



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**INFLUENCE OF CONTEXTUAL, DEVELOPMENTAL, AND
DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES ON SOCIAL ACTIVISM
AMONG UNDERGRADUATES IN SRI LANKAN UNIVERSITIES**

NISSHANKAGE SHANTHA ABEYSINGHE

IPSS 2009 3



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DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES ON SOCIAL ACTIVISM
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By

NISSHANKAGE SHANTHA ABEYSINGHE

**Thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra
Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy**

April 2009



DEDICATION

For the young people who have sacrificed their lives in struggles against policies and practices of power holders thus preventing them from achieving their life aspirations and enjoying life in its fullest and the purest sense

Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of the Universiti Putra Malaysia in Fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Influence of the Contextual, Developmental, and Demographic Variables on Social Activism among Undergraduates in Sri Lankan Universities

By

Nisshankage Shantha Abeysinghe

April 2009

Chairman: Professor Haji Azimi Hamzah, PhD

Faculty: Institute for Social Science Studies

Engagement in social activism is one of the means for building identity and citizenship competencies of young people. On campus, one of the vehicles that provide engagement in social activism is the students' union. In Sri Lankan campuses the students' union system has been established by the University Act and it has accorded the Student Unions with a wider scope for the engagement in such activities. Sri Lankan campus youth are encouraged to engage in both internal and external socio economic and welfare issues and to voice for the betterment of both campus youth and the public at large. Therefore a study that aims to measure the important determinants of youth's contribution relating to the engagement in social activism, should essentially take into consideration the related developmental as well as contextual variables.



The specific objectives of the study were to determine the level of social activism of campus youth, the level of social activism across selected contextual variables and demographic variables and the relationships between the level of social activism and the selected contextual variables and developmental variables. Finally, the contribution made by the selected demographic, developmental, and contextual factors on social activism was examined.

Four hundred and forty nine subjects were randomly selected from six campuses and representing three faculties (Science, Arts & Commerce/Management). The findings showed that the developmental variables such as self esteem, aggression and impression on governance were significantly related to the social activism of youth. Similarly, contextual variables namely, school extra curricular activities, campus club engagement and gender as a demographic variable was significantly related to social activism. Even though social activism among campus youth was high, an important feature within this observed phenomenon was the gender segregation. Female voice was not significantly represented in the context of contemporary social activism among campus youth. Subsequently, seniority in terms of age as well as the number of years stayed at the campus enhances the level of engagement in social activism. The level of self esteem, impression on governance, parents' income and female composition at campuses negatively effect the engagement in social activism. The conceptual model developed for this study was able to explain the factors influencing social activism among campus youth. Accordingly, the influence of the contextual factors on the engagement with social activism was greater than the influence of the developmental factors. Hence, external factors (contextual and

demographic) have greater influence on the level of engagement in social activism than internal (Developmental) factors. Policy recommendations for positive youth development are discussed with special attention to minimizing aggressive nature of social activism and building a harmonious democratic culture among youth at the higher educational institutions.

Abstrak Thesis Yang Telah Dipersembahkan Kepada Senat Universiti Putra
Malaysia Dalam Memenuhi Syarat – Syarat Bagi Memperolehi Ijazah Kedoktoran
Falsafah.

**Pengaruh Pembolehubah Kontekstual, Perkembangan Diri dan Demografi
terhadap Aktivisme Sosial di Kalangan Mahasiswa/i di Universiti-Universiti Sri
Lanka**

Oleh

Nisshankage Shantha Abeysinghe

April 2009

Pengerusi: Profesor Haji Azimi Hamzah, PhD

Fakulti: Institut Pengajian Sains Sosial

Penglibatan dalam aktivisme sosial adalah satu cara untuk membina identiti dan kompetensi kewarganegaraan di kalangan orang muda. Di kampus, satu daripada saluran yang menyediakan penglibatan dalam aktivisme sosial ialah melalui badan gabungan pelajar. Di kampus-kampus Sri Lanka, sistem badan gabungan pelajar telah diwujudkan melalui Akta Universiti dan ia telah memberi badan ini skop yang lebih besar untuk melibatkan diri dalam aktiviti-aktiviti sosial. Belia kampus Sri Lanka digalakkan untuk melibatkan diri dalam kedua-dua isu sosio-ekonomi dan kebajikan dalaman dan luaran dan untuk menyuarakan pendapat untuk kebaikan kedua-dua golongan belia kampus dan masyarakat umum. Justeru, satu kajian yang bertujuan untuk mengukur penentu sumbangan para belia terhadap penglibatan dalam aktivisme sosial, seharusnya mengambilkira pertimbangan terhadap pembolehubah perkembangan diri dan kontekstual.

Objektif khusus kajian ini ialah untuk menentukan tahap aktivisme sosial dalam kalangan belia kampus, tahap aktivisme sosial mengikut pembolehubah kontekstual dan demografi yang terpilih dan perkaitan di antara tahap aktivisme sosial dan pembolehubah kontekstual dan perkembangan diri. Akhir sekali, sumbangan yang dibuat oleh faktor demografi terpilih, perkembangan diri dan kontekstual terhadap aktivisme sosial diselidik.

