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## SOCIAL ENTERPRISE AS A MECHANISM OF YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

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**Abstract:** Empowerment is one of the most important social value creation activities performed by social enterprises (SEs). Despite the burgeoning research on SEs, there is limited research on the meaning and aspects of empowerment from the SE perspective, or the so-called SE-as-Empowerment research. In light of this research gap, we employed the Gioia’s methodology and data triangulation to analyze a renowned Hong Kong’s SE that focuses on youth empowerment. This study contributes to the SE-as-Empowerment literature by revealing five types of empowerment — building social awareness, meaningful participation, social connections, building entrepreneurial skills, and power sharing between youths and adults — which can be broadly categorized into social-capacity empowerment and entrepreneurial-capacity empowerment. This study makes novel contributions to the SE-as-Empowerment literature by proposing new concepts including multi-directional (internally and externally oriented) aspect of empowerment, the pluralistic notion of agency, and power sharing between youths and adults as important elements of youth empowerment in SE. Finally, we discuss the implications of this study for the SE practitioners, educators, and policy makers and propose avenues for future research.

**Keywords:** Social enterprise; empowerment; volunteering; youth.

## Introduction

Social enterprise (SE) is a new organizational form that has attracted the attention of the public, private and non-profit sectors, and considered as a more innovative and cost-effective model in delivering social and public services (Defourny & Nyssens, 2006). Social enterprise is characterized by its hybridity in that it combines social welfare and business logics (Chandra, 2016a; Doherty, Haugh, & Lyon, 2014). In the Hong Kong SAR context, social enterprises (SEs) emerged as the SAR government's response to the Asian financial crisis in 1997 (Chandra & Wong, 2016), which saw rising unemployment and poverty problems (Lee, 2012) and the state's desire to transform welfare to "workfare", an initial prototype that later morphed into the SE model. To date, Hong Kong's SEs have received recognition and status as a partner of the state and nonprofit sector in addressing a variety of societal challenges, from poverty and aging to environmental crisis (Chandra & Wong, 2016; Chandra, 2016b).

Although there is a burgeoning research on SE, extant research tends to focus on the organizational (Doherty *et al.*, 2014), motivational (Chandra & Shang, 2017a; Germak & Robinson, 2014), political (Nicholls & Teasdale, 2016) and institutional (Kerlin, 2013) aspects of SE. While this body of research provides an important contribution to the SE field, there is limited new theoretical advancement beyond these aspects in the SE literature. To this end, new theoretical ideas and research agenda must be pursued to push the SE scholarship forward. *Empowerment* is one of the most important social value creation activities performed by SEs, because SE is essentially an *intervention* to individuals with no or limited power and provide them with greater power to make decisions and choices in life and become self-reliant. In fact, most if not all of the work-integration social enterprises (WISEs), a popular form of SE, relies on empowerment as its main social value creation strategies (Chandra, Jiang, & Wang, 2016). Despite the importance of empowerment, it remains an understudied theoretical perspective and not-so-well-understood aspect of SE. In this paper, we seek to make a theoretical and empirical contribution by studying the *empowerment* concept.

Empowerment refers to a "process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability" (Kabeer, 1999, p.437). Empowerment comprises three inter-related elements: *resources*, *agency* and *achievements* (Kabeer, 1999, 2005). Resources are material (e.g., assets, income) and non-material (human and social) and are "affected by the rules and norms which govern distribution and exchange in different institutional areas" (Kabeer, 1999, p.437). Agency refers to an individual's ability to define his or her own goals and act upon them. Therefore, agency is about the sense of having

a power to perform “bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438). While resource is about “being”, agency is about “doing”; together they refer to capabilities. Achievements are the well-being outcomes. For instance, for women empowerment, achievement in empowerment refers to the health and survivability of their children. Empowerment has been studied extensively in the gender and inequality studies — but has limited application to SE (Haugh & Talwar, 2016). To date, we know little about the meaning and aspects of emancipation as it pertains to SE. We coin this as the “SE-as-Emancipation” gap in the SE literature.

Therefore, this paper seeks to answer the following research question: “*How do social enterprises empower its beneficiaries?*” To answer the research question and make new theoretical advancement in the SE literature, we examined a Hong Kong’s social enterprise called Soap Cycling that conducts youth empowerment through real-life SE activities that form a part of an undergraduate curriculum. We employed the Gioia Methodology and inductively coded various narrative data from in-depth interviews and other publicly available narrative data related to the SE. To facilitate this research, we relied on a computer-aided qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) tool to assist with the data coding and abstraction. In the next sections, we provide a theoretical orientation of the study, describe the methodology, and report the findings. We conclude the paper by highlighting key theoretical contributions to the SE literature and providing practical advice to SE practitioners, educators, and policy makers.

### **Empowerment: An Overview**

Empowerment is a critical concept for social policy and practice (Albuquerque, Santos, & Almeida, 2016; Christens & Peterson, 2012) and studies in gender and inequality (Kabeer, 1999, 2005). *Empowerment* refers to a “process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 437). Kabeer (1999, 2005) argued that empowerment consists of three inter-related elements: *resources*, *agency*, and *achievements*. Resources refer to material (e.g., assets, income) and non-material (human and social) and their access is affected by the rules and norms which govern distribution and exchange in different institutional areas (Kabeer, 1999, p. 437). Agency refers to an individual’s ability to define his or her own goals and act upon them. Hence, agency is about the sense of having a power to perform “bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438). Resource is about “being” and agency is about “doing”. Achievements are the well-being outcomes of having access to resources and a sense of agency.

In the social work literature, empowerment is defined as a process and a goal. As a process, it refers to helping individuals, groups and communities *regain power* to have control over their own lives and their affairs and reduce people's feelings of powerlessness (Solomon, 1987). The process of accessing power is autonomous and cannot be transferred from one individual to another (Lee & Hudson, 1996). As a goal, empowerment is a result of gaining power in political or personal aspects. The *reallocation of power* resulted from changes in social structures leads to the empowerment of people (Ackerson & Harrison, 2000).

At the beneficiary level, empowerment can be facilitated at the personal and community levels (Jennings *et al.*, 2006). At the personal level, an individual can be empowered through an increase in self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), awareness-building (Gutierrez, 1990) and developing political and interpersonal capacities (Prestby *et al.*, 1990). Personal empowerment often involves reflection of individuals' values, becoming aware of one's own strengths and weaknesses and even making fundamental changes in life (Perkinson, 1993). At the community level, empowerment includes obtaining access to resources (Jennings *et al.*, 2006), engagement in participatory dialogue (Ansari, Munir & Gregg, 2012) and development of internal cohesions (Kerrigan *et al.*, 2015). This type of collective empowerment includes processes and structures that increase group members' capacities, and improving their well-beings and strengthening organizational networks (Zimmerman, 2000).

