in terms of job quality and how employment types contribute to in-work poverty risks (Hick and Lanau, 2018, 2019; Brülle *et al.*, 2019). Specifically, Brülle *et al.* (2019) highlighted low hourly wages and part-time employment as two major risks driving in-work poverty. Nevertheless, studies on in-work poverty have limited understanding of precarious employment, emphasising objective conditions of employment as mentioned above. Precarious employment, which is more than an objective and economic aspect, is embodied with social, cultural and political aspects that deserve systematic study, especially in relation to in-work poverty.

Precarious employment is often understood as the breakdown of decent work in the deregulated and neoliberal labour market (OECD, 2018). Jobs are precarious because they typically provide relatively low wages, limited benefits, inadequate protection of labour rights, and offer no hope of security or advancement (Kalleberg, 2011; Campbell and Price, 2016; Kalleberg and Mouw, 2018). Such precarious employment, manifesting in insufficient working hours, short-term and temporary contracts, self-employment and significantly, low pay, is recognised as the new norm among the young workers (Rubery *et al.*, 2018). They also deprive young people of the sense of stability or certainty required to plan their careers, which inevitably fuels frustration, grievances, or even a so-called 'precaritised mind' among them (Standing, 2014). The phenomenon of work insecurity based on individual perceptions and psychological well-being such as the fear of job loss, with or without hope for upward job mobility, warrants further studies (Goedemé and Rottiers, 2011; Buttler, 2013).

Is precarious employment among young workers a permanent or transitory condition? A precarious job may provide a stepping-stone to a better-paid and more secure job on the one hand, or it may trap young workers in long-term low-paid jobs and continuous transitions in and out of work on the other (McKnight *et al.*, 2016). More pessimistically, the concept of a 'job-trap' illustrates the limited opportunities for young workers to exit their precarious work situation (Roberts, 2011). An analysis of how this precarious employment undermines young workers' aspirations of job mobility is lacking in current debates on in-work poverty. In this article, by bringing the precarious employment discussion into in-work poverty, we attempt to broaden the conceptual understanding of in-work poverty and demonstrate how this reconceptualisation is important to understanding youth poverty and employment in Hong Kong.

## Research design and method

Undergoing significant economic restructuring, Hong Kong has evolved from manufacturing into a service-based economy. It has brought concerns that the jobs created in the service sectors are more precarious as they appear to be low paying and, typically, part-time (Wai, 2006; Wong, 2007). Largely concentrated in these service sectors, especially in the creative industries, young highly educated workers are confronted with more casual and precarious employment relations. The creative industries are considered an important driver to boost the Hong Kong economy and are positioned as powerhouse generators to connect Hong Kong with Mainland China's economy.<sup>1</sup> Despite the surface prosperity, for this research, we ask whether young, educated workers in the creative industries have normalised precarious employment as an industry norm and accepted the status of vocational restlessness, trapping themselves in the in-work poverty situation in the process. Different from less educated and working-class young workers who often work in the gig economy, we further examine how these creative workers, who are typically characterised as having a better education and have taken 'slash' jobs, are subjected to new forms of insecurity and uncertainty due to precarious employment (Morgan *et al.*, 2013; Tse, 2018).

We focus on these well-educated young workers in the creative industry to understand their precarious employment, work experiences, and precarious livelihood, which are indicative of a new order of social, economic and political instability and inequality concerning in-work poverty in current Hong Kong society. The interviewees in this study (aged between eighteen and twenty-nine) worked or have recently worked in the three selected creative industries – art and design, advertising, and mass media. Respondents were recruited through purposive sampling methods. Between April and September 2020, with the assistance of local art and design groups and local specialists in the creative industries in Hong Kong, forty in-depth interviews were conducted (see Table 1).

