



“2026 Secondary School Students’ Well-Being Survey”

1 in 5 Students at High Risk of Appearance Anxiety, Girls’ Rate More than Double of Boys’ Higher Appearance Anxiety Tied to Lower Well-Being and Greater Emotional and Social Distress

(30 August 2026, Hong Kong) Since 2010, Baptist Oi Kwan Social Service’s “Mental Wellness Service for Children and Youth” has regularly conducted surveys on the mental health status of secondary school students in Hong Kong, aiming to help the community keep abreast of the latest trends in youth mental health and implement timely preventive measures. In 2023, the survey began incorporating a “well-being” component to further explore positive factors that support students’ emotional health.

Amid the widespread use of beauty filters and social media, appearance anxiety has become an emerging concern for adolescent mental wellness. Against this backdrop, this year’s “2026 Secondary School Students’ Well-Being Survey” focused specifically on appearance anxiety and its associations with students’ emotional health and social well-being. This year’s special focus was “appearance anxiety.” Conducted between November last year and March this year, the survey successfully collected 1,318 valid responses from local secondary school students, covering areas including well-being, emotional distress, life satisfaction, risk of appearance anxiety, social burnout, and social withdrawal.

The findings indicate that the mean of the overall well-being score among surveyed students was 2.87 (out of 5), comparable to last year’s 2.9 and remaining at a moderate level. While students’ overall emotional health showed signs of improvement, more than one in ten still exhibited moderate to extremely severe levels of depression (17.2%), anxiety (15.2%), and stress (11.8%), indicating a need for professional support.

Notably, 22.8% of surveyed students were classified as high-risk for appearance anxiety, reaching a level of concern. The proportion was particularly pronounced among female students at 33%—more than double the 14.5% recorded among male students. Further analysis revealed that the more appearance anxiety behaviours students exhibited, the higher their levels of social burnout and social withdrawal, the greater their symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress, and the lower their well-being.

Given the prevailing culture of social comparison in online and pop culture, compounded in recent years by AI and algorithms magnifying the “perfect filter” effect, adolescents have become increasingly susceptible to narrow beauty standards and external judgments. We urge schools, families, and society to confront the impact of appearance anxiety and social burnout on youth mental health, assist students in letting go of the “perfect filter,” guide them in shifting from self-criticism to self-compassion, and enhance their well-being through diverse values and positive connections.



1. Research Findings

This year's survey investigated secondary school students' well-being, emotional distress, life satisfaction, appearance anxiety, social burnout, and social withdrawal. The results are as follows:

1.1 Overall Well-Being Remains at a Moderate Level

According to the *Mental Health Continuum–Short Form (MHC-SF)*, surveyed secondary school students scored an average of 2.87 (out of 5) for overall well-being, comparable to last year's 2.9. Broken down by well-being categories, 30.7% achieved a high level of well-being (Flourishing), 58.2% were moderate, and 11.1% were low (Languishing). Well-being was significantly lower among female students and senior secondary students.

1.2 Around 10% Suffer Moderate to Severe Emotional Distress

According to the *Depression Anxiety Stress Scale–Youth (DASS-Y)*, the overall mean scores for depression, anxiety, and stress among surveyed students were 4.25, 3.41, and 7.12 respectively (each scored out of 21), falling within normal ranges and reflecting an improvement compared to last year. The proportions of students exhibiting moderate to extremely severe symptoms were 17.2% for depression, 15.2% for anxiety, and 11.8% for stress. All three categories saw declines, dropping from over 20% last year to roughly 15% this year. Emotional distress remained more pronounced among female and senior secondary students.

1.3 “Appearance and Body Shape” Consistently Ranks in Top Five Life Dissatisfactions

According to a self-designed questionnaire, the life domains with the highest satisfaction levels were: *family relationships* (57.7%), *physical health* (52.8%), *interpersonal relationships* (51.2%), *adapting to the learning environment* (44.1%), and *social conditions* (36.0%). Conversely, the top five areas of dissatisfaction were: *time management* (41.3%), *academics* (36.2%), *public examinations* (35.6%), *romantic relationships* (34.2%), and *appearance and body shape* (28.5%). *Appearance and body shape* has consistently ranked among the top five areas of student dissatisfaction over the years. Furthermore, satisfaction in this area is significantly associated with emotional distress, underscoring that appearance and body image remain critical factors warranting close attention.

