Tracing Dystopian Insta-Emotions among Hong Kong Trans Men

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Digital media is often understood as the primary platform to open up new social worlds for transgender men. The plethora of information from DIY videos on testosterone injections to daily transition vlogs has seen transgender men creating, developing, and curating themselves on digital platforms. This study focuses on the representation of Hong Kong trans men on digital media. The ongoing COVID pandemic has conjured up a wide array of cultural imaginations on the end of the world. Hong Kong has also long collected global imaginations of dystopia, cyberpunk, and science fiction. Under this larger context, I draw upon McKenzie and Patulny's (2021) notion of dystopia as "a process, a practice, a method of understanding and critiquing" to examine dystopian emotions among Hong Kong trans men through digital ethnographic fieldwork on Instagram and face-to-face in-depth interviews in 2020–2021. I argue that dystopia beliefs lay the groundwork for Insta-emotions to emerge, in overt and subversive ways, that speak to the resilience of transgender men.

Keywords: transmen, Instagram, Chinese transgender men, dystopian emotions, shame, feelings, social media

I spent thirty years trying to figure out what's wrong with me. It was not until I encountered a supervisor at work, who was particularly mean towards me, so much so that I felt constantly diminished and depressed. Once I had severe depression symptoms and got admitted into ER at the hospital. That's when I realized that my depression has to do with my gender identity. I've always thought of becoming a man but I thought it's impossible, unreal, like something that comes out of science fiction. I believed that being a man is not something that will happen to me. I lived like a zombie all these years and I felt warped, both physically and emotionally.

In his late-40s, Stephen sat across the table and uttered the words. He looked directly at me, with his hands clasped, forming a tight fist that did not seem to release their tension. Eventually he let out a sigh and said,

> But I finally had the courage to look it up online, typed in every word you can imagine that I know would describe my condition, anything, transsexual (變性), female-becoming-male (女變男), I really don't know the right terms and somehow stumbled upon the Transgender Resource Center website and wrote an e-mail to somebody. Joanne (a well-known activist in Hong Kong's transgender community) replied back. I never thought anyone would reply back from a random e-mail sent from a nobody. But she did! That's how my journey began.

Social media platforms present new social worlds for transgender men. Virtual communities are built and sustained through digital technologies. The plethora of information from DIY videos on testosterone injections to daily transition vlogs has seen transgender men, transmasculine and nonbinary individuals creating, developing, and curating themselves on digital platforms. Online visibility of trans men has allowed for a plethora of information to be shared online (Heinz, 2012). Accessibility to information and resources meant seeing an end to isolation for some and feeling a sense of empowerment for others (Kailey, 2005; Ringo, 2002). Social media filled up knowledge on transitioning, but it also created desire for change. Narratives similar to Stephen's recollection of his journey to seeking information and emotional support are common among interview participants in my study. The World Wide Web or the Internet, now dated terminology, opens doors for transgender persons to find information on issues related to gender identity, surgeries, psychology, and legal recognition.

In recent years, there has been heightened visibility of transgender persons and communities in Asian societies. Yet, little is known about the lived experiences of transgender persons other than empirical data on medical transitions and mental health. Research studies often tend to place more focus on transgender women. Trans men and trans masculine individuals remain less visible in academic literature in comparison. This ongoing study is part of a larger project exploring the sociocultural construction of trans masculinity through a qualitative ethnography study of trans men currently living in Bangkok, Thailand (n = 31), and Hong Kong (n = 30). For this study, a transgender person is defined as a person identifying in a gender other than the one that matches the sex that was assigned at birth. A transmasculine person can also be an individual who does not identify as a cisgender man but rather as nonbinary while engaging in gender expression that is toward the masculine end of the gender spectrum. A trans man is an individual assigned female at birth but who identifies as transgender and male along the gender spectrum. In this study, I will primarily focus on the representation of Hong Kong trans men on digital media using two case studies. I first begin with a brief discussion on emotions, feelings, and affect. Then I introduce and expand upon McKenzie and Patulny's (2021) conceptualization of "dystopian emotions" to provide a new lens in understanding trans men's online representation of emotions and to contextualize dystopia in the city of Hong Kong. Applying an Instagram filter on the concept, I use the term dystopian Insta-emotions to argue that dystopia beliefs lay the groundwork for certain feelings to emerge, in overt and subversive ways, that speak to the resilience of transgender men.

