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The role of social entrepreneurship for youth purpose development

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ABSTRACT

Despite the burgeoning research on social entrepreneurship in recent years, there is limited research on youths as a context for theorizing. This article examines the influence of social entrepreneurship on youth development through the positive youth development perspective. It explores how youth participation in social entrepreneurial activities helps develop their sense of purpose in life. Using data from semi-structured interviews with 27 youths and participant observations, this article demonstrated that social entrepreneurship contributes to youth purpose development by facilitating social conscience, prosocial connectedness, capability and personal agency development and how these manifest in different stages of youth purpose commitment.

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Social entrepreneurship; social enterprise; youth; purpose; positive youth development

Introduction

In recent decades, social entrepreneurship (SE) has become an important social and economic activity globally, and most pertinently, among developing countries (Chandra, 2017; Desai & Tyler, 2020). Social entrepreneurship has been casted as a hybrid organizing approach that marries different 'institutional logics' (c.f. Doherty et al., 2014) and pursues the dual mission of achieving both financial sustainability and social purpose. In recent years, SE has flourished across Asia as an effort to address unemployment problems (c.f. Leung et al., 2019; Park et al., 2017) and as a relatively new educational tool (Karlidag-Dennis et al., 2020). In Malaysia, interest in SE has also grown exponentially (British Council, 2019). An important part of this growth has been contributed by the Social Entrepreneurship Unit of the Malaysia Creative and Innovation Centre (MaGIC, 2015), a capacity-building initiative led by Malaysia's Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation; and a growing appetite for SE by young Malaysians (Rahman et al., 2016). However, despite the rapid growth of the SE sector in Malaysia, SE research that uses Malaysian data remains rare.

While most empirical SE research originated from business management (e.g. Palacios-Marqués et al., 2019), public management (e.g. Powell et al., 2019), social work (e.g.

Nandan & Scott, 2013), and community development (e.g. Munoz et al., 2015) literature, little research has been done to explore the development of youths through their participation in SE; the exception goes to Chandra and Shang (2017). As youths today demand greater inclusion and meaningful engagement, and are taking actions to address development challenges, including through entrepreneurship (Deloitte, 2018; United Nations, 2016), policy makers around the world find it important to equip youths with a balanced emphasis to economic, environmental and social concerns.

Youth purpose, a domain of research in youth developmental studies (Bronk, 2012; Bronk et al., 2009; Mariano & Going, 2011) and community development studies (Jones, 2017; Pizzolato et al., 2011), has been defined as 'a stable and generalizable intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and leads to productive engagement with some aspect of the world beyond-the-self' (Damon et al., 2003, p. 121). In this article, we seek to advance SE scholarship by drawing upon the youth development literature (Bronk, 2012; Lerner et al., 2005) to explore youths' participation and experiences with social enterprises, and the implications on youths' sense of purpose in life. In this article, we ask: *'How do social enterprises develop a sense of purpose among youths?'*

Using semi-structured qualitative interviews with 27 youths who participated in 18 Malaysian social enterprises, this study identified five major themes that explain the processes and outcomes of youth participation in SE and develop a process model of youth purpose development through SE participation. This article offers a new contribution to the SE literature by placing youth development as the core theoretical foundation and as a relatively new context of SE research. We end the article with some suggestions to educators and policymakers.

Literature review

Positive youth development

Prior research has shown that youth can be active agents in their positive development (e.g. Damon, 2004). Lerner et al.'s (2005) theory of Positive Youth Development (PYD) proposed that 'if young people have mutually beneficial relations with the people and institutions of their social world, they will be on the way to a hopeful future marked by positive contributions to self, family, community, and civil society' (p. 12). PYD contrasts with traditional youth service approaches that have only focused on problems that young people may encounter while growing up, such as drinking, drug use, risks of neglect and economic deprivation (Larson & Hansen, 2005). The PYD approach emphasizes the manifest potentialities of young people, and the term 'positive' in PYD refers to attributes of healthy development, for example, social and cognitive competence, self-efficacy, integrity. Contemporary youth developmental studies (e.g. Burrow et al., 2010; Mariano & Going, 2011) adopted the PYD perspective as a means to explore the various ways of improving the well-being of young people.

The PYD literature postulates that human development takes place through processes of complex reciprocal interactions between a person and its external environment (Lerner

et al., 2005). Accordingly, it is crucial to examine the contextual influences on young people, because 'young people negotiate their own lives, futures, and meanings in the context of specific social, political, and economic circumstances and processes' (White & Wyn, 1998, p. 314). In particular, the individual-context relational-developmental process of PYD (Lerner et al., 2011) involves adaptive developmental regulations between the strengths of the youth and the ecological assets.