1.4 Over 20% at High Risk of Appearance Anxiety, Girls' Rate More than Double of Boys'

According to the *Appearance Anxiety Inventory (AAI)*, the overall mean score for surveyed students was 14.57 (out of 40). Female students scored significantly higher (17.08) than male students (12.56), while senior secondary students also scored higher (15.51) than junior secondary students (13.72). Approximately 22.8% of surveyed students fell into the high-risk category for appearance anxiety. Within this group, the proportion of female students reached 33.0%—more than double the 14.5% recorded for male students.

The most common reported behaviors were: “*I check my appearance (e.g., in mirrors, by touching with my fingers, or by taking photos of myself)*” (34.3%), “*I brood about past events or reasons to explain why I look the way I do*” (24.9%), and “*I think about how to camouflage or alter my appearance*” (23.1%).



1.5 Social Distress More Severe Among Female and Senior Secondary Students

According to the *Social Burnout Scale (SBS)*, the mean score for social burnout among surveyed students was 2.21 (out of 5). Scores were higher among female students (2.31) than male students (2.14), and higher among senior secondary students (2.27) than junior secondary students (2.16). The most frequently endorsed statements were: “*I just want to immerse myself in my own world*” (19.4%), “*Interpersonal communication is a hassle*” (15.8%), and “*I feel comfortable shutting myself off*” (15.7%).

According to the *Social Preference Scale–Revised (SPS-R)*, the mean score for social withdrawal was 2.56 (out of 5). Both female and senior secondary students scored 2.64, higher than male students (2.51) and junior secondary students (2.50). The most common reported experiences were: “*Nervous to hang out with others despite the desire to do so*” (25.0%), “*Feel nervous to interact with others despite the desire to do so*” (18.7%), and “*Feel too shy to hang out with others*” (16.7%).

2. Analysis and Recommendations

2.1 Appearance Anxiety Closely Linked to Social Exhaustion

Analysis reveals that students with more severe appearance anxiety are more prone to social burnout and social withdrawal, exhibit higher levels of emotional distress, and report lower overall well-being. **Professor Kevin CHAN Ka-Shing, Professor in the Department of Psychology and Acting Dean of Faculty of Education and Human Development at The Education University of Hong Kong**, pointed out that when adolescents feel insecure about their appearance, they typically exhibit two types of reactions. The first is “**avoidance and camouflaging**,” such as deliberately hiding perceived physical flaws and avoiding crowds or social situations, which ultimately leads to **social withdrawal**. The second is “**threat monitoring**” behaviour in hope of “approaching” others, where adolescents become hyper-fixated on their appearance and repeatedly check their looks, going to great lengths to secure validation. However, this continuous over-expenditure of mental energy often leads to **social burnout**. Adolescents thus fall into an internal conflict of “*desiring to connect with others, yet fearing being seen*.” This vicious cycle severely undermines their sense of well-being and triggers emotional distress. As female and senior secondary students appear to be more affected across several indicators, their needs warrant particular attention.

2.2 Encouraging Adolescents to Shift from Self-Criticism to Self-Compassion

Mr. Jeff KEI Ching-Nam, Clinical Psychologist at this organisation, pointed out that appearance anxiety is often deeply rooted in adolescent development and attachment needs. Adolescents are at a crucial stage of exploring self-identity, with strong needs for love, acceptance, and belonging, which makes them particularly susceptible to external validation and judgment. Amid the widespread prevalence of social media and AI filters, unrealistic, narrow beauty standards are easily magnified, fostering beliefs such as “*I am not good enough and I don't want to be seen*,” which subsequently triggers emotional distress, social burnout, and self-isolation.

Addressing the survey findings that female and senior secondary students warrant particular



concern, Mr. Kei explained that traditional sociocultural norms still frequently evaluate female self-worth based on physical appearance. Furthermore, sophisticated social media algorithms consistently push targeted content related to beauty routines, weight loss, and body comparison to young women, further intensifying their anxiety over their looks. Meanwhile, senior secondary school marks a critical period in defining personal identity, where heightened sensitivity to “how others perceive them” leaves adolescents even more vulnerable to appearance anxiety.

He recommended that adolescents transition from “self-criticism” to “self-compassion”—treating themselves with the same kindness they would extend to a good friend, recognising that feelings of insecurity are a natural human experience, and learning to appreciate qualities beyond physical appearance. He also suggested taking proactive control over social feeds by unfollowing accounts that provoke anxiety and cultivating diverse interests to build self-worth. Meanwhile, parents and educators are encouraged to shift their focus and praise away from physical appearance toward students’ character and efforts, while inspiring them to explore varied strengths to foster a multifaceted sense of self-worth.