Scholarly interest on emotions, feelings, and affect have had significant influence across disciplines and fields. What I attempt to do here is to unpack and to apply these hefty, messy, and sometimes interchangeable terms to further understand their ontologies on social media. The task of delineating these terms has been taken up by cultural studies scholars, philosophers, and sociologists alike to distinguish their meanings according to their theoretical applications in various contexts. Emotion can also be taken as an articulation of affect that leads to the rise of feelings (Grossberg, 2010). Feelings can be experienced as "complex strings of ideas traversing emotions" (Bertelsen & Murphie, 2010, p. 140). Writing on the development of emotions as a sociological concept, Jack Barbalet (2006) asserts that the biological underpinning of these neuromuscular sensations are often results of sociocultural constructions and value-laden assumptions. Using fear as an example, Barbalet asserts that fear makes us feel fragile as a result of unequal power relations with persons or unmatched expectations with objects. He further reminds us that emotions are embedded in everyday social interactions and are therefore constitutive of "routine and core elements of social life" (Barbalet, 2006, p. 53).

Furthermore, being in possession of emotions or being emotional has a gendered dimension. Feminist philosophers often remind us of "the subordination of emotions" with its link to women and bodily feelings (Ahmed, 2014, p. 3). Sara Ahmed (2014) in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* problematizes feelings and emotions as innate and essentialist moods within us, and calls our attention to the social aspect of emotions whereby it is through our emotive responses to persons and objects "that surfaces or boundaries are made" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 10). These surfaces or boundaries hence separate or bind a person to another person or, in abstract terms, with the social. Naming emotions, as in calling out hate, feeling ashamed, or disgusted, or experiencing pain or love, can be traced back to the linking or delinking of these surfaces or boundaries.

Silvan Tomkins (1962) asserts affect as allowing for the rise of awareness in our feelings, making us conscious of its ability to transmit stimuli across and between bodies. Linking affect and emotion together, emotion is "the expression of affect in gesture and language," giving form to affect when affect is "unstructured, unfixed, nonlinguistic" and "nonrational" (Liao, 2021, p. 358). For the Enlightenment philosopher Spinoza, affect can be understood as in between emotion and feelings, where one has the potential to own the "power to affect and be affected" (Spinoza, 1952, p. 395). Brian Massumi (1995) posits affect as "an emotional qualification" that disturbs "narrative continuity for a moment to register a state-actually re-register an already felt state (for the skin is faster than the word)" (p. 86). Massumi (1995) uses the word "intensity" to illustrate a prolonged effect in receiving images and text that arise out of a gap between what we are and are not expecting to receive in our consciousness (p. 85).

The background and need to explore affect and emotions created and circulated online is expected as latest global events and the pandemic have heightened attention on collective emotions and collective emotional experiences (McKenzie, Patulny, Olson, & Bower, 2021). Global right-wing populism, climate change crises, and unchecked greed in capitalism have led to increased pop cultural representations in horror, crime, and gothic fiction and film genres (Millette, 2020). The ongoing COVID pandemic and its variants have put most parts of the world on hold and conjured up a wide array of cultural imaginations on the end of the world. As a collective emotional experience, Hong Kong government's response to the pandemic and the illness itself have cultivated a sense of going through

a health crisis as a group. COVID has also alerted us to "the affective and bodily registers that mark our collective vulnerability" (Erni & Striphas, 2021, p. 211). The creation of a dystopia world has a collective dimension to it (Moylan, 2000). On the other hand, the word "collective" has also become a misnomer under the pandemic when isolation, quarantine, and social distancing has become a way of life.

To put dystopian emotions into context, Hong Kong has made international news headlines with its large-scale prodemocracy social movements, anti-Hong Kong government, and anti-mainland Chinese state protests since 2012. In 2012, tens of thousands, including teachers, parents, and children, marched on the streets, demonstrating against a proposal to offer a revised version of moral and national education curriculum in primary and secondary schools. Two years later, a series of civil disobedience actions often referred to as the Umbrella Movement were sparked off with protests against electoral reforms, and major roads were occupied and blocked for 79 days. In 2019, the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement erupted onto the global stage with mass protests and collisions with the police frequently taken place in different parts of the city. The bill was originally proposed to enact legislation for fugitives in Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan to be extradited to the mainland China. The protests evolve to demand the government to withdraw the bill and to release arrested protestors, to support judicial autonomy and universal suffrage, and to investigate the use of excessive force by the police, among other demands. These events have led to citywide discontents across generations, producing unprecedented disturbing emotions and dividing "political feelings" among friends and families (Liao, 2021, p. 3). Feelings of hopelessness have also increased among young people who felt strongly about a dismal future ahead of them. Local dystopia fiction and films are also in circulation, from Albert Tam's (2010) award-winning science fiction thriller series *Humanoid Software* [人形軟件] to the low-budget independent omnibus film *Ten Years* (Kwok, Wong, Au, Chow, & Ng, 2015), capturing and expanding dystopic emotions to nearby Asia.