Youth purpose development

The possession of positive purposes has been viewed as an important marker and outcome of positive youth development (i.e. Benson & Scales, 2009). Research suggests that youth purpose aligns with several positive states of life such as life-satisfaction, optimism and mature identity status (Mariano & Going, 2011). Specifically, youths are deemed to be purposeful when they demonstrate a clear intention to accomplish something beyond themselves, offer prosocial reasons for doing so, and actively engage in achieving these aims (Bronk et al., 2010). Recent studies suggest that youths embrace life goals as they identify an inspiring life purpose that involves serving beyond-the-self (Johnson et al., 2018; Quinn, 2014). Damon (2004) described purpose as a tool which youths use to flaunt their distinct talent, strength and interests by getting involved with a person–context relationship. From another perspective, Bronk (2011) defined 'purpose' as one that affects the young adult's development, which also signifies a major component of their identity.

Empirical studies revealed that having a purpose in life contributes to better human development in various ways (Bronk et al., 2009). For instance, purpose is associated with positive psychological outcomes, including resilience (Machell et al., 2016), psychological well-being (Ryff, 2014), happiness (Wong & Wong, 2012), and life satisfaction (Bronk et al., 2009). Studies also suggest the importance of environment and social support in promoting purpose development, particularly those that are sensitive to the youths' interests and concerns (Mariano & Going, 2011; Moran et al., 2012). Quinn (2014) indicated that proximal connectedness to community may contribute to cultivating *other*-oriented purposes as youths participate and respond to the community needs directly. These studies resonate with Liang et al.'s (2016) proposition that purpose is shaped by capability and motivation, in which people (relationships), prosocial benefits (helping others), passion (love to do it) and propensity (capable of doing it) represent sources for purpose development.

Youth development in the context of social entrepreneurship

As alluded to earlier, there has been a dearth of research on SE in the context of youth and their development. On the other hand, there has been an increasing interest of youths to participate in SE (British Council, 2019; Deloitte, 2018) to improve the world. Fundamentally, SE offers an avenue for young people to create meaningful experiences as it leverages the youth's capacities to effect positive change in the communities. In recent years, SE has become an alternative means for young people to develop and exercise leadership and agency because SE enables youths to act as active agents of

change in their neighbourhoods and broader communities (Kruse, 2018). Importantly, SEs serve as a platform that exposes participants to crucial social issues and social inequality (Chandra & Shang, 2017), through which youths could develop effective agency by participating in tackling social injustice (Sutton, 2007). Moreover, recent studies found that participation in SE could enhance youths' identity capital development (Lewis, 2016) and empower youths on managerial and entrepreneurship skills (Chandra & Shang, 2017).

Methodology

There is a lack of empirical research that investigates youth participation and development through SE. To address this gap, we employed a multiple case study approach (Yin, 2013) to examine the roles and influence of SEs on youth purpose development. Given the limited theorizing of youth development in the SE domain and particularly in the Malaysian context, an inductive qualitative research method was considered to be the most appropriate approach for this study. We employed the Gioia coding techniques to analyse the data (Gioia et al., 2013).

Sampling

We adopt a purposive sampling method using these selection criteria to select SEs in this study: (1) a registered entity that sells product or services as the main source of revenue; (2) not a non-profit or non-government organization (NGO); (3) has a social or environmental mission; and (4) located in Malaysia. In total, we collected data from 27 youth participants across 18 SEs who had various involvement and participation in various sectors of SEs, ranging from restaurants, social marketplace, recycling, and farm to education (Table 1).

Data collection and analysis

The youth informants were between 15 and 30 years old. The term *youth* is used interchangeably with the words, adolescents, and young adults, as described earlier. The informants include youths who participated as social enterprises' founders, employees, interns, and volunteers (see Table 2).

The primary data was collected from in-depth semi-structured interviews with the 27 youth informants. While we included multiple informants with different roles in a single SE, due to some limitations in the fieldwork, some of the cases included only one participant. As shown in Table 2, the majority of the informants were female ($n = 18$ or 66.7%) and there were a mix of co-founders ($n = 9$ or 33.3%) and non-founders who were employees, interns and volunteers ($n = 18$ or 66.7%). We asked the informants to share their experience in SE participation and reflect on whether and how it led to any changes to how they view their lives. We triangulated the interview data with participant observation on the interactions between the SEs and youths for fact-checking, to augment and increase the credibility and trustworthiness of the qualitative research (Reeves et al., 2008).

By using ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software, we coded and analysed the interview data to derive insights and patterns. The coding process employed the Gioia's methodology (Chandra & Shang, 2019; Gioia et al., 2013) where we coded the raw data (i.e.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics.