The semi-structured individual interview was utilised to elicit new forms of poverty experienced by the young generation of working people. The face-to-face interview is an interaction between two embodied individuals (i.e. researcher and interviewee) in the qualitative research paradigm (Corbetta, 2003), and 'deep listening' is specifically used as a tool to hear the interviewees' words and capture their body language and emotions (Hart, 2021). Following the 'deep listening' guidance that requires the researchers 'listen again to the multiple layers of meaning potentially embedded in the same sound' (Bull and Back, 2003: 3), we first consciously undertook a predominantly listening role and encouraged our interviewees to share their substantial experience with some open-ended questions – for example, 'could you please tell us about your transitional experience from school to work?' As well as observing the emotional tone of the interview, we also explored their perceptions and reflections on precarious employment and in-work poverty.

Based on Benner's (1994) interpretive phenomenology, thematic analysis was applied to analyse all transcripts. To practice critical reflection and reflexivity, we attempted to conduct our interviews and analyse our data simultaneously. New questions were also developed during the interview and analysis process to investigate further the interviewees' struggles associated with precarious employment risks and how family and society may influence their understandings. In the final process, a set of important themes for a thematic analysis emerged, based on respondents' perceptions and experiences and the theoretical background discussed above – namely, sense of precarity, sense of mobility,

Table 1 Socio-demographic information of informants in interviews in 2020

	Informant	Gender	Industry	Employment status	Educational level
1	Marketer	Female	Advertising	Full-time	High diploma
2	Media planner 1	Female	Advertising	Freelancer	Bachelor
3	Art director	Male	Advertising	Multiple Tasks	High diploma
4	Media planner 2	Female	Advertising	Freelancer	Bachelor
5	Account manager	Female	Advertising	Full-time	Bachelor
6	Senior account executive	Male	Advertising	Full-time	Bachelor
7	Media planner 3	Female	Advertising	Multiple Tasks	Bachelor
8	Designer1	Male	Art and Design	Multiple Tasks	Bachelor
9	Assistant 1	Male	Art and Design	Full-time	Bachelor
10	Designer 2	Male	Art and design	Full-time	Bachelor
11	Arts administration executive	Male	Art and design	Full-time	High diploma
12	Dancer	Male	Art and design	Freelancer	Bachelor
13	Outreach education executive	Female	Art and design	Full-time	Bachelor
14	Graphic designer 1	Male	Art and design	Full-time	Upper secondary
15	Mural painting artist	Female	Art and design	Freelancer	Bachelor
16	Project coordinator 1	Female	Art and design	Freelancer	Master
17	Programmer	Male	Art and design	Freelancer	Bachelor
18	Project coordinator 2	Female	Art and design	Full-time	Bachelor
19	Stage manager 1	Female	Art and design	Unemployed	Master
20	Copywriter	Female	Art and design	Unemployed	Bachelor
21	Fashion design assistant	Male	Art and design	Full-time	High diploma
22	Stage manager 2	Female	Art and design	Unemployed	Bachelor
23	Graphic designer 2	Male	Art and design	Freelancer	High diploma
24	Interior designer	Female	Art and design	Full-time	High diploma
25	Fashion designer	Male	Art and design	Full-time	Master
26	Graphic designer 3	Female	Art and design	Freelancer	Bachelor

*(Continued)*

Table 1 (Continued)

	Informant	Gender	Industry	Employment status	Educational level
27	Graphic designer 4	Female	Art and design	Unemployed	Bachelor
28	Journalist 1	Male	Mass media	Freelancer	High diploma
29	Film producer	Male	Mass media	Unemployed	Bachelor
30	Film programmer	Male	Mass media	Full-time	Bachelor
31	Journalist 2	Female	Mass media	Full-time	Bachelor
32	Journalist 3	Male	Mass media	Full-time	Master
33	Media fixer 1/Film producer	Female	Mass media	Unemployed	Bachelor
34	Media fixer 2	Female	Mass media	Unemployed	Bachelor
35	Journalist 4	Female	Mass media	Freelancer	Bachelor
36	Journalist 5	Female	Mass media	Freelancer	Bachelor
37	Editor	Female	Mass media	Full-time	Bachelor
38	Commercial creative staff	Male	Mass media	Full-time	Bachelor
39	Journalist 6	Female	Mass media	Full-time	Bachelor
40	Journalist 7	Male	Mass media	Full-time	Bachelor

sense of security and sense of aspiration and hope. Although it is specific industry-based research, it encourages studies moving beyond the scope of the present study to see its potential in unfolding a fuller picture of youth poverty, covering precarious young workers in other industries.