Under this larger context, I draw upon McKenzie and Patulny's (2021) notion of dystopia as "a process, a practice, a method of understanding and critiquing" (p. 3) to examine dystopian emotions among Hong Kong transgender men, transmasculine, and nonbinary persons through a combination of methods including digital ethnographic fieldwork and face-to-face in-depth interviews in 2020–2021. I contend that tracing dystopia and dystopian emotions is useful to understanding the complications of everyday life as represented on social media and in specific context to recent social unrest and political uncertainties of Hong Kong. Classic dystopia accounts point to an understanding of the future as already present, therefore familiar and ordinary (McManus, 2022, p. 12). Zgymunt Bauman's (2000) conception of a liquid modern society conjures up images of "an Orwellian or Huxleyan nightmare with its relentless dismantling, deregulation, individualization and privatization of everything binding society and humans together" (Jacobsen, 2022, p. 146). Instead of thinking a dystopian world is to come, I illustrate through two case studies the use of dystopian emotions to deny its dystopian future and to practice staying in the present. Through an analysis of Instagram posts by two transgender men, I offer a productive reading of meanings embedded within the sequencing and display of visual images, the writing of captions and hashtags, to understand the influence of dystopia on their expressions of emotions.

Being Trans and Searching for Trans Experiences

As mentioned earlier, the Internet and social media is an indispensable part of a transgender person's life in searching for trans experiences. How one finds information about being trans and how one builds rapport with others on feeling trans can be life-changing for many trans youths. In a study of European, American, and Canadian trans men websites and blogs, Heinz (2012) observed:

> An emerging transnormativity—a desire to bring to light and integrate, into collective consciousness, the mundane aspects of transmen's lives—a discursive strategy that is reflected in expressions such as "just another FTM chronicle" and the theme of presenting one's trans identity or trans history as a to-be-acknowledged part of one's life, but not all of one's life. (pp. 335–336)

In the U.S. context, mainstream media representation of transgender persons tends to be middle class and professional (Fink & Miller, 2014). Because of the lack of role models on mainstream media, trans youth turn to the Internet in search for transition information and support. This is not to say that only young people would access information pertaining to transgender issues, as research has also shown that adults used the Internet to search for information and, for some, to try out their second lives as transgender individuals (Marciano, 2014). Transgender vloggers on YouTube videos often educate the public on issues from using proper pronouns, gender transitions, healthcare access, housing, gender-neutral bathrooms, workplace issues, and educational resources for parents. There are differences in the kinds of information that female-to-male (FTM) persons search online in comparison to male-to-female (MTF) individuals. Testosterone is the prime material that FTM persons try to seek online, from locating the sources for obtaining testosterone to the many ways of administering testosterone into one's body. Digital storytelling in the form of vlogs have been instrumental for trans men to document hormonal changes during various stages of transition. Vlogs are cultural and political interventions where trans persons can be in charge of their own bodies and construct their own self-narratives to create online communities of support (Horak, 2014). Precisely because YouTube and Instagram posts created by transgender persons often have an educational element to them, the posting of other nuanced representations of alternative aesthetics or less-than-positive emotions can be seen as rare and potentially at risk of backlash.

Contextualizing Trans Studies

In Hong Kong, earlier studies on transgender communities have mainly focused on clinical measures to assess mental health wellness, public attitudes toward transgenderism (King, Winter, & Webster, 2009), or to provide a legal framework for human rights (Emerton, 2006). Genderism and heterosexism within Confucianism has been cited as key factors in transphobia (Chen & Anderson, 2017). The stronghold of Christianity in Hong Kong schools has also contributed to a conservative sex education curriculum devoid of discussion on gender diversity and sexual orientations (Kwok, 2018). Cheung's (2012) work on the formation of "shame to pride" identities among transgender and gender-variant individuals still places more emphasis on trans women (p. 263). Film and media representation have also been a consistent strand of Chinese transgender studies (Leung, 2012). Along with cross-genre literary analysis on varied historical and cultural adaptations of transgender in Chinese literature, there

is a bourgeoning field of queer Sinophone cultures and the significance of geopolitics in Chiang's (2021) *Transtopia in the Sinophone Pacific*. Building upon Chiang, Henry, and Leung's (2018) provocation of *Trans-in-Asia, Asia-in-Trans*, trans studies scholars are tasked with thinking through and approaching questions that aim at unpacking geopolitics within areas and regions, cultural consistencies within societies, sex/gender categories, and political struggles within populations, to arrive at new and critical understandings of "cross-cutting processes of visibility/invisibility, empowerment/disenfranchisement, and centrality/peripherality" (Chiang et al., 2018, p. 300).