Name of SEs	Location/City	Year of Establishment	Nature of Business	Beneficiary/Social/Environmental Cause
RiseCafé	Kuala Lumpur	2016	A community café with dine-in facilities to serve homeless and urban poor communities.	Homeless and urban poor
HomeChef	Selangor	2015	Partner with refugee homemakers who cook authentic dishes of their country origin to support their children's education.	Refugees
Orifarm	Pahang	2015	Organic farm operated by indigenous smallholder farmers.	Indigenous community, organic farming methods
SuperHero	Selangor	2010	Restaurant run by hearing impaired youths and adults.	People with disabilities
GourmetPlus	Kuala Lumpur	2015	Restaurant cum culinary training centre for urban poor youths.	Marginalized youths
TopDeals	Selangor	2016	Market and sell food surpluses at discounted price; organize pop-up stalls to sell fresh vegetables at urban poor neighbourhood.	Urban poor, Environment
CandleLite	Selangor	2016	Recycle used cooking oils to make soaps and candles.	Environment
MyDelight	Selangor	2015	Partner with urban poor homemakers who cook and bake authentic local dishes.	Urban poor
LittleCares	Selangor	2016	Café run by youths with high-functioning autism.	People with disabilities
Galaxia	Sarawak	2015	Partner with indigenous smallholder farmers who preserve heirloom seeds through traditional methods of farming.	Smallholder indigenous farmers, traditional farming methods.
MyBarista	Kuala Lumpur	2016	Hire and train marginalized youths with disabilities on coffee and drinks.	People with disabilities
SnackBites	Kuala Lumpur	2016	Mobile/pop-up stalls that run by people with hearing impaired.	People with disabilities
GreenDeals	Penang	2018	Market and sell food surpluses at discounted prices; prioritize hiring riders from marginalized communities to deliver orders.	Environment
UrbanPro	Penang	2015	In-house developed urban farming system that emphasizes on nutritional values and reduce environmental impact.	Food security, Environment
FortuneOne	Selangor	2015	Restaurant that develop and hire at-risk youths.	At-risk youths
SilverFarm	Perak	2018	Partner with vegetable smallholder farmers; hire youths from marginalized backgrounds.	Smallholder farmers
PineStyle	Johor	2017	Upcycle agriculture waste into arts and fashion products.	Environment
PopMail	Selangor	2016	Promote and sell products and services of social enterprises.	Social Marketplace for SE

Table 2. Details of Key Informants in the Study.

Interviewee pseudonym	Gender	Age	Affiliated SEs	Duration participating at SEs (No. of Years)	Role at SEs
Winnie	F	26	CandleLite	3	Co-founder
Rita	F	26	FortuneOne	3	Employee
Yvonne	F	30	Galaxia	4	Co-founder
Angeline	F	22	GourmetPlus	1	Volunteer
Jayden	M	24	GreenDeals	1	Co-founder
Dylan	M	23	GreenDeals	1	Co-founder
Sandy	F	21	HomeChef	Less than 1	Intern
Grace	F	27	HomeChef	3	Co-founder
Marina	F	24	HomeChef	3	Employee
Elaine	F	20	LittleCares	2	Volunteer
Noraini	F	30	MyBarista	4	Employee
Irene	F	30	MyDelights	3	Co-founder
Emily	F	24	OriFarm	2	Intern
Brian	M	26	OriFarm	1	Employee
Fatimah	F	28	PineStyle	3	Co-founder
Katherine	F	22	PopMall	2	Co-founder
Vanessa	F	20	PopMall	2	Volunteer
Peter	M	17	RiseCafe	2	Volunteer
Jenny	F	18	RiseCafe	1	Intern
Penny	F	18	RiseCafe	Less than 1	Intern
Anna	F	21	RiseCafe	1	Volunteer
Sean	M	27	RiseCafe	2	Volunteer
Stephen	M	28	SilverFarm	1	Co-founder
Nizam	M	30	SnackBites	1	Employee
Jackson	M	23	SuperHero	1	Volunteer
Carmen	F	28	TopDeals	1	Employee
Raymond	M	25	UrbanPro	1	Employee

interviews and fieldnotes) using first-level, second-level coding and to aggregate dimensions.

Findings

Our data analysis generated a total of 12 first-level codes, which were further classified and aggregated into five second-level concepts: (i) *facilitating youth activism*, (ii) *promoting civic participation*, (iii) *cultivating a sense of belonging*; (iv) *building skills and knowledge*, and (v) *nurturing personal agency*. We finally aggregated these five concepts into three aggregate dimensions, which we labelled as (a) *social conscience development*, (b) *prosocial connectedness development* and (c) *capability and agency development*. [Figure 1](#) describes the analytical coding process used in the study. We discuss these findings in the next section.

Social conscience development

The first type of development process facilitated by SEs for the youths is social conscience development. Social conscience is the ability to have a sense of responsibility or concern for the problems and injustices of society (Benson et al., 1998). The findings demonstrated that SE participation has enabled the youth participants to reflect on deeply held opinions about social justice and sustainability (Steiner & Teasdale, 2019). We found that SEs foster

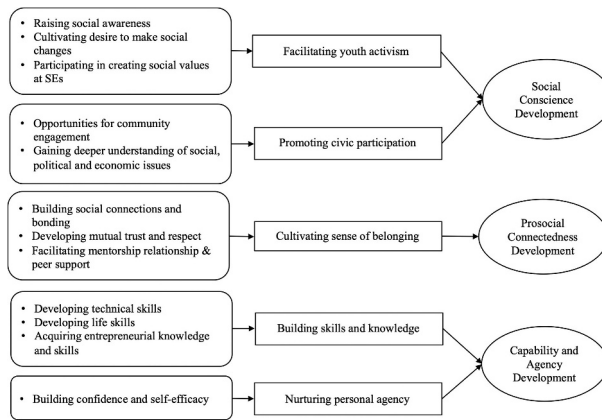


Figure 1. Analytical Coding Process Using the Gioia Methodology.

youths' social conscience development mainly in two ways: (1) facilitating youth activism and (2) promoting civic participation.