Empat ratus empat puluh sembilan responden dipilih secara rawak dari enam kampus yang diwakili oleh tiga fakulti (Sains, Sastera dan Pengurusan/Perdagangan). Dapatan kajian menunjukkan pembolehubah perkembangan diri seperti estim sendiri, agresif diri dan pandangan terhadap govenan mempunyai hubungan yang signifikan terhadap aktivisme sosial di kalangan belia.

Begitu juga, pembolehubah kontekseual yakni, aktiviti kokurikulum sekolah, penglibatan dalam kelab di kampus dan pembolehubah demografi iaitu jantina pelajar didapati mempunyai hubungan yang signifikan terhadap aktivisme sosial. Walaupun aktivisme sosial dalam kalangan belia kampus adalah tinggi, satu dapatan utama dalam kajian ini ialah tentang pengaruh faktor jantina. Suara wanita didapati tidak signifikan dalam konteks aktivisme sosial kontemporari di kalangan belia kampus. Tambahan, kekananan dari segi umur dan bilangan tahun berada di kampus meningkatkan lagi tahap penglibatan dalam aktivisme sosial. Tahap estim sendiri, pandangan terhadap pemerintahan, pendapatan ibu bapa dan komposisi wanita di kampus mempunyai kesan negatif terhadap govenan dalam aktivisme sosial. Model konseptual yang dibina daripada kajian ini berupaya untuk menerangkan faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi aktivisme sosial di kalangan belia kampus. Seterusnya, pengaruh faktor-faktor kontekstual terhadap penglibatan dalam aktivisme sosial

adalah lebih besar daripada pengaruh faktor-faktor perkembangan diri. Maka, faktor-faktor luaran (kontekstual dan demografi) mempunyai pengaruh yang lebih besar terhadap tahap penglibatan dalam aktivisme sosial berbanding faktor dalaman (perkembangan diri). Cadangan polisi untuk perkembangan diri belia yang positif turut dibincangkan dengan perhatian khusus kepada meminimakan tahap tiugkah laku agresif dalam aktivisme sosial dan membina budaya demokratik yang harmoni di kalangan belia di institusi pengajian tinggi.

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I certify that an examination committee has met on 28 April 2009 to conduct the final examination of Nisshankage Shantha Abeysinghe on his Doctor of Philosophy thesis entitled “Influence of the Contextual, Developmental, and Demographic Variables on Social Activism among Undergraduates in Sri Lankan Universities” in accordance with Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U.(A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis is my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously, and is not concurrently, submitted for any other degree at Universiti Putra Malaysia or at any other institution.

NISSHANKAGE SHANTHA ABEYSINGHE

Date: 28 April 2009

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AIWA	Asian Immigrant Women Advocates
CAPAY	Coalition for Asian Pacific American Youth
DV	Dependent Variable
ECR	Embuldeniya Committee Report
EDA	Explorative Data Analysis
EE	Electronic Economy
IV	Independent Variable
KE	Knowledge Economy
PYD	Positive Youth Development
SJP	Sri Jayewardenepura University
UGC	University Grants Commission
VIF	Variance Inflation Factor
TRA	Theory Reasoned Action
TPB	Theory of Planned Behaviour
SA	Social Activism

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Problem and Its Context

Pioneers of the higher education sector in Sri Lanka have given adequate attention to the non academic sector and specially the development of civic and social engagements of young people at the campus level. Accordingly, the students' union system has been introduced and students' voice and opinions have been taken into consideration with regard to internal matters as well as external public issues. This policy has set out both positive as well as negative outcomes.

Empowerment of youth and their engagement in social activism can be considered as a part of positive youth development. Such engagement would elevate national development goals, since educated youth will be the future key actors in policy planning, development and leadership.

However, close examination of the contemporary student activism indicates that academic functions have been overridden by the social activism among campus youth. During the year 2007 itself one campus (Rajararta Campus) could not conduct classes for 195 days and another campus (Sabaragamuwa) also failed to conduct 165 days of work out of the total 210 days allocated for the year's academic activity schedule (Dissanayaka 2008). Furthermore, internal group conflicts have arisen. The learning environment has become more uncertain, fearful, and hostile. Campus

administration is in a powerless condition in the present scenario of social activism. Parents of campus youth are also uncertain about the time taken to complete their children's education and more serious and concerned about their engagement in social activism and its negative outcomes such as hospitalization due to injuries resulted from conflicts at the campus level and the suspension of studies by the university authorities. Few of them have already sacrificed their lives due to extreme engagement in social activism political party affiliations. The university learning environment has more hostile and volatile conditions and even leads to the intervention of police. Local universities are becoming less appealing higher educational institutions except in some fields such as medical, law and engineering fields. Therefore, universities have become even dysfunctional and have fallen short of optimizing their outcomes. In this context, unveiling the factors that have contributed for such social activism is of prime importance today. Therefore, there is a due need to conduct a study to seek as to what factors have contributed towards social activism among campus youth in Sri Lanka.

Social Activism at the Higher Learning Institutions in Sri Lanka

Since independence in 1948, political pluralism was encouraged in Sri Lanka by the successive governments. The new constitution (1948) made provision for minority ethnic participation and wider participation of citizens in the process of decision making. Subsequently, a democratic system of government was established with adequate room for such participation and representation. Policy makers of the secondary and higher education sectors have also laid the foundation for the orientation of civic and social engagement of young people. One example is the advancement of students' associations / unions and their activities in the context of