Hong Kong transgender men, transmasculine, and nonbinary persons have also put into digital practice an "inter-Asian referencing of" queer codes, processes, and meanings of being trans by following key opinion leaders in Taiwan and Thailand (Iwabuchi, 2013). The humanizing aspect of autobiographical trans posts or videos is well-studied in its effectiveness for decreasing misunderstandings about transgender identities and life experiences (Chen, 2010). Yet, beyond the usual operation of social media for marginalized persons, social media is also a venue for expressing "productive anger" in trans digital activism (Steinbock, 2019, p. 4). Online interactions shape the formations of affect and feelings, demonstrating how digital data and information is part of a larger schema of emotions (Karatzogianni & Kuntsman, 2012). The popularity of crowdfunding for gender/sexual reassignment surgeries can be read as a result of crowd affect based on an understanding of surgeries as a major intervention to counter violence against trans bodies (Farnel, 2015).

Method

In conducting social media research, one is often faced with volumes of visual data that requires collecting, organizing, sequencing, coding, and interpretation, of which all hinges upon the temporality of platforms, privacy of users, algorithms of patterns, and spatiality in geo-tagged locations (Hand, 2016). Broadly speaking, a quantitative approach focuses on social media's advantage in providing gigantic sets of data available for big-data analysis and for establishing patterns. A qualitative approach, on the other hand, adopts in-depth interviews with users and content producers, discourse analysis as primary methods of investigation. Mixed methods, as in using surveys, focus groups, and individual interviews, also yield results in understanding user behavior on social media. Issues surrounding sampling, authenticity, and representation might have been similar to understandings of conventional quantitative or qualitative research design. Yet, with social media research, the abundance of visual data, the timeframe in data collection, the technological affordances, the production, and audience reception of the images or text often set limits and challenges on its design.

Instagram has often been known for its architectural structure and visual interface to spread positivity and positive feelings through a multiarray of functions such as filters, stories, images, and hashtags. Instagram filters provided users with enhanced images and facilitated desires to present idealized versions of themselves (Chua & Chang, 2016). The visual interface of Instagram provided both images and text in the form of hashtags for rich discourse analysis. Comments provided another layer of analysis. At the same time, ethnographic interviews provided an additional method to collect empirical data on the everyday life of trans men in Hong Kong. Through this methodological exercise, I was able to dive into the social worlds of transgender men and to understand the shaping of trans men's identities and the nature of

relationships with friends and families. In addition, I was also able to capture the wider structural constraints on being a trans man by investigating social institutions from education to government departments to medical establishments. Ethnographic data feeds back to online social media as information flows. I was also able to follow the emotions relayed to me through the interviews and analyzed them in relation to the emotions mediated and represented on their images and hashtags on Instagram. Malighetti, Sciara, Chirico, and Riva (2020) suggest that Instagram enables a combination of images and hashtags to further its "communicative potential" in relaying complex emotions. Moreover, it is through leaving an "emotional mark" on one's post that relationships can be built with other users. In the case of trans-community building practices, Instagram pulls trans individuals together through affective belonging and a closer understanding of trans experiences.

I selected two case studies from the Hong Kong cohort in this comparative ethnographic research and conducted discourse analysis on their Instagram posts since August 2020. I conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews with both participants, Liam and Ah Kin, in 2020 and 2021, as part of the fieldwork on the project. I followed their Instagram accounts afterward and collected their images and text data to make connections with the emerging themes from the interview data. I analyzed their posts using discourse analysis to make meanings out of their posts, in particular, to draw relations between social media posts and narrative accounts. This methodological approach allows me to examine the consistencies and discrepancies in how they represented themselves online and offline and to investigate these selfies discursively as "gendered practices of self-representation" (Albury, 2015, p. 1743). I chose these two particular cases because of their distinctive social media narratives. Liam is already a public figure among LGBTQI+ communities and has appeared on news media as an advocate of transgender rights. Ah Kin is a member of a trans youth group but has not come out in public. I mainly investigate their narratives of being transgender and associated topics on work, family, housing, relationships, body, and surgeries, as well as everyday experiences of discrimination and harassment. By exploring self-representations of trans men on Instagram, I show how conflicting themes of frustration, anxiety, and fear are embedded within visual images, captions, handles, and hashtags. Instagram has been critiqued for allowing user images to be mined, sold, and reproduced without consent. It should be noted that even when consent is provided, it is best practice to approach interview subjects for permission, of which I have done so with both interview participants in this case. This research project obtained ethical approval by Lingnan University's Research Ethics Sub-Committee.