Facilitating youth activism

Raising social awareness. All youths in the study have had earlier exposure to community service work through non-profit organizations except one who claimed to have the first experience working with an SE. Most of them heard about SEs through friends, talks and social media. As these youths started participating in the SE activities, they learned more about the underlying issues of these communities. As stated by Jenny, an intern,

Before this when I see homeless people on the street, I will think of 'why is he there, how can I help'. But now [after I joined RiseCafe] when I see them I try to imagine what happened to them before this ... I seek to understand more about their background, and then we will eventually find the road to solve the problems ... I know some of them are alcoholic or drug-addicted. Now I learned that these addictions may not be their intention. (Jenny, intern, RiseCafe)

Besides learning SE concepts from school and media, individual life experiences infused an urge in youths to find better ways to improve the lives of people whom they care about. For instance, raised in a farming family, Raymond, an agricultural science graduate, had concerns about his father's use of massive amount of pesticides and herbicides in his farm. After joining UrbanPro SE, he gained higher social-environmental awareness through his exposure to new farming technologies, food safety and environmental sustainability, as he stated:

Urban farming sounds and looks 'green' on the surface as many people think that it is [the] same with growing healthy organic food. But honestly, not all urban farming systems use the right way that gives good nutrition value and is safe for consumption; some even use a lot of energy, it is not good, not sustainable. (Raymond, employee, UrbanPro)

Cultivating desires to make social changes. The youth also indicated their desire to make social change through participating in SEs. Some of the youths hoped to venture into new entrepreneurial ideas; some became advocates for the social/environmental

causes that they believe in; and some were determined to continuously offer their time and talent to help others in need. For example, Carmen, an employee at TopDeals SE, was captivated by the idea of monetizing surplus vegetables in tackling food waste issues. By witnessing tons of food waste being sent to landfills, she believed that tackling waste issues in a more entrepreneurial way from the upstream was crucial, as she stated, *'I want to venture into farming, I believe food waste issues can be solved from the farming side, by working directly with the farmers'*. (Carmen, employee, TopDeals).

Participating in creating social value. Additionally, the youths in this study had the opportunities to participate in the social value creation process through direct engagement with the SEs' beneficiaries and stakeholders. Such engagements enhance the youths' understanding of their potential to create positive societal impact. Raymond, an employee of UrbanPro SE, credited his early exposure to different farming techniques in helping him to develop better solutions for UrbanPro SE:

I did my internship in one of the organic farms in Green Ville. There is a lot of hard work and labour just to produce limited supplies. I visited an organic farm there which uses natural, permaculture methods for farming. This farm has even more challenges than the normal organic farm ... I like this urban farming concept [of UrbanPro], especially aquaponics system because it solves the problems that I see in conventional and organic farming. (Raymond, employee, UrbanPro)

Promoting civic participation

Opportunities for community engagements. SE offered opportunities for the youths to get closer to communities or groups whom they would hardly gain access to, for example, people with disabilities and special needs. These engagements enabled the youths to work closely and collaboratively with these disadvantaged groups, and enhanced their empathy to the problems faced by these groups. For instance, Nizam, an employee at SnackBites SE, was working closely with beneficiaries with hearing impairment and he gained a better understanding of the challenges and difficulties faced by these beneficiaries during his engagement with them:

... they [beneficiaries of SnackBites] are just like us normal people. But sometimes they get emotional when we told them about their mistakes, we have to use the right way to counsel them ... The others, [senior ones], they know their limits, but sometimes they are quite slow due to old age, and physical challenge because the need to carry heavy things, so we need to deal with them differently. (Nizam, employee, SnackBites)

A deeper understanding of social, political and economic issues. The findings also revealed that SEs provide a platform for the youths to develop a deeper understanding of social, political and economic issues. For instance, Jenny and Peter were exposed to the complex social issues related to homelessness and urban poverty after working at RiseCafe SE. With a better understanding of these issues, these youths have since committed to pursuing their tertiary education in development studies as they hope to contribute their knowledge and expertise to help the underprivileged communities.

Prosocial connectedness development

The second type of development process facilitated by SE is prosocial connectedness. Prosocial connectedness involves the degree to which youth engage in prosocial behaviours and can successfully create and maintain positive social interactions with others (c. f. Anderson-Butcher et al., 2008). Our analysis found that SEs contributed to youths' prosocial connectedness development through cultivating a sense of belonging within the SE and the community in various ways as we explain below.