3. Advocacy

In response to the survey findings, **Ms. Scarlet POON Fung-Oi, Assistant Chief Executive Officer of this organisation**, put forward three core recommendations calling on all sectors of society to support adolescents in navigating the challenges of the AI and social media era.

3.1 Strengthening Platform’s Digital Standards

The tech industry is urged to mandate disclosures on AI-altered images and filters, and introduce “youth-tailored algorithms.” When systems detect prolonged user engagement with content focused on physical looks and body image, platforms should proactively recommend diverse aesthetic perspectives and mental health support resources. In addition, platforms should regularly release transparent risk management reports regarding content moderation.

3.2 Establishing Comprehensive Prevention and Screening Framework

Regular psychological screenings should incorporate assessments for appearance anxiety and apprehensions surrounding an AI-driven future. The Government and community should step up public education to help the public differentiate virtual representations from reality, understand algorithmic mechanics, and equip parents and educators with practical guidance. This will help alleviate feelings of powerlessness among youth, bolster early identification and prevention, and ensure timely interventions and referrals.

3.3 Deepening Digital Literacy Education for Adolescents

School curricula should incorporate education on algorithmic literacy and body image to foster critical thinking and promote multifaceted aesthetic values. Furthermore, youth consultation mechanisms should be embedded into policy formulation processes, respecting young people’s agency and ensuring policies effectively address their lived experiences and practical needs.



Ms. Poon concluded, “We do not advocate for a blanket ban on adolescents’ use of social media or AI tools. While technology presents opportunities, it also carries risks. The key lies in setting healthy boundaries, mitigating misuse, and cultivating critical thinking in youth. Society should prioritise prevention and education, while ensuring timely intervention when needed, and empower young people to build resilient and self-confidence while respecting their autonomy.”

4. Related Support

• “Digital Literacy and Social Media Addiction Prevention” Course

Our organisation offers free in-school group workshops on “Digital Literacy and Social Media Addiction Prevention.” Grounded in the framework of Self-Determination Theory, the program utilises brief lectures, interactive discussions, and scenario simulations to enhance students’ sense of autonomy, relatedness, and competence. This empowers students to reduce their dependence on electronic devices and cultivate healthier digital habits.

Enquiries: 3413 1556

• “Navigating Appearance Anxiety in Adolescence” Online Seminar

We also offer a free online seminar for parents and educators to help them better understand the appearance anxiety adolescents experience under the influence of social media and peer culture. The session explores common communication blind spots, equips participants with effective communication techniques with youth, and introduces mindful self-compassion practices to help adults manage their own emotions in order to be better empowered to support young people.

Date: 23 September, 13:00 to 14:00

Registration: <https://refresh.bokss.org.hk/tc/workshop/teen-appearance-anxiety-free-workshop>

5 About the Survey

5.1 Sample Data

The study was conducted between November 2025 and March 2026, successfully collecting 1,318 valid questionnaires from local secondary school students via both physical and online self-administered formats. Male and female students accounted for 56% and 43% of the sample respectively (with 1% not specifying their gender). The distribution across grades is as follows:

Grade	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	N/A
Number of people	219	206	261	226	280	124	2
Percentage	16.6%	15.6%	19.8%	17.1%	21.2%	9.4%	0.2%

5.2 Measurement Instruments

• Well-Being

Measured by the Chinese version of the *Mental Health Continuum – Short form (MHC-SF)*, assessing students’ emotional, social, and psychological well-being. It contains 14 items,



with students rating each item's frequency over the past month from 0 (never) to 5 (every day), giving a total score ranging from 0 to 70. Higher scores indicate greater well-being.

- **Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Levels**

Measured by the Chinese version of the *Depression Anxiety Stress Scale – Youth (DASS-Y)*, assessing depression, anxiety, and stress in students. The scale includes 21 items, with students rating the frequency of symptoms in the past week from 0 (*not true*) to 3 (*very true*). Each subscale has a total score ranging from 0 to 21, with higher scores representing more severe symptoms, as detailed below:

	Normal	Mild	Moderate	Severe	Extremely severe
Depression	0–6	7–8	9–13	14–16	17 or above
Anxiety	0–5	6–7	8–12	13–15	16 or above
Stress	0–11	12–13	14–16	17–18	19 or above

- **Life Satisfaction**

Measured by a questionnaire designed by the research team of this organisation, evaluating students' satisfaction with academics, future prospects, interpersonal relationships, societal situation, and appearance. It contains 12 items, rated from 0 (*strongly dissatisfied*) to 4 (*strongly satisfied*), giving a total score ranging from 0 to 48. Higher scores indicate greater satisfaction with each life domain.