Episode One

I first met Liam for an interview in the summer of 2020. The interview was arranged by Kasper Wan, an advocate, researcher, and gatekeeper in the trans men community. We spent an afternoon together talking about his transition from female-to-male and his newfound freedom as a young trans adult. Of course, he had found freedom a year earlier, in 2019, when he turned 18. A year can do a lot for a trans man's body. Liam has been waiting for a long time. In his words, teenage years seemed to "drag on forever." He was excited for the legitimate and legally prescribed injections of testosterone. Liam said, "No more testosterone boosters for female bodybuilders! I don't need to go from one dispensary to another or one fitness nutrition store to another." Turning 18 also meant being put on the waiting list for top surgery at the

Gender Identity Clinic located at the public Prince of Wales Hospital. More waiting would ensue but at least it was starting somewhere.

Liam has had an Instagram account since 2014. He mostly uses the space to talk about gender identity issues and to share information for others. He often tells his own struggles with being trans on Instagram Stories, the same way that he found others online when he was a young teenager. He already knew about the movers and shakers of the Hong Kong transgender scene by the time he reached the age of 13. He found information on Facebook and joined an online group for transgender persons. At this point of the interview, both Kaspar and I gasped with surprise that Liam has a Facebook account, in particular when most young people at his age would have stopped using Facebook. Moreover, he was approached by another transgender activist, offering support to him when she saw Liam's random comments on a Facebook page. This kind act also prompted Liam to see social media as the platform to reach out and to provide advice on being a trans youth:

> When I leave comments randomly on different pages, I'm hoping that some people will write back to me. This is especially true if I purposely leave a comment about my life being trans. I've had many people contacting me this way. IG is particularly good as most young people use IG. It's eye-catching and with the right hashtag, people come to you.

Similar to Stephen in the introduction to this article, Liam also received help just by writing to a stranger. In November 2020, Liam posted a series of his self-portraits on Instagram (Figure 1). I am fascinated by his choice of using photography, a static medium, to document his days under COVID. There was nothing like the before/after transition photographs, common among trans persons; rather, it's Liam posing as a "weirdo," as mentioned in his hashtags.

I speculated on his pensive mood under the pandemic. On his authorship of his own representational trans male body. On performing himself. On being Instagrammable. Sometimes the same photos were used as background to Liam's manifestos on love, acceptance of trans people, and hatred of trans inner-circle gossips and politics. Each photo offered a glimpse of Liam in movement. The photos were all shot in the public housing flat that he shared with his parents. A typical public housing flat built in the late 1990s and early 2000s for a two- to three-person family commonly measures 21 square meters (226 square feet) in total. One wide-angle shot of the flat showed us the living room, the sofa bed in black-and-white-checkered cloth in the background, family photos on the pastel green wall, a Chinese calendar, and Lunar New Year's red banners were pinned on the door and to the cupboards. Colorful plastic chairs were stacked up to the side, and a microwave was vaguely visible, tucked in on the shelf.

Figure 1. Liam at home (Mak, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d, 2020e).

Within this series, there were photos of Liam being zombie-like, being a monster, and being angry. He wrote "I don't fucking care!" which has become more prevalent. During our first interview back in the summer of 2020, Liam commented on the wider political environment of Hong Kong. Feeling at the end of the world, combined with "being in the moment where history is made," sums up his emotion of the day. There is nothing to hope for but also not much to lose. The photos show him looking like he has given up on life, lying down, and waiting for a rebirth. The almost comical hashtags also pointed to being "a corpse, a corpse transforming into something else, struggling with death, drop dead," and "under repair." He defied the common notion of being an optimistic role model by expressing his raw emotions of not caring and sarcastically posted that he wanted

to "reset to factory settings," as illustrated in his hashtag and comment. His post demonstrated "fragmentation and open-endedness of stories, exceeding the confines of a single posting and site and resisting a neat categorization of beginning-middle-end" (Georgakopoulou, 2017, p. 267).

Self-representations on social media have been burdened with claims of authenticity and expectations of self-disclosure of varying degrees. The "public disclosure of one's true self" on social media is complicated and fraught with contentions, in particular when interrogation of authentic selves are often conducted by followers (Lobinger & Brantner, 2015). Selfies can be understood as stories and performances of oneself within larger content feeds and narrative arcs (Georgakopoulou, 2017). To put it crudely, timing is everything on social media. It is always about capturing "the here and the now" (San Cornelio & Roig, 2018, p. 2780). To understand the context of a post, one needs to examine how a single post fits into "a personal historiography of the present" (San Cornelio & Roig, 2020, p. 1127). But the present is not the only concern on the use of social media. Digital archives are built and sustained through regular postings across time and space. Digital devices have long become extended memory drives of our cognitive memory, capturing and documenting moments in everyday life. Archives and devices are not only understood to be in the private realm; rather, they can be used in the public sphere when deemed necessary. Liam's posts are public within his increasing network of friends and allies. As a trans youth activist and public figure, his posts are also available to a wider public through sharing and circulating mechanisms online and offline. Instagram has long been shown to be a critical space for discussion of social and political issues, but recent research has also shown how mainstream news media picked up on Instagram posts to comment on politics around issues (Towner & Muñoz, 2020).