Empowerment is a key social value creation strategy adopted by social enterprises (Chandra, Jiang, & Wang, 2016) particularly work-integrated social enterprises (WISEs). Essentially, WISEs empower their beneficiaries (e.g., ex-convicts, elderly citizens, disabled people) through employment that enables skills transfer, self-respect and self-esteem, broadening of one's social networks and enhancing one's social status (the non-material resources) as well as income and the ability to acquire material possessions (material resources). WISEs also usually provides training to enhance the beneficiaries' skills and knowledge while at the same time using training as a means of advocacy, to build the beneficiaries' co-workers' and public's understanding about the plight of the beneficiaries. Therefore, WISE applies employment and training as a mechanism or process of empowerment with a goal of reallocating power to the power-deficient beneficiaries. In Hong Kong, a classic example of empowerment via WISE is the Fullness Salon, which employs and trains deviant youths and young ex-convicts into hair dressers. However, there is little theory-building research conducted to deepen and expand the "SE-as-Empowerment" concept literature.

In this paper, we focus on *youth empowerment*, an important yet understudied topic of relevance to researchers, practitioners and policy makers (Berg, Coman

& Schensul, 2009; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). In recent years, youth programs have gradually shifted from rehabilitation or containment (Jennings *et al.*, 2006) to facilitating healthy youth development and capacity building through active community involvement (Christens & Dolan, 2011). However, we also note that youth empowerment has different meanings in diverse contexts. Many previous studies of youth empowerment have focused on vulnerable populations (Einspruch & Wunrow, 2002; Tierney *et al.*, 1993) or youth from diverse ethnic groups (Ginwright, 2007). For example, Holden and his colleagues (2004) studied a youth empowerment model in the context of tobacco control and viewed young people as community assets who are empowered to better their health and own lives. Jennings and her colleagues (2006) examined youth empowerment model that emphasizes on engaging youth in work that would help them develop skills, build critical awareness and have opportunities to engage in creating community and societal changes. Zimmerman (2000) suggested that the ultimate goal of youth empowerment is to promote greater social changes by means of building the individual capacity of young people.

Although researchers have discussed a variety of youth empowerment models and theories (e.g., Wilson *et al.*, 2008; Holden *et al.*, 2004), there is a dearth of research that focuses on the *why and how of youth empowerment in the context of social enterprises*; and deriving insights from youth empowerment SE to develop new concepts and theories in SE. Because social enterprises is a relatively new form of organizing and can be considered a new sector (one that combines the best of the public, private and non-profit sectors), the notion of youth empowerment in SE may differ from other contexts or sectors and therefore this deserves a special attention to theory developers.

### **Volunteering as a Means of Empowerment**

A volunteer is someone who contributes time and efforts to helping others without expecting any returns (Bussell & Forbes, 2002; Wilson, 2000). Some scholars even call volunteering as a form of serious leisure (Stebbins, 1996). Volunteering is a win-win activity for the society and social development (MacNeela, 2008). For the society, volunteers and their services can assist the government and non-profit sectors in public service deliveries (Butcher, 2010).

Specifically, volunteering is believed to be beneficial for the volunteers and beneficiaries (MacNeela, 2008; Musick & Wilson, 2000). Past research found that people's involvement in voluntary activities contributes to their own empowerment (Cohen, 2009), among others, through participation in community committees, self-help groups and so forth. Volunteers tend to demonstrate higher levels of

self-efficacy, critical awareness and interpersonal skills (Zimmerman, 1990). For young people, volunteering helps build self-confidence through engagement in self-reflection (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003), as it provides opportunities to try new things and deal with challenges (Schwartz & Suyemoto, 2013).

Despite the existing research on youth empowerment (e.g. Berg, Coman & Schensul, 2009; Jennings *et al.*, 2006) and the motivations and processes of volunteering as a means of youth empowerment (Cohen, 2009), we know little about volunteering and youth empowerment in the context of SE. To date, the nascent SE research on empowerment has taken a one-sided view of the service recipient's or beneficiary's perspective (e.g., Gray, Healy & Crofts, 2003; Datta & Gailey, 2012). There is limited research that takes a *dyadic or holistic view of SE* empowerment through the eyes of the SE founders and youth volunteers who participate in SE activities. This paper will address the “dyadic gap” in youth empowerment SE research (i.e., by focusing on the SE's founder and beneficiaries), and as will be shown later, this is an important perspective to better understand empowerment in SE.

## **Methodology**

To answer the research question — “*How do social enterprises empower its beneficiaries?*” — we conducted a theory-building research using the Gioia Methodology (Gioia *et al.*, 2013; Chandra, 2017; Chandra & Shang, 2017a, b). We focused on a single case (Yin, 2003) because first, youth empowerment in the SE context is an underexplored area that is worth exploring. Secondly, Soap Cycling is a unique case (Yin, 2003) as it is the first student-run SE in a university in Hong Kong that has become a well-established credit-bearing course. The SE has become an inspiration and benchmark for other Hong Kong's universities to develop student-run SEs. Thirdly, this SE starts and grows inside a university and relies on the expertise of university staffs, giving it a unique context (Yin, 2003), unlike most SEs in Hong Kong that are started in the community and or receive substantial support from the government or individuals with business experience.

In this paper, the emphasis is not on a particular type of (marginalized or disabled) youth. Rather, we focus on general, non-marginalized youths following Wilson and colleagues' (2007) concept of youth empowerment as the outcome in which young people have access to resources and skills that can impact their own lives and lives of other individuals.

To enhance the internal validity of the study and better capture the reality, we employed data triangulation by using different sources of information about

the case (Yin, 2003; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). In doing so, we collected data from three sources: i) interviews with the founder and general manager of Soap Cycling to collect first-hand qualitative data, ii) interviews with the beneficiaries of the SE, the student volunteers; and iii) secondary narrative data from publicly available sources (see Table 1). A summary of the data sources used in this study is shown in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. A summary of data sources**