### A multi-scalar employment risk: in-work poverty in Hong Kong

Workfare without adequate social protection is a fact of Hong Kong society that most young workers in creative sectors have had to endure, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a city of exceptional risk, Hong Kong's highly educated youth workers have suffered from a multi-scalar employment risk leading to existential concerns regarding their sense of hope and future. As Beck defines, 'The concept of risk is directly bound to the concept of reflexive modernisation. Risk may be defined as a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernisation itself' (1992: 21). Taken as an existential problem of reflexive modernity, Beck argues that the new risks have acquired a new quality, and 'by their nature they endanger all forms of life on this planet' (Beck, 1992: 22). 'Risk society is a catastrophic society' (1992: 39), and Beck further argues:

'This is bound up with the fact that the work society is coming to an end, as more and more people are ousted by smart technologies... The 'job for life' has disappeared.' (2000: 2)

Derived from the insights of Beck's risk theories, we construct a multi-scalar model of risk encompassing economic, social, psychological and political aspects that specifically facilitates the study of in-work poverty in relation to precarious employment. To

investigate the economic aspect, we study the transition from school to work and entry into the labour market, including factors such as payments, contracts, work hours and employment benefits, if any. For the social aspect, we discern young people's job mobility by examining their change and turnover of jobs in the past five years and whether there has been upward mobility, downward mobility or immobility. We examine the psychological aspect to reveal the sense of insecurity and uncertainty shared among young people by looking at whether they face job barriers or policy discrimination which creates fear, anxiety and frustration. To understand the political aspect, we attempt to understand the truncated work-life experiences caused by employment risks and see if these experiences nurture a sense of social inequality and grievance, driving young people to civic participation and social movements. As such, Hong Kong youth poverty and employment should be considered as an existential problem that critically challenges young people's lives (Pun *et al.*, 2021).

### *Economic risk: sense of instability*

As new entrants of Hong Kong's creative industries, young workers have encountered an unstable socioeconomic transformation after the global financial crisis involving a massive cutback of full-time jobs coupled with a rise in part-time employment and self-employment. Our respondents' nuanced accounts of their employment experiences reflect a vulnerable life situation confronting juvenile workers, especially when they undergo the school to work transition in Hong Kong's volatile labour market. Unable to find regular and decent work, especially during the COVID-19 period, many interviewed respondents became freelancers or self-employed artists or designers. Having no or very limited income, ten out of forty respondents reported themselves as freelancers, and seven out of forty respondents were unemployed in 2020. In this vein, these creative workers, most of whom have a bachelor's degree, experienced poverty without recourse to a poverty alleviation scheme as most of them would not be conceived as 'poor' people, even though some have fallen below the official poverty line.

Falling into absolute poverty or debt is often the result of unemployment or underemployment in times of economic decline or crisis, especially for those young workers from working-class families. We ran into Leo, a community artist (male, twenty-eight), who has had his performance and education programmes suspended for ten months due to the impact of COVID-19. In his late twenties, he moved out from his parents' apartment and rented a cubicle room in an industrial building for HK\$6,000 and used it as his studio as well as his shelter. He said he was running into debt as he had almost used up his savings. He was unaware of the poverty line in Hong Kong. When we told him that it was classified as earning below half of the median income and that the cut-off is HK\$4500,<sup>2</sup> he immediately commented, 'Nobody could really survive with an income of HK\$4,500 in Hong Kong today, it's not even enough to cover the basic expenditures of food, not to mention shelter.'