Episode Two

Responding to a WhatsApp message calling for recruitment to this study, Ah Kin filled out the Google form on basic demographic details and, in the blank space titled "Other Comments," he wrote a long narrative on his shameful feelings toward his transgender male identity and his difficulties in building personal relationships. In brief, Ah Kin wrote:

> Actually I'm very ashamed of my identity . . . I've stopped contact with all my secondary school friends. I have nothing to say to them. I don't want to tell others about my trans identity. I want to socialize as a male from now on. I am extremely careful about choosing friends, extremely careful. I don't want them to have pity on me. I'm worry that they will find out about my defects, my weaknesses . . . As a bodybuilder, I do my own T (testosterone) injections. I doubled or tripled my own dose. I can't stop. I will get major gender dysphoria if I stop. It would make me no different than a female bodybuilder . . . Going to washrooms and locker rooms is a nightmare. I go to the disabled washrooms. I'm too muscular to go to the female washrooms but I can't be seen naked in the men's locker rooms. I have to make sure that there's absolutely no one if I go to the men's room.

We met up a month later after he responded to my call for interview participants, in a secluded café in busy Tung Lo Wan (Causeway Bay). He sat down, and we ordered coffee. Then he asked if it was okay for him to have a snack. He took out a glass Tupperware full of plain white rice. We talked for a bit, and he proceeded to share his Instagram account with me and started showing me posts and stories of his bodybuilding journey. Indeed, there were very few posts of him hanging out with friends. Rather, Ah Kin was usually photographed

next to workout buddies with the photos also taken in the gym (Figure 2). He began with the usual topic of exercise and dietary routine on bulking up muscles, displaying one's torso, and flexing his quads and biceps. Although working out at the gym is often acknowledged as a way for transgender men to bulk up and gain social recognition as a man, Ah Kin's experience as a bodybuilder was not all positive. He was not elated in the way he scrolled and swiped to show me his feed. At one point, he stopped. Then he slowly spiraled into feelings of anxiety when we talked about his experience at the gym. He described an incident to me where a gym buddy sent Ah Kin a video that was widely circulated in bodybuilding groups online. The video showed Ah Kin working out at the gym while an excited male voiceover can be heard clearly mocking Ah Kin, "I tell you it's a woman. The shortie is a woman. Hahaha. Can you imagine? *Chi lun sin*! (swear words in Cantonese)."

Ah Kin recalled the horrific experience with a blank face, a voice without emotions, almost stoic, and he stuffed a mouthful of rice into his mouth. I stayed silent. He chewed slowly, stared straight forward, and said,

> I have no idea that I'm being watched at that time. I couldn't go to that gym anymore. Now I have to travel far from home to another gym and I work out at odd times. I feel depressed all the time. All I want to do is to get physically stronger, to be exaggeratingly buff and hit back. I've been tripling my T dosage. You know what Siu Fung (world award-winning genderqueer bodybuilder from Hong Kong) said to me, "Stop killing yourself. You'll OD on T. You have to take it slow."

He stopped starring ahead and turned toward me. I did not know how to respond. I could feel the heaviness surrounding us, like being trapped in a Christmas snow globe, except there was no one to shake us up.
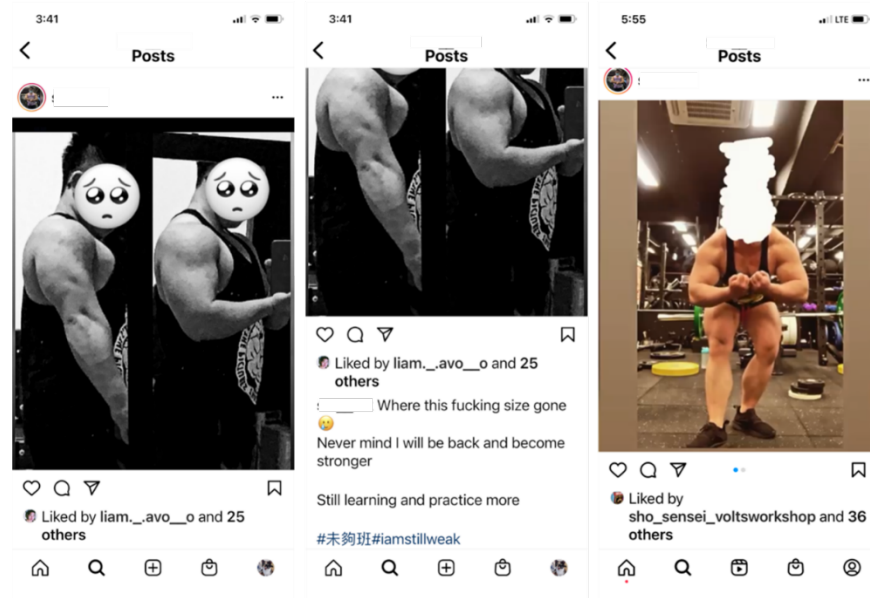
Figure 2. Ak Kin in the gym (personal communication, March 15, 2021).