<b>Name of interviewees (n=7)</b>	<b>Position/Role in the SE</b>	<b>Background</b>	<b>Number of interview</b>	<b>On-site visit</b>
David Bishop	Founder, Chairman	Lawyer, business law lecturer at HKU	2	✓
Patrick Davis	General Manager	Lawyer with MBA from HKU	1	✓
Student A	Beneficiary, Marketing of the SE	Year 3 Accounting student (local) at HKU	1	✓
Student B	Beneficiary, Human Resources of the SE	Year 2 Economics student (local) at HKU	1	✓
Student C	Beneficiary, China Expansion of the SE	Year 4 Human Resources Management student (local) at HKU	1	✓
Student D	Beneficiary, Operations of the SE	Year 2 Accounting student (local) at HKU	1	✓
Student E	Beneficiary, China Expansion of the SE	Year 4 Accounting student (exchange) at HKU	1	✓
<b>Publicly available narrative data:</b> (n=7)	Facebook page of Soap Cycling, LinkedIn page of David Bishop and Patrick Davis, official Soap Cycling website and YouTube, South China Morning Post (2 articles), Students' blogs			
	HKU website, Forbes website ( 2 articles), PwC website, Unicef website, American Chamber of Commerce website, Hilton Hotel website, Skoll website on David Bishop			
	The Straits Times website, Hong Kong Fress Press website			
<b>Photographs as data</b> (n = 15)	Photos on the students doing the soap scraping work, the interaction between students and domestic helpers in a soap scraping session, the manufacturing.			
	facility of Soap Cycling, the plodder machine to recycle soaps, recycled soaps in different colors and shapes			

Specifically, we interviewed David Bishop, the SE’s founder, in his office at the University of Hong Kong in August 2016. We asked about the rationale and history behind the development of the SE, how he managed the SE, how students were involved in the SE and his views about how the SE benefits the students. We then interviewed Patrick Davis, the general manager of Soap Cycling, in April 2017 using the insights derived from the earlier interview with the founder. We asked Mr. Davis about his working relationship with the student



volunteers and how the Soap Cycling project is operated by these students and how students benefitted from the SE.

Finally, we interviewed five student volunteers. By embedding ourselves in one of the weekend events of the SE, we learned that the student volunteers were assigned to different departments (i.e., China Expansion, Marketing, Compliance, Operation, and Human Resources), just like a real life organization. From here, we randomly selected one student from each of the departments for interviews. We asked the students questions about their major at the university, how they benefitted from the Soap Cycling SE project, their responsibilities and their plan for a future career. For all interviews, we did not use the word “empower” or “empowerment” in the interviews to avoid leading the informants on the topic of the study. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and included in the analysis.

To offer a vivid illustration of Soap Cycling, we also included a photo that documents a scene of the students in a voluntary session held for Hong Kong’s domestic helpers in April 2017.

**Figure 1. Soap Cycling student volunteers**



Photo courtesy of Soap Cycling; 3 April 2017.

Next, we searched for any publicly available narrative data about the SE; and collected 17 unique sources of information comprising websites, news articles, additional interview materials, blogs and social media posts about Soap Cycling

(see Table 1). These narratives contain important stories and constructs (Pentland, 1999) that help us better understand the phenomenon under investigation.

The data analysis strategy follows the so-called Gioia methodology (Gioia *et al.*, 2012; Nag & Gioia, 2012; Chandra & Shang, 2017b), which is suitable for inductive theory building and narrative data. We inductively coded the narrative data into first-level codes and then abstracted them into the second-level codes and finally into aggregate dimensions (Gioia *et al.*, 2013) with the help of RQDA (Huang, 2016), an open-source computer-aided qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) tool that runs in R programming language (for a detailed review of RQDA please read Chandra & Shang, 2017b). CAQDAS is a valuable tool that can enhance the transparency and trustworthiness of qualitative research (Carvajal, 2002; Chandra & Shang, 2017b). It comprises various types of computing tools to enable narrative data classification, coding and abstraction, retrieving and plotting (Chandra & Shang, 2017b). CAQDAS packages facilitate grounded theory analysis with functions that enable researchers to build a “theory” through a system of codes where theory is that which emerges out of the data (Richards & Richards, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). A screenshot of how we conducted the coding process is shown in Appendix I. Next, we provided an overview of the Soap Cycling case and then presented the findings.

### **Soap Cycling: A Youth Empowerment Social Enterprise**

Soap Cycling was founded in 2012 by David Bishop, a lecturer at the University of Hong Kong, and a group of University of Hong Kong’s undergraduate students as a student internship project. Youth empowerment is one of the key missions of Soap Cycling. Soap Cycling is a SE because it seeks to create educational and environmental value while generating revenue from various sources (i.e., donation, fees, etc.) to run its programs. This SE recycles unused soaps to improve sanitation and hygiene of young people in underdeveloped regions. By recycling unused soaps into new soaps, this SE seeks to address pneumonia and diarrhea, two leading killers of the children around the world (International Vaccine Access Center, 2015). These diseases can be prevented with appropriate hand washing with soap and hygiene education (World Health Organization, 2013). Yet, access to soap has always been a big problem to young children in the third world.

How did the idea for Soap Cycling come about? The story can be traced back to the experience of Bishop, a former lawyer in the US and East Asia and who later worked as a lecturer in the Faculty of Business at the Hong Kong University. Bishop recognized that university graduates often lack real world experience and face difficulties in finding jobs after graduation. Bishop wanted

to change this situation and provided the students with a meaningful leadership and management experience. As Bishop stated below:

*“University students [in Hong Kong and elsewhere] need to have real-life work experience before they graduate...They need to know how the real world works, what they are good and not good at honestly... and listen to what the boss tell them where they need to improve. They need to learn how to deal with setbacks in life. You can't learn these things in the classroom ... They need hands-on learning experience by managing an enterprise”* (David Bishop interview, August 2016).

*Of the 18% of Hong Kong high school graduates who score well enough to attend college, many are unprepared for decision making, leadership roles, teamwork, and strategic thinking...[Thus] I wanted to challenge students to engage in real leadership experience and to give back to society”.* (David Bishop interview, August 2016).

Soap Cycling SE is operated by student volunteers. Student volunteers are distributed across various managerial positions and operational aspects. These volunteers normally work for 13 weeks (during a semester) as a part of their undergraduate curriculum. With three other co-directors: Baniel Chung (an engineer and marketing expert), Beau Lefler and Dr. Chad Lykins (both lecturers in law at the University of Hong Kong), Bishop provides guidance and advice to students in managing the SE and encourages the volunteers to make decisions and take own actions (Chiu, 2012).

Specifically, how does Soap Cycling SE empower students? We presented the findings of the study in the next section.

## **Findings**

The first stage of data analysis consists of an “open and axial coding” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Gioia *et al.*, 2013) to understand how Soap Cycling empowers student volunteers. This means that we coded the raw narrative data into various themes and gradually aggregate them into higher themes or dimensions. In doing this, we created a total of 13 first-level codes. We then exported the 13 first-level codes into an excel file and further classified, and aggregated them into five second-level concepts — *building social awareness, meaningful participation, social connections, building entrepreneurial skills, power sharing between youths and adults* — and finally aggregated them based on similarity in meaning which we called *social-capacity empowerment* and *entrepreneurial-capacity empowerment*.