- **Social Burnout**

Measured by the Chinese version of the *Social Burnout Scale (SBS)*. This 11-item scale assesses the degree to which students wish to distance themselves from social interactions due to social exhaustion. Students rated items on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), giving a total score ranging from 11 to 55. Higher scores indicate greater social burnout.

- **Social Withdrawal Intention**

Measured by the Chinese version of the *Social Preference Scale–Revised (SPS-R)*. This 10-item scale measures students' anxiety and avoidance motivations in social contexts. Students self-reported on a scale from 1 (*unlikely*) to 5 (*likely*), giving a total score ranging from 10 to 50. Higher scores reflect a stronger tendency to experience negative emotions in interpersonal relationships and a greater desire to avoid socialising.

- **Appearance Anxiety**

Measured by the Chinese version of the *Appearance Anxiety Inventory (AAI)*. This 10-item instrument measures the frequency of behaviors associated with appearance anxiety. Students rated items on a scale from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*always*), giving a total score ranging from 0 to 40. Higher scores indicate more appearance anxiety behaviour, while a total score greater



than or equal to 21 indicates a higher-risk level warranting attention.

6 Support Services

Our organisation has collaborated closely with the Education Bureau and schools across Hong Kong for many years to support the mental health needs of students. Our key initiatives include:

- Hi-Five Student Engagement Award Scheme

This programme promotes a mentally healthy school culture by establishing five areas of engagement: 'behavioural', 'intellectual', 'emotional', 'social', and 'family and community'. For more details: <https://www.hi5.bokss.org.hk>

- Student Mental Health Ambassador Training

This programme offers psychoeducation and peer emotional support training to enhance students' skills and networks for supporting one another. For more details: <https://bit.ly/3MqsYH6>

- YOUTHorizons

This service is designed to support young people aged 11 to 25 who are experiencing emotional or mental health challenges. Services include mental health assessments, early intervention and counselling, and parental support.

For more details: <https://www.bokss.org.hk/integrated-mental-health-services/service?id=57>

- GROWTHorizons

This service supports specifically for children affected by attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and emotional symptoms, along with their parents, through professional training and counselling services.

For more details: <https://www.bokss.org.hk/integrated-mental-health-services/service?id=323>

- HealHorizon Project

This project provides financial assistance to adolescents aged 6 to 24 who are suspected to suffer from emotional or mental health issues and let them obtain counselling and medical service at early stage.

For more details: <https://www.bokss.org.hk/integrated-mental-health-services/service?id=270>

- Re:Fresh Online Mental Health Self-Help Platform

The platform offers an online mental and physical well-being experience, featuring self-assessment tools, online courses and workshops, and practical resources.

For more details: <https://refresh.bokss.org.hk/>

For any inquiries regarding our services, members of the public are welcome to contact us by phone at 3703 6206 or via email at mwcy@bokss.org.hk.



Download press kit: <https://bit.ly/46gdu2p>

Photo Caption: (from left)

Mr. Thomas FUNG Chak-Tong, Assistant Service Head (Children and Youth Development Service), Baptist Oi Kwan Social Service

Prof. Kevin CHAN Ka-Shing, Professor in the Department of Psychology and Acting Dean of the Faculty of Education and Human Development at The Education University of Hong Kong

Ms. Scarlet POON Fung-Oi, Assistant Chief Executive Officer, Baptist Oi Kwan Social Service

Mr. Jeff KEI Ching-Nam, Clinical Psychologist at ICCMW, Baptist Oi Kwan Social Service

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About Baptist Oi Kwan Social Service

Authorized by the Baptist Convention of Hong Kong in 1978 for Hong Kong Baptist University (formerly known as Hong Kong Baptist College) to establish and was formally founded in 1982. The organisation provides services across Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and the New Territories, adopting a community-based approach to deliver diverse services for people of all ages. These include programmes for children, youth, and families; services for the elderly; mental health support; training and employment assistance; clinical psychology and counselling services; carer support as well as a nursery school, catering services, social enterprises and poverty alleviation initiatives. In 2009, the organisation formally became an independent legal entity (guaranteed company) under the Companies Ordinance and was approved by the Inland Revenue Department as a tax-exempt charitable organization under the Inland Revenue Ordinance.

Website: www.bokss.org.hk