The poverty line defined by the Hong Kong government looked like nonsense to Leo and his colleagues, who often fought against the sense of poverty in order to pursue their careers. Creative workers were realistic about the risks embedded in the long-term precarious work engagement. The sense of precarity and instability is more acute for those creative workers from a working-class background who strive to keep their 'ideal' with a vulnerable career. A high degree of creativity and autonomy at work, if any, also

comes at the costs of employee benefits, such as health insurance, Mandatory Provident Fund (MPF) contribution or annual leave, to which the freelancers and part-time workers are usually not entitled.

Most of the creative workers we interviewed expressed their economic instability in terms of their salary and benefits. Ann, a stage manager, said:

It is not stable; you know the income is not secured. It depends. I usually get a lump sum payment by cash if I am a stage manager, say HK\$20,000 per show. It takes around one to two months to finish the jobs . . . . [when] being a stage assistant, it is charged by an hourly rate, say around HK\$60. I don't have a fixed rate. (Female, twenty-nine)

In a bid to avoid economic instability, many creative workers often worked several jobs to make ends meet. However, in the context of precarious employment, multiple jobs mean multiple risks. These terms hardly capture the instability these creative workers faced, especially the fresh graduates, such as working for low pay or waiting for prolonged periods to be paid. Without a written contract, it was also difficult to pursue their unpaid bills. Tom, a designer, reported that they were under huge time pressures and were often tasked with taking on several roles at once:

Calling you a creative worker? They won't list the job duties clearly, and it means that you need to do everything they ask you to do. My major is graphic design, but I have also worked in the photography and advertising units. [Therefore] I am responsible for filming, designing, recording and lighting the scene, and even assisting in storyboard creation, animation . . . four day- . . . you should finish all the jobs. . . . (Male, twenty-three)

The situation worsened following the impact of the COVID-19 crisis as there were even fewer jobs in the labour market. Many freelancers were struggling to receive orders and experiencing long-term unemployment and/or underemployment. The highest record of unemployment faced by Ann was six months. The impact of this period of unemployment led her to live on her savings and financial assistance from her family. Moreover, a few fresh graduates in art and design who graduated in 2020 were in a desperate situation of taking whatever job was available to them. Thus, despite their credentials, unique skills and qualifications, they have never completely ruled out the possibility that they may experience in-work poverty, which contributes to a deep sense of vulnerability.

#### *Social risk: sense of im/mobility*

The socioeconomic risks of precarious employment interweaved with stagnant mobility overtly creates a deep sense of immobility among young workers, particularly for the creative workers struggling to stay in the industry. Although attracted by the new promise of the creative industry, our respondents experienced an ambivalent and contradictory situation once they entered their occupations which were typically lacking in job prospects. Most of them lacked the chance of upward job mobility, doubted their employment prospects and questioned how many years they could stay in this industry. Hebe, an outreach education artist, said:



There is no prosperous career ladder for me to climb – senior manager, manager and then director. The senior posts are quite limited, and there is no opportunity for you to get promoted . . . (Female, twenty-six)

Hebe and her colleagues joked about their job prospects: ‘Job mobility? Are you kidding? We just want to keep our job, have a more stable income and not have to work overnight too often.’ This sense of precarity is deeply entwined with a sense of immobility among these young workers in the creative sector resulting in low expectations regarding a salary increase or job promotion.

However, while the creative workers saw no chance of vertical upward mobility, horizontal mobility of jobs and workplaces were surprisingly frequent. In their experiences, the alternative to upward job mobility was job-hopping. As such, most of the respondents experienced job changes nearly every one to two years, showing a high turnover rate and high interchangeability of companies. Jamie, an art project coordinator, informed us that to secure job orders for her freelance peers, she had to shift jobs from one workplace to another, sometimes two to three times a year (Female, twenty-five, project coordinator). ‘Without benefits, all jobs are the same to me. I haven’t experienced any increase in my income in the past three years, not to mention a promotion,’ Jamie said. In the landscape of precarious employment and such a market-led bargaining structure, young creative workers recognised that they had little bargaining power for a better contract.