**Figure 2. Analytical coding process**

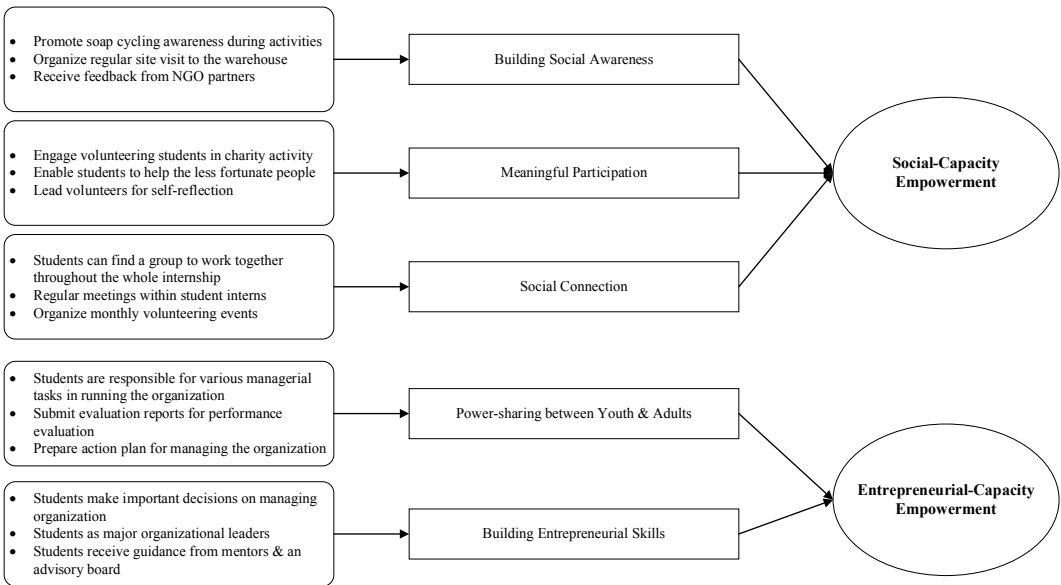


Figure 2 shows the analytical coding process that highlights the first-level and second-level concepts and the aggregate dimensions derived from the coding process. We discuss our findings backwards, by discussing the higher level themes first and using the lower level themes to illustrate them.

### **Social-Capacity Empowerment**

The first type of empowerment found in this study is social-capacity empowerment. The analysis found that Soap Cycling SE empowered student volunteers’ social capacity through three main stages: 1) social awareness building, 2) meaningful participation and 3) enhancing social connections. We discussed each of them below.

#### ***Social Awareness Building***

Before the student volunteers joined Soap Cycling SE activities, many of them lacked awareness of the hygiene problems in developing countries and had no idea what happened to unused soaps in hotels after they were used and how they might be repurposed. For instance, one of the students interviewed stated that “before I joined Soap Cycling, I had no idea what happens to the bars of soap left behind at hotels” (Student D interview).

In other words, the SE develops young people's social awareness or individuals' understanding of the needs and historical specificity of social events and process (Dinev & Hart, 2005). The social awareness building involves "*naming the problem, speaking out, raising consciousness, and researching*" (Steinem, 1983, p. 352). By providing student volunteers the opportunities to visit the SE's recycled soap warehouse and participate in reprocessing and distributing the soaps, the SE also helped build the students' sense of civic responsibility (Verba *et al.*, 1995).

To enhance volunteers' social awareness on hygiene problems in developing countries, the SE organized field visits to its warehouse at World Peace Center in Kwai Chung and allowed the students to "*know what soap recycling is*". The SE exposes the volunteers to the needs of the deprived groups and makes them think of ways to help them. As stated by one of the volunteers:

*"Amidst other pressing environmental problems, our team learned that sanitation and hygiene, which are environmental and health problems, are constantly overlooked. Soap Cycling has taught us that by merely washing hands throughout the day... significantly reduces the impact of two fatal diseases: acute respiratory infection (e.g., pneumonia) and diarrheal disease plaguing poor communities."* (student interview quoted from PwC website)

Apart from learning the importance of sanitation and hygiene, the student volunteers also receive regular feedback reports from NGO partners that help distribute the recycled soaps directly to poorer regions. This interaction enabled the students to learn more about the plight of the disadvantaged population. As one of student volunteers stated:

*"We really see that the local condition (in poorer regions) may not be that good especially comparing to Hong Kong. We are very fortunate that we basically have what we need. But in those poorer areas, people may not have clean waters. So soap is very important to improve their sanitation and hygiene conditions."* (Student A interview)

### ***Meaningful Participation***

Soap Cycling SE provides volunteering opportunities to university students by engaging them directly in charity work to "*learn and help the less fortunate people in the underdeveloped countries*" (Soap Cycling website). During the interview, four out of five student volunteers mentioned that what they do at Soap Cycling is "*very meaningful*". As one of students stated: "*...this project is very meaningful. I can work and build friendship, but also can help others*" (Student D interview). By collecting donated soaps from hotels and reprocessing them into

new soap bars, student volunteers gained hands-on experience in helping others. These activities provide a meaningful experience for the students through the new things that the volunteers learned or gained in the process (Jennings *et al.*, 2006). Participation in voluntary work is a form of civic engagement (Morton & Montgomery, 2011) and has important implications on youth empowerment (Catalano *et al.*, 2004). Engagement in meaningful charity or voluntary activities can help youth to develop self-identity, self-esteem, and enhance self-efficacy and confidence (Bhangaokar & Mehta, 2012). As one of the students stated:

*“By doing my small part and spending my weekend morning scraping soaps, another volunteer could turn them into new bars of soap, which would be packed by another person, loaded in a car or truck, driven to an airport, loaded onto a plane, flown across the world and given to someone in need. Not bad for the morning of a teenage girl in Hong Kong!”* (A student’s blog)

Another interesting empowerment aspect of the Soap Cycling SE was that student volunteers were given “silent time for reflection” after each volunteering session, a process led by staff members. This reflective practice supports volunteers’ self-development and enhances their commitment to doing charity services (Goethem *et al.*, 2014; Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003). Reflection also enhances the meaning of participation in voluntary services. It facilitates self-inquiry by linking learning and personal experiences (Johns, 2011). This was well illustrated in one of the student volunteers’ remarks:

*“There were silent times for reflection, and I realized soap carving is similar to knitting in that it is tedious yet soothing, and gives you time to really think about your life and the world in general. Yes, sometimes you come across a piece of soap with pubes or other questionable smudges but you just scrape it off, thank the karma fairies that you are wearing gloves and a mask, and carry on.”* (A student’s blog)