A careful read of Ah Kin's posts in the gym often had his face covered either by a feeling emoji or, more brazenly, by a white marker, erasing his face with only his body visible to users. The body was depicted as a shield. He flexed his muscles in the usual pose commonly seen among bodybuilders. Another post had him sideways, with his face in mosaic, showing off his solid biceps. These posts can be read in contrast to his earlier note on feeling ashamed. Yet, I contend that they were strongly associated to his earlier note on feeling ashamed about his identity. Elspeth Probyn (2010) casts the writing of shame as "an exposure of the intimacies of selves in public" (p. 72). To expand, Probyn (2010) calls to attention the act of "writing shame" as placing "the body within the ambit of the shameful: sheer disappointment in the self amplifies to a painful level" (p. 73). Ah Kin's sharing of his shameful feelings toward his trans identity and his body was amplified in magnitude on social media. His selfies on Instagram, where he was constantly working out, were related to the pain and humiliation that he suffered from the malicious circulation of the video mocking his trans identity. The shamefulness that he experienced was a deeply felt sense of broken personal relationships and everyday discrimination. His physical demonstrations of flexing muscles and his comment on his own post, "Never mind I will be back and become stronger," in response to his own disappointment about his bicep, indicated how he had to put himself down to achieve better. The hashtag #iamstillweak appeared multiple times across many posts. This regular act of putting himself down on Instagram, combined with his written comments on the Google recruitment form and his interview, point to a complex emotional world full of anxieties, shame, pride, and anger. As Probyn (2010) puts it succinctly, "Shame is the product of many forces" (p. 81).

Dystopian Insta-Emotions

Liam and Ah Kin's resilient accounts offered complex readings of dystopian Insta-emotions in light of their trans identities and the situation in Hong Kong. The notion of resilience originates from research in the field of child development and psychology to understand how children growing up in poverty, abuse, and other difficult environmental circumstances manage to cope and perform well later in life (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). Research on resilience has since developed to not focus just on the individual and one's exceptional ability to adapt in adverse situations but rather to understand the relationship between the psyche self and external structural factors (Masten, 2001). Resilience in regard to LGBT persons point to how one's marginalized sexual and gender identity affects a person's capacity to face and bear social stigmatization of LGBT identities. On an individual level, LGBT resilience focuses on a LGBT person's ability to accept oneself, to bear hope in life (Kwon & Hugelshofer, 2010). Social support including families, friends, colleagues, and LGBT communities comprise external aspects that would build up resilience among LGBT persons (Wong, 2015). Ah Kin's aggressive take on "beefing it up" contrasted with Liam's performance as a zombie. His need to be strong and resilient differed from Liam's desire to be playful and subversive. Ah Kin's intense feelings of being hurt by others diverted from Liam's "I couldn't care less" attitude. I read Ah Kin as a spiraling account of depression, and I read Liam as another form of inertia. Feelings of angst and frustration were highly prevalent and publicly disclosed on their Instagram accounts. Ah Kin's fight against online trolling can be perceived as a self-intervention, while Liam puts forth a self-invention to counter an overall dystopic environment. Their resilient strategies differ from the popular U.S.-based notion of It Gets Better, pioneered by gay activist Dan Savage, or other positive uplifting representations. Legal scholar Davina Cooper (2014) briefly discusses dystopia in the introduction to her book *Everyday Utopias* to

emphasize how utopia and dystopia are not merely "mirrors of each other" and "polarized images." Cooper (2014) elaborates,

> Utopia conventionally depends on stimulating desire and hope in order to inspire and motivate change. Dystopias, by contrast, aim to stimulate action in order to resist or halt what is feared to be emerging. Dystopic narratives assume change, that the world is not a static or stable place but moving toward, indeed in some cases already enacting, its own ruin. (p. 31)