As Ursell (2000) argued, creative workers face ‘networked sociality’ where work is secured on the basis of actively developing personal contacts, a reputation and useful connections. However, in times of hardship or pandemic, Ann, Tom and many others have reported that they have controlled their social life and stopped meeting friends not only because of the need for social distancing but to avoid paying for meals in restaurants. ‘No earning, no gathering, and no social life’, commented Jane, a female media planner. Being deprived of a social life clearly illustrates that the social risk for young creative workers highly impacts their social advancement and job mobility.

In our studies on creative workers, social connections and personal relationships are also decisive in seeking a job or securing projects in an increasingly precarious industry. However, by relying on personal networks to get orders, our respondents typically received a lower piece-rate or hourly wage than the going market rate, as they feared that setting a higher price or a ready market price would worsen the relationship. One of the biggest struggles they faced was the variable rates they charged based on their clients’ needs. Besides, subject to the clients’ budget and the fierce price competition in the market, the creative workers had little bargaining power in rate setting, making them work for lower fees.

The term ‘slash’ has become popular among Hong Kong youth to signify a new model of work/life success in current years, which ‘refers to an individual who derives multiple income streams simultaneously from different jobs’ (MWYO, 2018). This new work/life mentality is called upon to accept a new normality of non-standard employment with low or no job mobility. Far from a successful work/life model, young creative industry workers, often perceived as ‘slashies’, are constantly under threat of job loss and suffer from prolonged anxiety and uncertainty about their future. As a misrecognition of the employment traps in fluctuating labour markets, slash is a term used to embellish precarious

employment, including unemployment and underemployment, and it presents this way of living as an avant-garde lifestyle pursued by the youth. Once they fall into poverty and deprivation, especially during the global pandemic, the youth's experiences of precarious employment can hardly be articulated as 'slash' – a novel work/life model internalised as self-choice and self-governance by young people anxious for alternatives. These experiences of precarious employment with significantly stagnant mobility have trapped these young creative workers in a 'continuous present' characterised by in-work poverty where their future is deferred (Bone, 2019).

*Psychological risk: sense of insecurity*

An increasingly flexible labour market generates precarious employment resulting in insecure jobs, part-time work, and short-term or no contracts, especially for youth as new entrants (Wong and Au-Yeung, 2018). The threat of social dumping, as a consequence of employment traps, is heightened in the new economy sector, where there are young 'people working for no remuneration to try to get a job, people working overtime without being paid, and people in other precarious work arrangements (Greve, 2017: 390). Therefore, most respondents said they had heard of the so-called 'causal norms' and 'underpaid norms' from their peers before entering these creative industries. Nevertheless, their passion and enthusiasm drove them to precarious work. Some believed that if they could earn work satisfaction from their job, this would compensate for the precarity and insecurity they had experienced. Samson, a graphic designer, said:

I know that jobs in my occupation are underpaid and unstable, and I have to be prepared to take up very casual work. The sense of satisfaction I have is to produce a graphic painting I like. You gain fulfilment if you are doing something you have a passion for, and freedom. (Male, twenty-three)

However, our respondents found that the insecurity created by precarious employment and the freedom they aspired to were in tension. In effect, the enthusiasm and freedom they highly valued were gradually consumed, making them feel that they were on the road to burnout. Sharon, a painting artist, explained:

I own my free time. But on the other hand, my income is always unstable. There was a huge sense of enthusiasm when I started to teach drawing, but it has gradually become numb... it's no longer a relaxing job for me... (Female, twenty-one)

Creative workers' psychological feelings about the meaning of work and their commitment to it are consequently undermined, increasing their sense of job insecurity. Besides, respondents have painfully shared that social bias towards their work as unproductive negatively impacted their professional status and security. Samson further explained:

My mom always said that I entered the wrong occupation. How could a university graduate earn so little income when the working hours are so long? Once mom was tearful when she

said that what she expected from me was not much – only HK\$ 4000 a month for subsidising the household expenditure, but I cannot contribute this. (Male, twenty-three)

Samson felt ashamed that his family was of a working-class origin living in a public housing estate. His mother had high hopes for him when he was admitted into university, but his earnings after graduation shocked her. Samson said that his middle-class peers received more understanding from their parents or even financial support to help keep their careers afloat. This is a classic story of the ‘hidden injuries of class’ and the embodiment of in-work poverty. (Sennett and Cobb, 1973).