### ***Social Connections***

Soap Cycling SE also provided student volunteers the opportunities to enhance their social connections through social and teamwork development skills. For instance, when performing the voluntary work, the volunteers “*were asked to raise funds to support Soap Cycling by registering others for the event*” (HKU website). Such activity provided the opportunities to refine their communication skills. Voluntary work is teamwork (Miller *et al.*, 2002) because volunteering almost always revolves around working collaboratively with peers to provide



various services. Teamwork also allows volunteers to share responsibility thus empowering them (Wallace-DiGarbo & Hill, 2006). Through cooperation with others, the student volunteers met new people, developed networking, communication and interpersonal skills hence enhancing their social connection. As one of the student volunteers stated:

*“This is a great place to help students to commit, push themselves and finally become a more responsible person. Another great thing is about friendship — you can find a group to work together throughout a whole semester.”* (Soap Cycling website)

However, working together is also one of the challenges that student volunteers encountered, as one of them stated: *“Different people are working on different projects. It seems challenging to me to accommodate to different people’s working styles and to communicate effectively to get the work done”* (Student A interview).

To help the student volunteers overcome these difficulties, the directors and the general manager of the SE share what they do with other teammates and allow the students to seek advice or help from others. Apart from receiving practical advice from peer volunteers and supervisors, the students also develop a sense of teamwork and stronger connections with their teammates through the meetings. As one of student volunteers said:

*“We have a general meeting every week. Different teams will report the progress of their teams...We talk about what we did, what kind of help we need from teammates and how we can help others. We are able to better communicate with each other. We also have an intern event every month which can increase our bonding between different teams.”* (Student C interview)

## **Entrepreneurial-Capacity Empowerment**

This study also found that Soap Cycling SE empowered student volunteers by building their entrepreneurial capacity. The SE was established to provide a platform for students to develop hands-on entrepreneurial and technical (e.g., IT, law, marketing) experience and better prepare them for future jobs. As Bishop stated, *“They (students) can learn many things by managing our Soap Cycling [than directly joining large investment banks] ...In Soap Cycling they learn to be an all-rounded entrepreneur”*. This study identified two elements of entrepreneurial-capacity empowerment: 1) power-sharing between youth and adults 2) building entrepreneurial skills.

### ***Power-Sharing between Youth and Adults***

Soap Cycling SE enhanced the decision-making power of its student volunteers. Most young people in Hong Kong, as the SE general manager Patrick Davis stated, “*have been given a lot of opportunities... [but] they are not allowed to fail. Their lives can be so [well] managed. They do not really have a chance to try anything outside of their comfort zone*”. To give students a sense of power, Bishop encouraged students to make almost all the important decisions in the SE, from selecting business ideas to managing the SE.

Take the establishment of the SE as an example. The decision to set up Soap Cycling was not planned by Bishop himself, but rather emerged from his discussions with students and it happened that one of the students had an intimate knowledge of soap manufacturing (i.e., this unplanned, stakeholder-based decision making is known as “effectuation”; Sarasvathy, 2001; Chandra, 2017).

The SE is operated by student volunteers and the volunteers are given various managerial positions to handle all administrative and operational aspects of the SE as a part of their 13-week internship. As the general manager Patrick Davis stated, “*Basically, they [student volunteers] run everything. My job is to give them guidance and make sure they have a strong foundation*”. By doing so, the SE has empowered students to exercise their decision-making power. This enhanced the students’ self-confidence and developed their sense of responsibility. As one of the volunteers said, “*Compared to other projects, this [social enterprise] gives us more responsibility. We are actually running our own organization*” (Student B interview).

Power refers to the capacity to access and having control over resources for improving environmental conditions (Chadiha *et al.*, 2004). Power-sharing between youths and adults as practiced in this SE involves adults transferring a certain amount of responsibility and decision-making power to young people to enhance their competence and confidence (Jennings *et al.*, 2006). Although power-sharing is an important element for youth empowerment, in practice, most youth internship programs do not offer students the opportunities to make real decisions, “*nor to suffer the consequences when they make mistakes*” (The University of Hong Kong, 2012). However, Kohfeldt and colleagues (2011) pointed out that taking responsibility for own decisions is also a critical element in youth empowerment as constructive learning can arise from bearing consequences from one’s own actions. Also, it is often difficult for organizations to achieve and sustain such an equitable balance of decision-making power between youths and adults since most youth organizations favor safer methods and thus rarely practice effective transfer of power to young people (Finn & Checkoway, 1998). Soap Cycling SE enables power-sharing between youths and adults to work effectively and



to suffer from the consequences of their mistakes. As Bishop stated, “*as the students are given the power to make decisions, they also had to face the reality, including being grilled by the directors and learning to take the blame when they make mistakes*”.

In this SE, student volunteers are empowered to make real decisions and take actions independently. This experience gives them opportunities to, as quoted from Patrick Davis, “*become leaders and to figure how to run the business*”. This experience allows them to have a better understanding of what employers expect from them when they enter the job market. As one of student volunteers said:

*“Because our general manager let us do what usually other companies won’t let their interns do. For interviewing people, I do not believe any company would dare to let interns do [it]. But our general manager said, ‘just do it’. I think from that [experience] we could learn a lot. Because we are always on the other side of the table.... we have never been interviewers [before joining Soap Cycling]. We have always been interviewees. When we are interviewers, we get to know why sometimes interviewers like some people or do not like some kinds of people. We get to know what they think.”* (Student E interview)

This study also found *mentoring* as a new type of youth-adult relationship that is emphasized at Soap Cycling SE. Past research demonstrated that adults assisting and supporting the youths to take up new roles as decision makers and leaders would help them understand their responsibilities and expectations toward them (Pearrow, 2008). As Jennings and colleagues (2006) argued that such support is important if youths are stretched to take on new responsibilities, try out new ideas, reach out to the community, and begin to make important decisions on behalf of the group.

At Soap Cycling SE, Bishop and other board members who are HKU academic staffs and donors served as *partners* to the youths, instead of being their *bosses* or leaders. Their mentoring relationship with student volunteers is built on mutual trust and respect. They provide advice and guidance to the students only when necessary and emphasizing on the students’ personal development and independent learning, as one of students stated below:

*“Our general manager normally gives us instructions that are not very detailed. He respects what you want to do. He gives kind of vague instruction in a positive manner. So, you are able to apply your own thinking instead of him being bossy around and ask you to do what you are supposed to do. This is different from how we actually learn in lectures where professors give us certain tasks with guidelines which are quite restrictive so that you can’t apply creativity to it.”* (Student D interview)

By providing support and power to the young people, the adults who have valuable real-world experience can help empower the students and achieve the SE's goals. As Bishop said *"If they make a mistake because they will and they do, guys like me are there to fill in the gaps. We don't want to hold their hands but we understand they need some guidance"*.