Cultivating a sense of belonging

Building social connections and bonding. The resource limitations of the SEs in the study (typical in any start-ups) drove the youth volunteers to work closely and collaboratively with others to tackle resource and operational issues. This created a strong sense of belonging among the youths, peers and the beneficiary communities. For example, several youths expressed that they continued to get involved in the SE activities due to the social bonding and attachment formed within the SE environment. For example, Peter, a volunteer at RiseCafe SE stated:

When I first volunteered with RiseCafe is that sense of humanity that the street clients have a choice, they get to come and you build a relationship with them ... One thing that keeps me coming back to volunteer is that sense of belonging that we all have created, between volunteers, and between the street clients, we are like a family. I feel good when everyone has good relationships working together. (Peter, volunteer, RiseCafe)

Developing mutual trust and respect. Besides, we also observed that the SEs practiced a culture of community consultation to gain mutual respect from community members. We found that the youth participants can develop strong bonding and connections with the beneficiaries as they worked and lived together. For example, after 4 years working with the indigenous smallholder farmers, Yvonne, a co-founder of Galaxia SE, received strong support from more farmers who expressed interest in organic farming. However, Yvonne admitted that the path to gain trust and respect from the indigenous community was challenging at the beginning due to negative impacts brought about by others to the community before Galaxia adopted the fair-trade model:

We have seen cases where fast development goes in, the community cannot take it, everything just falls apart; and we hope that we will not be like other conventional businesses, that's the whole reason why we started Galaxia in the first place. Businesses come and go, projects come in and out, people come and go, and what we see is that the negative impact is very long-lasting, it can last through generations ... and so, I guess, our business, we have more responsibility in that, because we have to put that into consideration. (Yvonne, co-founder, Galaxia)

Facilitating mentorship relationships and peer support. Despite the SEs' limitations in resources and capacity development, we observed that some youth co-founders had demonstrated exceptional leadership quality in mentoring the youths who participated in the SEs. This is evident in the experience of Anna, a volunteer at RiseCafe:

The sharing sessions with Mary [the co-founder of RiseCafe] are very important for my personal development in a social enterprise because there's a lot of stress, a lot of turbulence,

a lot of build-ups, a lot of things to do. As a mentor, Mary would break down the events and asked me what I thought about it, and see if I could see the patterns or not. In a way, she was training me how to view things from different perspectives. (Anna, volunteer, RiseCafe)

As small and new organizations, the SEs operated under stressful conditions as there were no precedence or routines on how things work. This has led to some youths who experienced burnout as they juggled multiple duties in the SEs. When this occurred, peer understanding and shared responsibilities became crucial. We found that SEs could facilitate a supportive environment for the youths as they are working together for same social causes. For example, Sandy, a volunteer of PopMall SE was under pressure but she always received encouragement from Katherine, the co-founder of PopMall:

Sandy was just super stressed because she's dealing with a lot of stuff, putting too much on her shoulder ... I told her that there's a lot of people that you can trust and believe in. And slowly she let go of things. That changed her as well ... We didn't have a big team, but at least somebody in that team learned something from the whole project, so that helps empower me. (Katherine, co-founder, PopMall)

Capability and agency development

The third type of development process found in this study is capability and agency development. This refers to the development of youth capability that includes building individuals' actual skills and the belief in one's effectiveness in performing specific tasks (i. e. self-efficacy) (Bandura, 2010). Specifically, we found that the SEs contributed to youth participants' capability and agency development in two ways: (1) building skills and knowledge and (2) nurturing personal agency.

Building skills and capabilities

Acquiring managerial, technical and life skills. From the personal observation data, we found that the youths in this study acquired various skills and knowledge through their participation in the SEs. These include life skills, technical and vocational skills, and entrepreneurial skills. For instance, Brian, who received multi-skills learning throughout his 1.5 year of attachment in OriFarm SE, stated:

At first, I was assigned to manage the farm [at OriFarm], but later on our financial situation hits a downturn because the sales in City A were not good, so we end up focusing on sales in Town B. Since then, my role changed from farm operations to sales and marketing. Now, I'm doing more than that, I'm handling farming, sales and marketing, repairing, procurement, training, leadership training, interacting with indigenous people, and everything. (Brian, employee, OriFarm)

Another example to illustrate the skills development of youths in the SEs was Sandy, an intern from HomeChef SE. After joining HomeChef, Sandy had the opportunities to rotate across different roles in the SE, from finance, human resources to operations. The experience of taking responsibilities in different positions allowed her to develop new skills and enabled her to step smoothly to roles of greater responsibility, like becoming a project manager at HomeChef SE, as Sandy noted:

At first I was doing more finance-related stuff. After that, I got involved in a bit of HR, [such as] having phone interviews with potential interns. After that, they assigned me into Operations

as well, [like] handling the deliveries between the kitchen, the clients, and also the runners. And lastly, I was assigned to manage a pop-up café event. It [working at HomeChef] has been a hectic but fulfilling experience for me. (Sandy, intern, HomeChef)