If feeling dystopic signifies a need to change, then it echoes McKenzie and Patulny's (2021) assertion that these feelings are part of the affectual process to building up resilience in response to the current state of affairs, both in terms of transgender issues and the wider discontents in the city. Currently, there are no enacted gender recognition laws in Hong Kong. Physical violence, sexual harassment, and discrimination targeting transgender communities is prevalent in everyday life (Suen, Chan, & Wong, 2021; Winter, Webster, & Cheung, 2008). In February 2019, the High Court threw out a judicial review case and affirmed the government's policy that to be legally recognized as a man in Hong Kong, one has to undergo genital reconstruction as well as sterilization. Suen et al. (2021) carried out a survey of 234 transgender people and found them facing increasing levels of discrimination that resulted in extremely poor mental health outcomes. Research has demonstrated the close connection between cyberbullying and transphobia on social media, regardless of whether the targeted person is MTF or FTM (Miller, 2017; Norton & Herek, 2013). Transgender people are also more at risk of prejudice and violence than cisgender gay men or lesbians (Dargie, Blair, Pukall, & Coyle, 2014). In addition to social discrimination, cyberbullying can have a direct impact on the everyday lives of transgender persons, resulting in low self-esteem, compromised social skills, and poor mental and physical health. Strained social relations lead to challenges in finding work and securing long-term employment. Support networks are often cited to be critical to a transgender person's survival, but maintenance of these networks also demands one to know when and who to reach out to when crisis hits.

Societal change may not happen overnight, but there has slowly been heightened visibility of transgender individuals and community activism in Hong Kong. A support group known as the Transgender Equality and Acceptance Movement was first established around 2003. The group was entirely composed of trans women and a few allies but did not include any trans men. Community organizations such as the Transgender Resource Centre, Association of World Citizen Hong Kong China, and Gender Empowerment were established in 2008, 2013, and 2015, respectively, with different levels of trans men involvement. A filmmaker and trans activist, Kaspar Wan founded Gender Empowerment. Kaspar is best known in public as the representative trans man in the last decade. In 2020, Liam Mak, Alice Ho, and others started a trans youth group called QUARKS (跨青時刻).

Liam survived as a trans youth by poking fun at the end of the world through deliberately in-your-face poses, while Ah Kin faced shameful feelings by keeping physically stronger and stronger. Both lived through dystopian emotions to feel resilient as trans men. By using specific physical settings for their selfies, as in Liam's flat and Ah Kin's gym, they demonstrate the deployment of social media as expressive multisensory surroundings (Pink, 2012). Hong Kong as an unstable and troubling urban space is prevalent here with Liam playing dead in his public housing unit and with Ah Kin's underlying narrative on depression

while working out in a gym. To be reborn in Liam's case and to fight back in Ah Kin's case perhaps indicates renewed faith in trans community building. It was almost as if one needs to feel hopeless to gain strength for survival again. As part of my ongoing ethnographic research, I met up with Liam again on a winter night in December 2020 to talk about living in the time of COVID. Liam first brought up that the year has gone by so fast with what happened in Hong Kong last year, with the 2019 protests and how everybody learned to navigate and strategize getting around in the city. We talked about being numb, disoriented, and unfeeling. Now, with the pandemic, everybody had to deregulate their routines and to reestablish their patterns, to stay put, and cling to our old selves as much as we could to build memory archives, or to shed our old skins and learn something new. I told Liam about writing a paper on his Instagram self-portraits. I told him that the visual images called up varying affective responses from me and also that I found his images dystopic. Then I took out my phone, showed Liam the selfies that I was writing on by scrolling up and down, swiping left and right, right and left, repeatedly and quickly. He giggled across the table in the *cha chang teng* (local term for diner), reading a menu with too many food items crisscrossing cuisines of empires and continents, from *chow fun chow mien* (fried rice noodles and fried egg noodles) to thin-cut steaks and pork chops served with a small dollop of mashed potatoes and veggies that were often way overblanched. But Liam picked something else: he picked a rice dish, fukien/hokkien fried rice (福建炒飯).

He said, "I like having starchy gruel on my rice, as if every bite I take is soft and moist. I don't like dry fried rice." I told him that I'm going to present his Instagram posts at a workshop. I asked him about the connection between trans politics, his activism, and the selfies. He laughed,

What's there to talk about? I used an old phone and took them at home. I am always home now because of COVID. I usually eat at home. But actually I did want to say something about trans politics with these photos. I was very upset, felt hopeless, angry and wanted to kick away the negative energies that I felt from others. All the backstabbing between trans folks. All the shit we already had to deal with in the outside world.

He took a sip of the iced Hong Kong-style milk tea and said, "This is cold. I need a glass of hot water." On this note, we ended our conversation and walked out into the dark alley in between industrial buildings.

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