### ***Building Entrepreneurial Skills***

This study also found that Soap Cycling empowered its student volunteers by helping them develop entrepreneurial skills. As part of their 13-week work, volunteers have to submit an action plan to improve the SE and a general manager will evaluate their performance. The volunteers work in various departments, from "strategy" (in charge of developing growth and expansion strategy), marketing (in charge of formulating marketing and branding strategies), manufacturing and delivery, to accounting, human resources, and law. For example, another department called the "China expansion team" is responsible for building a partnership with hotels in Mainland China. Student volunteers are expected to be self-motivated and to work independently, as one of the students recalled:

*"I think getting new hotel partners is quite challenging. We need to send e-mails and we do not know if it will work. We need to approach people who might be really interested. We did not know how to do this at the beginning. So, we tried different strategies and had to ask former interns about how they convince hotel partners. We found that if we tell hotels that we are also partnering with Hilton, they will accept our invitation to become our partners more easily."* (Student E interview)

Most internship positions in for-profit organizations do not often offer opportunities for students to gain a holistic, real life entrepreneurial experience. At Soap Cycling SE, with its emphasis on youth empowerment, student volunteers are encouraged to take responsibilities and are put into positions of authority, as stated by Bishop: *"this is a real position. Their faces will be on the webpage, they have business cards. If they don't do their jobs they will be fired. What I always tell students and our corporate sponsors is that this is not a company so much as a youth movement"*. The first-hand entrepreneurial experience helped develop students' leadership, communication, creative thinking and interpersonal skills and other management skills. The following quote from one of the student volunteers well illustrated this point:

*"There is no other organization in HKU or other universities [in Hong Kong] that provides such a realistic and practical work experience. Everything each student does [here] have an actual impact... the provision of such a*

*great work experience that allows students to gather first-hand management skills and also to increase the awareness of the actual possibility of working in an NGO.”* (Soap Cycling website)

Although Soap Cycling is not for-profit organization, it has a solid business model and networks. The SE provides a unique platform for student volunteers to help the disadvantaged population by recycling soaps and allow the students to practice their entrepreneurial skills to maintain the financial sustainability of the SE. As one of student volunteers stated, *“I am really interested in working for NGOs, I felt connected to the Soap Cycling the most. I found Soap Cycling integrates both sustainable development and charity. It integrates [both elements] in a way that is very effective and useful”* (Student D interview).

Soap Cycling SE is a hybrid organization in nature and combines both commercial and social welfare logics (Cooney 2006; Doherty *et al.*, 2014). Hence the SE enables students to learn both the social and commercial aspects of organizations, providing them with invaluable experience to enter the marketplace. The following quotes from one of the student volunteers well illustrated this point:

*“I actually did a lot of internships in the business field before. But Soap Cycling is different. What they are doing is really helping people directly, and they are not asking for profit. But we have connections with investment banks or accounting firms. So it still provides some exposure to students for them to get in touch with the business world, which is very helpful.”* (Student C interview)

## Discussion

Despite the burgeoning research on SEs, there is a dearth of research on the meaning and aspects of empowerment and particularly youth empowerment from the SE perspective, or the so-called “SE-as-Empowerment” research gap. To answer the research question *“How do social enterprises empower its beneficiaries?”*, we employed the Gioia Methodology and inductively coded and abstracted narrative data collected via in-depth interviews and secondary sources pertaining to Soap Cycling SE, the first student-run SE inside a university in Hong Kong. Our research identified two important elements of youth empowerment in SE not previously discussed in the SE literature, which are: *social-capital empowerment* and *entrepreneurial-capital empowerment*. Specifically, social-capital empowerment consists of three sub-elements, which are i) building social awareness, ii) creating meaningful participation, and iii) developing social connections. *Social awareness* has been discussed in the literature as a positive outcome of youth development programs (Shek, Siu & Lee, 2007) as it can further stimulate young people’s

sense of social responsibility and engagement in community activities. However, this study found a different notion of social awareness; an awareness of the suffering of others (external awareness) and awareness of one's own weaknesses as a youth (internal awareness). This highlights a multi-directional form of social awareness not currently documented in the SE literature.

To empower the students, Soap Cycling SE exposes them to crucial social issues surrounding sanitation and hygiene problems in poorer regions and provides them with opportunities to *participate in meaningful activities*, such as distributing recycled soaps to the poor and organizing voluntary sessions for domestic helpers. Existing studies demonstrate that engagement in meaningful activities may contribute to young people's role stability, self-efficacy and counteract their lack of direction or purpose (Chinman & Linney, 1998). This is an aspect where Soap Cycling had done well to attract loyal armies of volunteers and more volunteers year after year. Although the importance of meaningful participation was already discussed in the volunteering and empowerment literature (Jennings *et al.*, 2006; MacNeela, 2008), it is relatively unheard of in the empowerment literature in SE. To this end, this finding reveals "creating meaningful participation" as a key component of a youth empowerment SE.

Moreover, Soap Cycling SE provides a platform where students can meet and work with peer student volunteers who share similar interests. By working together for social causes, young people develop a sense of bonding and enhance their relationships and social networks (with peers and external organizations) in a positive manner. This appears to confirm one of the benefits of volunteering theorized in the literature (MacNeela, 2008; Miller *et al.*, 2002). Nevertheless, the "development of social connections" as process and goal of empowerment that we found in this study remains under-reported in the empowerment research in SE. For instance, Datta and Gailey (2012) found that collective ownership, self-reliance, profit sharing as key elements of empowerment — all of which are "economic" empowerment in nature. Although they also discussed about cooperation as an element of empowerment they refer this to ability to make decisions and solving problems. Haugh and Talwar (2016) found economic and social aspects of empowerment but did not underline the importance of developing social connections as an element of empowerment in SE. Our study adds the concept of social-capacity development as a central element in the SE-as-empowerment literature.

Our study also identified two elements of entrepreneurial-capacity empowerment as being central to youth empowerment SE: i) power-sharing between youths and adults, and ii) building entrepreneurial skills. Although building entrepreneurial skills are already discussed as an element of empowerment in the SE literature (Datta & Gailey, 2012; Haugh & Talwar, 2016), the concept of *power sharing*

*between youths and adults* is relatively new and is an important addition to the SE-as-empowerment literature.