Nurturing personal agency

Building confidence and self-efficacy. We also found that the experience gained from SE participation helped strengthen self-efficacy and confidence of the youths. For instance, during the early start-up stage, Jayden, co-founder of GreenDeals SE, was disappointed with outlets that refused to sell their premium bakeries at a lower price and would rather bin them to ‘preserve’ their brand image. It took Jayden months to finally secure the first partner who was willing to try out the idea of selling food surplus at a discounted price. Through this experience, Jayden became more confident and determined to help more people, as he stated:

It [the experience of co-founding GreenDeals] has taught me a lot, shaped my mindset to be more optimistic, allowed me to broaden my mind, to be able to see things from a new perspective, able to meet more new people, and also I have a sense of purpose right now that I want to help as many people as I can so that they can also help others. (Jayden, co-founder, GreenDeals)

Although not all youths may be fully committed to pursuing the SE path in the future, it cannot be denied that the experiences they had gained from participating in the SEs helped them refine their life direction and goals. For example, Vanessa was determined to pursue a postgraduate qualification in biology after her volunteering experience at PopMall SE, because she was concerned about biodiversity conservation and wanted to contribute through policy-related research. We provide more proof quotes in [Appendix A](#).

Discussion

Despite the rapid growth of the SE sector in Malaysia, there is a dearth of research on youth development and particularly youth purpose development from the perspective of SE. To address the research gap, this study answered the research question ‘*How do social enterprises develop a sense of purpose among youths?*’. We employed multiple case study method and the Gioia coding techniques to inductively analyse in-depth interviews data from youths who participated in SE activities in various roles, from volunteers, interns, employees to co-founders. Overall, the findings demonstrated that SE is a promising tool to shape the positive development of youths through developing a sense of purpose in their SE participation.

Our research first identified that SE contributed to shaping youths’ purpose development through three major aspects, which are *social conscience*, *prosocial connectedness and capability and agency development*. *Social conscience development*, which refers to the ability to have a sense of responsibility, consists of two sub-elements, which are (1) facilitating youth activism, and (2) promoting civic participation. These two elements have been discussed in the literature as important strategies in facilitating positive youth development (Larson & Hansen, 2005; Sherrod, 2007), as they give youths opportunities to pursue real information about the way the world works and to find ways to make social change (Pearce & Larson, 2006). While traditional youth service providers rarely pay

attention to the need for youth activism and participation (Balsano, 2005), youth participants in our study treated SE activities as a form of activism, and this positions them to act as partners and agents of social change to impacts others' lives. This highlighted SE's potentials in engaging youths in the society and develop their social conscience through their participation in meaningful activities, such as supporting vulnerable farmers and homeless people.

Secondly, the findings revealed that SE could foster *youths' prosocial connectedness development* through cultivating a sense of belonging, which involves both feeling cared for and caring about the social environment (i.e. Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008). Existing research has pointed out that a solid sense of belonging is an important mechanism for positive youth development, as youths can gain more from their participation when they have bonding with the agency or organization (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2008). Our study demonstrated that participation in SE activities offers youths the opportunities to meet individuals who share similar interests and concerns for social issues. Through working collaboratively for the same social cause, youths develop a strong sense of peer group belonging (Newman et al., 2007). Importantly, the findings revealed that SEs could act as a platform for engaging and interacting with a wide range of stakeholders including beneficiaries, SE partners and funders, which further facilitates community integration of youth participants. While most youth development studies have focused on the importance of developing bonding and connection to youth agencies or programmes, our study demonstrated a *multi-directional aspect* of the prosocial connectedness development through SE as youths are able to develop connections and sense of belonging internally and externally at different levels through their SE participation.

Moreover, our study identified two elements of *youths' capability and agency development* in SEs, which are building skills and knowledge, and nurturing personal agency. Unlike in most youth organizations where youths are regarded as service recipients (i.e. Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006; Ferguson & Xie, 2008), youth participants in SEs are given opportunities to operate an organization and contribute to the social and economic development of the organization. Our findings suggested that by assuming different roles and directly engaging in social and economic activities through SE, youths are enabled to build and reinforce various skills such as leadership, vocational and communication skills. More importantly, through the experience of creating value in SE, youths can strengthen their self-efficacy and confidence, which are essential elements in positive youth development (Burrow et al., 2010). These personal feelings of control and agency subsequently enabled the youth participants to pursue greater goals and develop a greater commitment.

Importantly, this research discovered that SEs could contribute to multiple stages of youth purpose development through their participation in SE activities. While there are limited studies on youth development in the SE literature, our findings have enriched and advanced extant understanding of positive youth development theory (Bronk, 2012; Burrow et al., 2010; Lerner et al., 2005) by providing evidence that youth purpose development can be explained by the *process of initiating, sustaining, escalating, and evolving commitment towards what the youths aim to achieve in life*. We summarize the youth purpose development process within the SE context derived from this study in [Figure 2](#).