For Samson and many others, the structure of feeling is a mismatch between education and economic rewards, precarity and social insecurity, and an unspeakable psychological pain that they feel they have failed their parents’ expectations. ‘It is almost impossible for us to apply for any poverty alleviation schemes in Hong Kong, as our self-esteem and self-respect will be hurt, not to mention the stigmatizing effect,’ Samson said. This structure of feeling has gradually deprived the creative workers’ sense of having any control of their life (Williams, 1977).

Kimberley was a journalist, earning as little as Samson. However, she looked more relaxed when talking about her parents’ expectations. Kimberley laughed when she said:

I dare not to tell mom and dad about the first-month salary. They think that I have graduated from an elite university with a major in journalism and that this should enable me to get a high-income job. But . . . it’s not the reality . . . gradually, they’ll figure it out. (Female, twenty-two)

As a female, Kimberley said her parents would not expect her to contribute significantly to the family expenditures. Coming from a middle-class family, she could enjoy a few years of freedom and autonomy until she had her own family. Precarious employment and in-work poverty underpin these classed and gendered experiences. Acknowledging this deepens our understanding of these young workers’ subjective perception of self-actualisation and the meaning they invest in work-life, which is essential to a more nuanced understanding of youth poverty.

#### *Political risk: sense of aspiration and hope for the future*

In contrast to the view that tolerance of precarity and poverty is a transitional stage in their striving for future stability, we argue that the structural constraints they encounter in a fluctuating labour market lead them to develop a sense of powerlessness and social grievance. Preparing to quit when seeing no hope for the future, Tony, a journalist, said, ‘I believe that everyone knows this is a harsh industry with inadequate salary. Everyone will leave after trying for two to three years. At least I have tried.’ (Male, twenty-three)

Encountering the objective and subjective experiences of precarity and insecurity described above, many respondents, losing their sense of job aspiration, found that they were stuck in a dilemma: leaving or staying. However, respondents admitted that the decision was not theirs to make and these ideas of leaving or staying kept lingering in their minds. Some respondents expressed their willingness to stay in the creative industries at the cost of delaying or giving up marriage and the prospect of a family. In contrast, others felt they might quit their job or even [re]start a new career outside the creative industries if

they could develop another life plan or get older. However, it's apparent that the risks and costs that arise from such career fluctuations are increasingly individualised and transferred to younger workers. Anita, a mural painting artist, said:

The income I earn is enough for me. It is difficult for me to answer whether this model [of being a freelancer] will continue in the future. (Female, twenty-five)

Terry, a Media fixer, informed us:

Some previous colleagues also chose to leave this industry because they wanted to get married and have children. Overtime work is a big problem; you have to work on weekends if there is an event. (Male, twenty-seven)

Without proper social protections from the government, young workers have little means to resist falling into poverty induced by their precarious employment. Although the launch of the temporary 'Support Scheme for Arts and Cultural Sector' aims to support individual arts practitioners who were severely affected by the COVID-19, most respondents said that they were not eligible. Freelance artists, who were not related to any organisations, do not fit the definition of arts practitioners determined by the government. Amy, a freelance project coordinator, aired her grievance:

In fact, I cannot apply for the HK\$7,500 subsidy because the government says that I am not an art practitioner. It is so frustrating. As a freelance artist, a creator, HK\$7,500 for three months is a humiliation to me. But in the end, I was told that I was not qualified. Then who am I? (Female, twenty-eight)

By not being enrolled in an MPF scheme as a 'self-employed person', the freelancers interviewed in our research also failed to qualify for a one-off lump-sum subsidy of HK \$7,500 from the 'Employment Support Scheme'. Most of our respondents viewed the government's application requirements as a barrier to receiving financial assistance. Dissatisfaction with the government has therefore accelerated. What's more, the prospect of any further loss to the freedom once valued as the cornerstone of the creative industries because of political constraints has exacerbated their discontent. In response to this, some respondents reported that they gained a high level of satisfaction from creating artwork as a means of support for the protesters in the 2019 Hong Kong protests. We have discovered that young creative workers played a critical role in mobilising local and international support in the movement. Being illustrators, photographers, animators, infographic designers, video producers and so on, they acted collectively to oppose the anti-extradition law that could restrain their freedom of thought and expression. Thus, it is not surprising that young creative workers actively voice their grave concerns and dissent via civic movements.