Unlike in most youth organizations where youths take leadership roles without actual decision-making power (Chinman & Linney, 1998), student volunteers in Soap Cycling SE are given autonomy to make decisions and take actions to achieve their goals and bear the consequences of their actions. Extant studies demonstrate that it is not easy for youth organizations to maintain a delicate balance between overt support and covert control (Jennings *et al.*, 2006). This, however, is not a problem for Soap Cycling SE, because in this SE, adults *make little interference* on how students should run the SE and provide *unspecific/ambiguous instructions* to students and only *providing advice when necessary*. By assuming managerial roles and running a business at Soap Cycling SE with great autonomy, student volunteers are able to develop and reinforce critical entrepreneurial skills such as leadership skills, communication skills, and problem-solving skills that have vocational implications.

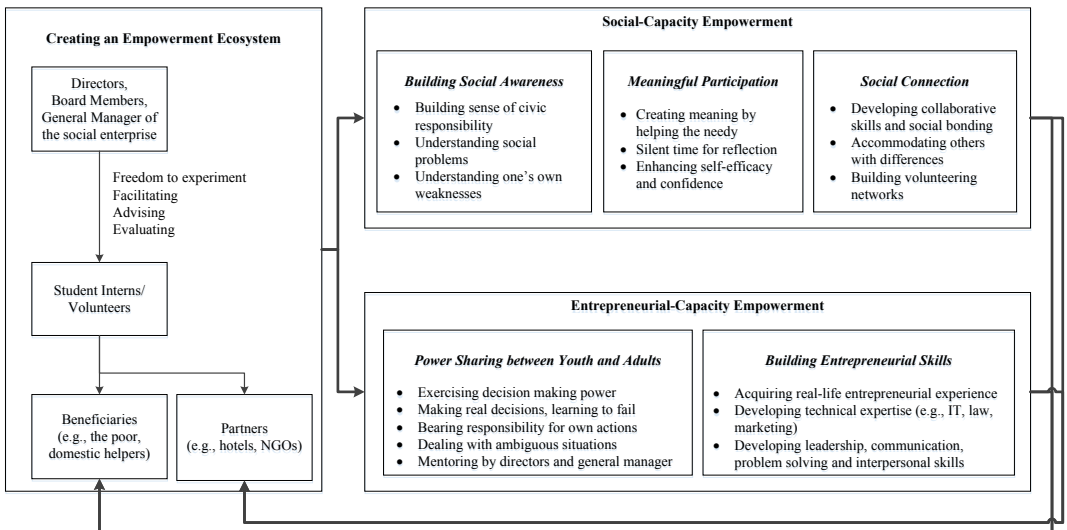
As mentioned above, the extant literature identified three inter-related elements of empowerment, which are resources, agency, and achievement (Kabeer, 1999, 2005). In terms of “resources”, Soap Cycling SE provides an educational platform for young people to learn a real life social business to benefit the underprivileged population who lack access to sanitation and hygiene; and whereby directors and the general manager in the SE offers guidance and support. Soap Cycling has morphed into a well-established credit-bearing learning program for students at the University of Hong Kong. Student participants have access to funding and established social networks at Soap Cycling SE (e.g., the partner hotels and soap suppliers), and they also receive regular evaluation and feedback reports from the supervisors, which fosters their performance improvement. The importance of resources is already discussed in the SE as empowerment literature (Datta & Gailey, 2012; Haugh & Talwar, 2016). However, there is something unique with the resources provided by SEs located inside a university such as Soap Cycling. First, SEs inside a university benefit from *technical experts* (i.e., faculty members) who could provide (free) advice and resources. Another type of resources is the *legitimacy* conferred by the university itself (e.g., University of Hong Kong is the oldest university in Hong Kong and has a strong alumni networks across sectors) which lends credibility to the SE operating inside it. The technical experts and organizational legitimacy are two new types of resources that enrich and extend the notion of “resources” in the empowerment concept in SE research.

In terms of “agency”, student volunteers at Soap Cycling SE are empowered to make decisions, take actions and bear the consequences of their actions. Having control and a voice in the SE enable student volunteers to develop a sense of agency, which subsequently enables them to pursue the greater social goals

and strengthen their capacities. At the same time, the students who take part in the SE have a clear social mission: to serve the underprivileged population who lack access to sanitation and hygiene. These suggest a different notion and meaning of agency from one that is linear and one way (i.e., students being the recipients of a service) to a *pluralistic notion of agency*, where students take part in alleviating the plight of suffering others (the “strong ones” to empower others) while simultaneously being empowered by the SE (the “weak ones” to be empowered). The pluralistic notion of agency is an important contribution to the SE as empowerment literature.

In terms of “achievement”, there are identifiable positive outcomes at both individual- and community-levels at Soap Cycling SE. At the community level, student volunteers engaged in community activities and felt empowered to improve the lives of the disadvantaged population in the poorer regions by utilizing their knowledge and expertise in diverse fields. At the individual level, student volunteers developed a range of skills that are helpful for their future career, and developed their self-efficacy and confidence through the 13-weeks internship. As nicely summarized by one of the student volunteers: *“The experience at Soap Cycling will definitely help me to do better in the workplace. I really learned a lot. For example, I learned how to negotiate with potential partners and how to manage relationships between team members. I feel a lot more confident now”* (Student C interview). The notion of achievement tends to be under-studied in the empowerment related SE research. Our study identifies a multi-level notion of achievements in youth empowerment SE. We summarize the youth empowerment process derived from this study in Figure 3.

Figure 3. A youth empowerment process in the context of social enterprise





## Conclusion

This research sought to advance our understanding of a promising yet not so well understood concept in SE: *empowerment*. In doing so, we employed the Gioia Methodology and analyze primary and secondary narrative data of Soap Cycling, a renowned youth empowerment SE in Hong Kong. The analysis revealed that youth empowerment SE comprises five empowerment aspects — *building social awareness, meaningful participation, social connections, building entrepreneurial skills, and power sharing between youths and adults* — all of which can be categorized broadly into *social-capacity empowerment* and *entrepreneurial-capacity empowerment* (see Figure 2). These empowerment practices, particularly the three elements in social capacity empowerment (i.e., building social awareness, meaningful participation, and social connections) and one of the entrepreneurial-capacity empowerment (i.e., power sharing between youths and adults), are new and advances the empowerment concept discussed in the SE literature (Datta & Gailey, 2012; Haugh & Talwar, 2016).

Specifically, the empowerment practices identified in this paper make four new contributions to the SE-as-empowerment literature. First, SE in and by itself can be employed as a resource and mechanism to enhance young people's sense of social awareness (i.e., about target beneficiaries' suffering), in addition to understanding young people's own challenges in life (e.g., being relevant in the marketplace after graduation). This reflects a *multi-directional* (internally and externally oriented) *aspect of empowerment* not theorized in the extant empowerment literature. This also highlights a new notion of social awareness in youth empowerment SE; that is, building an awareness of the suffering of others (external awareness) and awareness of one's own weaknesses as a youth (internal awareness). This highlights a *multi-directional form of social awareness* not currently documented in the SE literature.