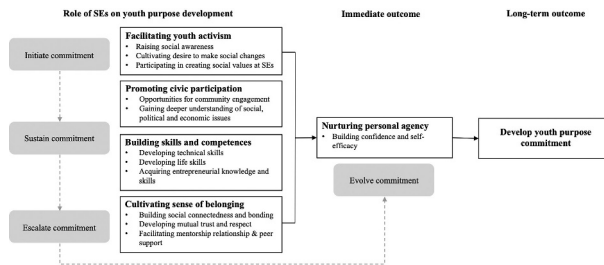


Figure 2. The Role of Social Enterprises for Youth Purpose Development.

In particular, this study demonstrated a *multi-functional* aspect of SE in the youth purpose development process. First, the findings revealed that SE could *initiate* the youths' commitment to finding purpose amid social-environmental issues through facilitating youth activism. By involving youth participants in dealing with complex social-environmental issues in the society, SE acted as the 'real-world window' for the youths to get the exposure and develop the desire to tackle complex socio-environmental problems in an entrepreneurial way. Secondly, the SE participation could further *sustain* youths' commitment through promoting youths' civic participation and building their skills and competences. The social exposure and experience gained from participating in SE activities helped develop the youths' sense of social and environmental conscience. By directly engaging in social and economic activities of SEs, youths are able to derive meaning from their efforts and acquire various skills for performing SE tasks and dealing with challenges, which could help them sustain their commitment and encourage them to continue to get involved in SE activities. Also, the findings showed that SEs could *escalate* youths' commitment through cultivating their sense of belonging towards SEs and the communities they served. The community-based services through SE provided the youths with opportunities to develop connections and gain respect from community members, which helped the youths' commitments to take root, while the supportive relationships from like-minded colleagues and mentors in the SEs may help youths increase their commitments over the long term (Bronk, 2012). Lastly, youth commitment could also *evolve* as youth participants enhance their confidence and self-efficacy through their SE participation. Our findings suggested that through successfully performing SE tasks, the youths experienced enhanced self-efficacy (Bandura, 2010) in which youths develop positive beliefs in their capabilities. These positive transformations in youths' beliefs offered opportunities for their commitments to evolve.

Conclusion

Although there is a burgeoning research on social entrepreneurship (SE) globally, research that places *context* as a central aspect of SE theorizing remains a minority. Context can mean many things, in this article we focus on *youth* and a country relatively new in SE theorizing (i.e. Malaysia) as the context to study SE. To address the context gap in SE research, we embraced the positive youth development (PYD) perspective as a lens to explore how social enterprises (SEs) could facilitate PYD through helping youths

develop their sense of purpose in life. We chose Malaysia as a context to study youths and SE relationship and collected data on 27 youths from 18 Malaysian SEs.

This article makes three novel contributions to the SE literature. First, this article offers a process model of how SE participation can lead to the positive youth development through building youths' positive purposes. The process model (see [Figure 2](#)) well summarized the stages in which the purpose development of the youths can be fostered by SE participation. Specifically, this article highlights that through *facilitating youth activism, promoting civic participation, cultivating sense of belonging, building skills and competences, and nurturing personal agency*, SEs enable several major processes of youth purpose development, including *initiating, sustaining, escalating, and evolving commitment* towards what the youths aim to achieve over time. This highlights a *multi-functional* aspect of SEs, which is not well documented in existing SE research, and shows how SE could play different roles in fostering youth purpose development at different stages.

Secondly, this article demonstrated SEs as a *multi-dimensional* mechanism that can lead to positive youth development (see [Figure 1](#)) through which youths could build their social conscience, prosocial connectedness, capability and personal agency from participating in SE activities. These findings enhance our understanding of the implications of SE participation and advances the youth development concept discussed in the SE literature (i.e. Ferguson & Xie, 2008). Importantly, this article contributes to a *individual-context nexus* of SE research by articulating a bidirectional nature of relationship between the youths and SEs, an area that is marginalized in the youth development literature (Mariano & Going, 2011).

Lastly, this study demonstrated that SE can be employed as an effective educational tool for youths – those in high school, university students and young graduates – as part of internships or service-learning requirements in an off-classroom setting. While the majority of SE literature does not emphasize the importance and impact of engaging in SE activities on youths, this study shows that SE engagement has many benefits, such as building a deeper understanding of social-environmental issues, developing connections and bonding to the community, building personal capabilities and skills and developing a sense of agency, among others.

This study implies the importance of collaboration between SEs and schools or universities. Such collaboration can assist the growth of the local SE sector through a pool of purpose-driven youths as valuable resources. Therefore, developing youths' sense of purpose is not the holy grail of SE alone but it can also help spur the rise of positive-minded youth leaders to support the growth of SE sustainably.