## Conclusion

By understanding in-work poverty through the lens of 'precarious employment', this article contributes to the study of youth poverty in at least two ways. Firstly, by studying

the precarious youths' experiences and aspirations regarding job mobility, it goes beyond the existing discussion of in-work poverty, which is often confined to the economic aspects of employment in terms of income, employment status, contract status and job quality. In contrast to the view that tolerance of precarity is a transitional stage in their striving for future stability, we argue that these structural constraints they encounter in a fluctuating labour market trap them in in-work poverty. Secondly, young workers' power and labour agency are highly challenged by suffering from a hard-to-articulate in-work poverty situation. Young people are usually considered as the hope and future of society. When the opportunities for social advancement through work and employment are diminished, young workers' belief in the fairness and equality of society will also be undermined (Cheung and Chou, 2016). An organic whole encompassing a multi-scalar risk in economic, social, psychological and political terrains, therefore, further helps to articulate the connections between young workers' subjective experiences and perceived in-work poverty in terms of their sense of stability, sense of mobility, sense of security as well as their sense of aspiration and hope.

The respondents were at risk of income instability and job insecurity by pursuing greater control and freedom over their work in the creative industries. Instead of clinging to the prospects, creative workers strived to cope with insecurity by living in the present. Through encountering both objective and subjective experiences of precarity, young precarious workers nevertheless realised that their precarious employment could not provide them with a sustainable life, which not only traps them in the risk of poverty but also leads them to develop a sense of powerlessness and grievance. As suggested, the experiences of precarious employment and in-work poverty may fuel young people's grievances and anger, which are increasingly gaining the public's attention as a result of young people's participation in Hong Kong's social movements (Wu, 2010; Lee, 2016; Lam-Knott, 2018).

Through launching a series of work-first services and training programmes, the government aims to improve incentives for young workers in terms of their adaptability and competitiveness in the labour market to speed up their employment entry regardless of the job quality. It still hopes that education and other factors will equip poor youths for labour participation and social mobility, offering an escape from poverty. For example, current youth-focused employment policies, including service-led employment policies, short-term vocational training and the youth activation labour policy, represent a combination of investments in human capital to speed up employment entry paths for young workers (Wong and Au-Yeung, 2019). However, this diagnosis of the nature and the causes of youth poverty fails to account for the working poor's actual problems. As a result, the strategies have not translated into sufficient policy responses. The younger generation living with an increasingly flexible labour market in challenging economic and political situations is no less in danger of in-work poverty (Wong and Lee, 2001; Lee and Wong, 2004). This study calls for a more comprehensive understanding of youth in-work poverty. It provides a more specific policy-focused approach to the highly educated youth working in the creative economies.

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## Notes

1. According to the 2020 Report, the contribution of creative sectors to the GDP of Hong Kong was 4.4 per cent, attracting 217 280 creative workers, accounting for 5.6 per cent of the total employment of Hong Kong. Census and Statistics Department (June 2020). See Hong Kong Monthly Digest of Statistics at: [https://www.censtatd.gov.hk/en/data/stat\\_report/product/FA100120/att/B72006FA2020XXXXB0100.pdf](https://www.censtatd.gov.hk/en/data/stat_report/product/FA100120/att/B72006FA2020XXXXB0100.pdf) (accessed 19.09.2021).
2. According to the 2020 poverty line defined by the Hong Kong government, a one-person household that earned below half of the median income, i.e. HK\$4,500, would be considered living in poverty.

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