Second, this study demonstrates how SE provides a *pluralistic notion of agency*, where students become agents who are then given the opportunities to make life choices but also make decisions and choices that impact the lives of the SE's beneficiaries (e.g., poor children in the third world). The pluralistic concept of agency is an important contribution to the SE-as-empowerment literature. This also positions a university-based youth empowerment SE differently from conventional SEs in the marketplace. Conventional SEs and specifically work-integration SEs (WISEs) tend to take a singular view of the role of beneficiaries (e.g., the disabled, ex-convicts) in that beneficiaries are considered as the "weak ones" to be empowered. It ends there. However, in university-based youth empowerment SE, the students take a central role as the "strong ones" who

empower the beneficiaries of the SE (e.g., the poor) as well as the “weak ones” to be empowered by the SE itself.

Third, SE can work effectively as a form of *educational intervention* to empower specific target groups (e.g., youths) by developing their entrepreneurial and managerial capacity. The majority of the empowerment literature does not emphasize the importance of entrepreneurial capacity and our study is one of the first to emphasize the importance of the *entrepreneurial capacity as a mechanism for empowerment*. Arguably, one of the most interesting contributions in this study, related to the entrepreneurial-capacity empowerment, is the concept of *power sharing between youths and adults* as a new element of youth empowerment SE. While this power sharing seems to be natural in a university learning environment, it is rarely used in conventional SEs and under-reported in the mainstream SE literature.

Last but not least, the context of our study is unique; we focused on an SE that works on youth empowerment inside a university. There is limited research on SE for youth empowerment. Our study shows that SEs inside a university has many advantages, including their ability to gain free *technical experts* (i.e., faculty members) and *organizational legitimacy* conferred by the university, which enable the SE to sustain its operations. Our study fills in the gaps about what SE can do to empower the youths and how they do so. In an “exam-oriented” culture like Hong Kong, this type of SE plays an invaluable role as complementary educational tools to provide a holistic education to Hong Kong’s youths (Wong & Chandra, 2015).

This study underscores two important implications for practitioners, educators and policy makers. First, our findings of the various youth empowerment practices may provide useful for those who seek to develop curriculum on youth empowerment and or SEs that involve young people. For instance, our finding on *power-sharing between youth and adults* as a means of empowerment implies a need to re-define the role of adult-youths relationships in educational settings. The other useful finding is the notion of *providing unspecific instructions to students and only providing advice when necessary*. Empowerment requires freedom to explore and make mistakes and recover from them. This suggests that youth empowerment SE needs to “liberate” students from all kinds of oppression including the rigidity in how to accomplish things (commonly found in conventional lecture-and-exam based courses); and embrace the “experimental thinking” (i.e., educated trial and error by comparing a strategy versus a baseline) principle in accomplishing tasks. In addition, our findings provide insights for work-integration SEs (WISEs) and NGO leaders who focus on youth development by demonstrating the benefits of the social-capacity and entrepreneurial-capacity empowerment strategies.



Lastly, this study is not without limitation. In this study, we adopted a single case study approach and only focused on the Hong Kong-based Soap Cycling. Therefore, our findings might only capture the unique imprint and traits of this specific social enterprise which may limit its generalization. Future research can explore more cases and compare different types of social enterprises and across countries to see if they have different strategies in empowering the youth population. Future research can also conduct surveys to refine and test the new elements of youth empowerment discussed above and test correlates of performance (e.g., subjective and objective well-being measurements) using different types of empowerment strategies. Experimental research to verify the efficacy of various empowerment practices will also prove to be fruitful and allow researchers to build stronger cause-effect connections between youth empowerment and various types of performance measures (e.g., self-efficacy, leadership potential, capabilities).

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## Appendix I. A Screenshot of Sample Coding

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### 3 Codings of “Students\_can\_find\_a\_grp\_to\_work\_together” from 3 files.

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#### Official website [708: 931]

“This is a great place to help students to commit, push themselves and finally become a more responsible person. Another great thing is about friendship... you can find a group to work together throughout a whole semester...”

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#### The Explorer\_blog\_2016 [393: 551]

Although my internship was very short, I was able to experience working with others, think about marketing strategies, and learn how to make my own decisions.

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#### pwc\_news [1484: 1605]

At the end of the day, the team managed to clean numerous boxes of recycled soap and made friends with other volunteers

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### 3 Codings of “Students\_receive\_guidance\_from\_mentors&an\_advisory\_board” from 3 files.

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#### Additional [4377: 5854]

We intend to have board members from multiple relevant industries including: hotels and hospitality, logistics, academia, sanitation and public health, and NGO management. So far the following talented individuals have agreed to participate on the Board:

David Bishop, Founder and Chairman

Mr. Bishop holds multiple degrees, including a JD from The Georgetown University Law Center. He has worked for multiple international law firms in both the United States and Hong Kong and is currently a senior lecturer at HKU where he teaches several courses concerning law and ethics.

Baniel Cheung Director

Mr. Cheung holds degrees in Electric Engineering and Marketing Management. He has taught at multiple universities, and is currently a part-time lecturer at HKU. A marketing expert, Mr. Cheung has represented some of the world’s most respected companies.

Beau Lefler, Director

Mr. Lefler has a BS (Economics) from the University of Utah and a JD from the University of Michigan. He is now a senior lecturer at HKU where he teaches Business Law and Company Law courses. Mr. Lefler also has years of experience working with NGOs, and sits on the Board for the Tandana Foundation.

Dr. Chad Lykins, Director

Dr. Lykins completed his PhD in Leadership and Policy Studies at Vanderbilt University. He is currently an Assistant Professor and Coordinator within the Faculty of Education at the University of Hong Kong. Dr Lykins is an expert on development, poverty, and sustainability.

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### 2 Codings of “Allow\_students\_to\_make\_choices\_in\_startup\_business” from 2 files.

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#### Forbes\_News\_2013 [2980: 3347]

Bishop wanted to provide meaningful experiences for his students and decided if he couldn’t find good opportunities for them, he would create them. He asked a group of them if they would be willing to run a company if he agreed to put up his time and capital to start the business. After giving them some plausible business ideas, the students selected Soap Cycling.

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#### HKU\_Newsletter [158: 689]

Hotel guests typically are provided with small, wrapped complimentary bars of soap. Rarely do they use the whole bar. What happens to the remainder?

That question spurred students from the Faculty of Business and Economics to engage with the community in an initiative that offers a solution and benefits both the environment and public health.

Inspired by an American organisation that collects and recycles hotel soap in the U.S., the students set up a social enterprise, Soap Cycling, to provide a similar service in Hong Kong.

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