While this article shed some light on the roles of the SE in developing youths' life purpose, it is not without limitations. First, this article focused on positive youths alone, which constitutes a small population of the youths participating in SEs. Future studies can examine the development of other types of youths within the SE settings, such as those who flunked out of SEs for whatever reasons they may be, as well as those who might develop negative experiences with SEs. Second, more research is needed to examine how relevant stakeholders of SEs such as funders (private or public), the policy makers, and colleagues or team members, may exert influence on the purpose development of youths. Future research may also adopt hypothetico-deductive research to evaluate the efficacy of SE interventions on youths (e.g. SE activity with or without pay; SE as a graded activity

in students' GPA or merely an extracurricular activity; SE curriculum with stronger emphasis on social value versus entrepreneurial skills) and characteristics (e.g. SE being located school/campus or outside, full time or part-time involvement in SE). We hope that this article offers some new insights to spark a new interest on SE for youths for academics, policy makers and practitioners.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix A. Additional Quotes From Youth Interviews

First-level coding	Sample quotes extracted from youth interviews
Exposure to social issues and developing social awareness	<p>We often get caught up in human issues, poverty, orphans, abused people, but we don't really see the connection to nature, and, ultimately what we can do about it, to raise awareness... because the root of the problem for wildlife and all these bio-ecosystem issues is the human ourselves. (Vanessa, volunteer, PopMall)</p> <p>They [the LGBT community] are not getting what they should, they couldn't work in a proper company because of discrimination. Some are transgenders and forced to become sex workers just to earn a living... I think about helping them, the basic one is to help them not to get discriminated, to have the equal chance, equal employment opportunities. (Sandy, intern, HomeChef)</p>
Cultivating desire to make social changes	<p>I hope to setup a business, like a social enterprise, I am inspired by many friends who started social enterprises. Some do sewing; some do food, many ways to help the needy ones. All ideas can be combined and do something with social impact, can help more people], especially those who are struggling [like people with disabilities]. (Nizam, employee, SnackBites)</p>
Creating social values	<p>It's very inspiring that night when we completed the job interviews for the homeless people, we see 7 people who got lifted up overnight. They don't really have the education qualifications. But when they tell me their intention, I can see that they really want to work. It's also sad to see some really got declined, or some cannot pass the urine test. It also depends on how they talk to us, if they speak clear enough. If not, they are probably alcoholic. It's a lot about judgement, our judgement and how we feel about their passion to make a change. (Jenny, intern, RiseCafe)</p> <p>Sometimes the OKU (people with disabilities) get emotional when we told them about their mistakes, we have to use the right way to counsel them. When we say they were wrong, they get sensitive and emotional. Another challenge is about changing their mindset, cultivate their passion, this is very hard. [Some of them] are already grown up but still very pampered by the family. These young OKU they lack experience, so it's quite difficult to correct them. (Nizam, employee, SnackBites)</p>
Opportunities for community engagement	<p>Doing business for the orang-asli (indigenous) is taking ownership. The idea is like nonprofit, but we take it to a deeper level, where we build relationships, we help them to come up with ideas on their own, we spark ideas from them, we don't tell them what to do, but they themselves give ideas, and they take part in discussions. We can give them suggestions along the way, and they are the ones making the final decisions. So, I see that's participation and collaboration, not just top-down. So that's how I build relationship with them. (Emily, intern, OriFarm)</p>
Gain deeper understanding of social, political and economic issues	<p>Before this I wanted to study about economics so come here to learn about how economic works. I realized that whenever you do something, it will lead to different consequences, and many uncertainties are there, so I understand that economics is not the only solution... I became more interested in liberal arts education, it is not just about economics, it covers philosophy, and sociology, history through many disciplinaries. (Penny, intern, RiseCafe)</p>
Facilitating mentorship and peer support	<p>I always had that inking hope that it [GreenDeals] will grow into something big someday, that really brings an impact. Especially under Jayden's (GreenDeals co-founder) leadership, although there were ups and downs, he always get back up eight times, and fall down seven, but I admire that in him. (Dylan, co-founder, GreenDeals)</p>
Developing technical and life skills	<p>I became the head volunteer, and was essentially in charge of most of the stuff, others do help me of course, but I basically had to help organize all of the volunteer groups who came in. I learned to communicate better with internal team and the volunteers group, how to get the same information across. And there's lots of coordination work, how the service line works, what needs to be done, how to you fill the street clients' data. (Anna, volunteer, RiseCafe)</p> <p>I'm more grateful that I gain a lot more patience towards a many people, especially dealing with Kenny and Thomas [beneficiaries cum employees of SilverFarm]. I had to be patient with myself first, get the [MS Excel data entry] job done, then come back to teach them again and again. It was really tough at the beginning, but I feel that the burden of helping Thomas out is off my shoulders now, because he can run on his own, he is earning money for his family. I'm so happy for him. (Stephen, co-founder, SilverFarm)</p>
Building confidence and self-efficacy	<p>With the legal experience that I have, it would help more to set up a social enterprise, to give back the way I want it to be. That's why I'm not doing pro-bono because doing pro-bono takes up a lot of time. I am more confident now, maybe I can start a social enterprise for myself, hopefully in legal service. (Sean, volunteer, RiseCafe)</p> <p>This [the volunteering experience at PopMall] has definitely changed my mind. It was because of this SE and the innovation that we have, I realize that we can do more than just volunteering. (Vanessa, volunteer, PopMall)</p>