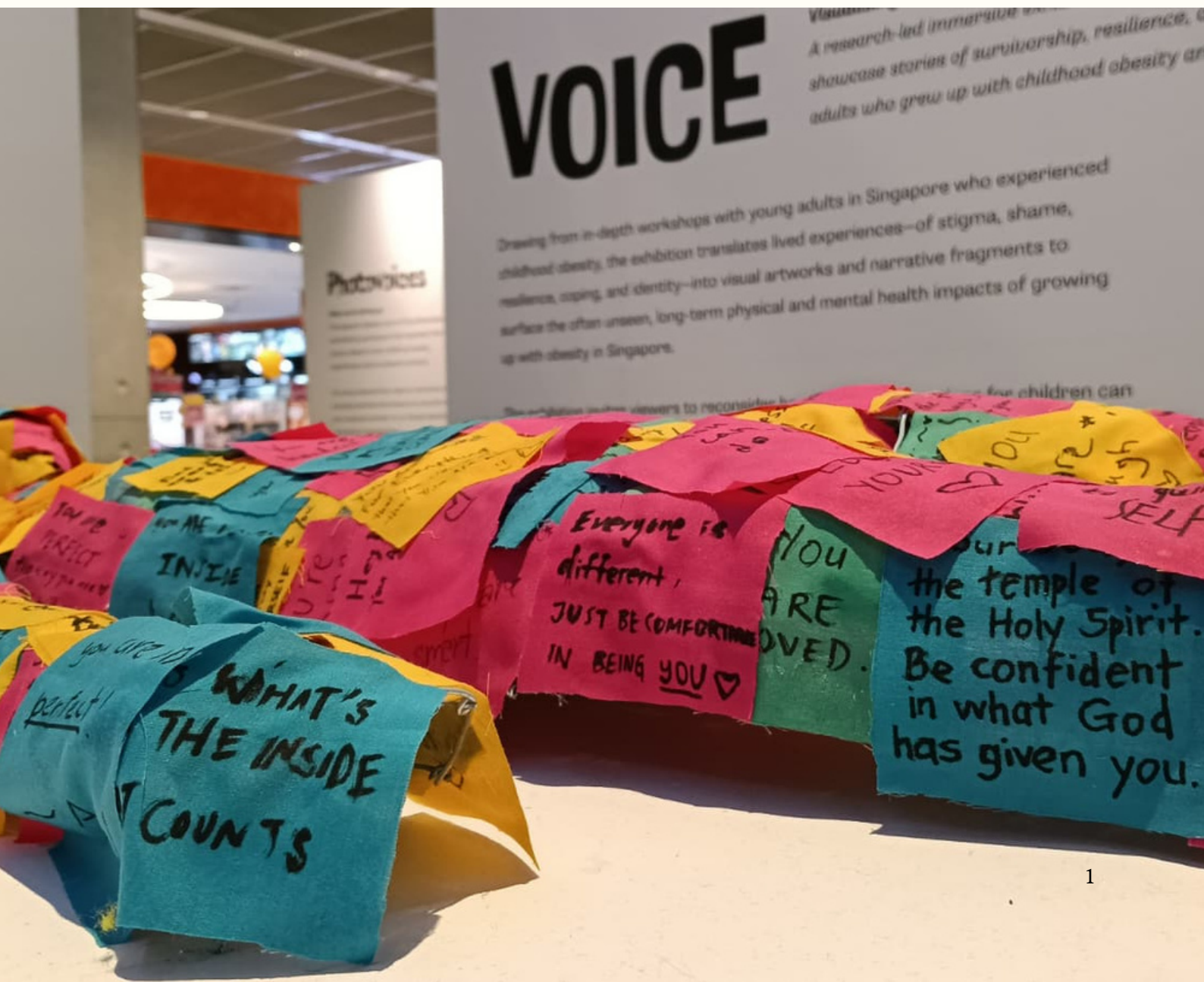


MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS OF GROWING UP WITH OBESITY INSIGHT REPORT

May 2026



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Visualising Obesity's Impact from Childhood Experiences (VOICE)

VOICE is a research- and storytelling-based project led by the Centre for Behavioural and Implementation Science Interventions (BISI) and the LRF Institute for the Public Understanding of Risk (IPUR) at the National University of Singapore, and supported by artists Joshua Tan and Hannah See, and RICE Media.

VOICE focuses on young adults in Singapore who were told they were obese during childhood/adolescence, and seeks to strengthen risk perception of obesity's multifaceted consequences on health.

Curated from in-depth workshops with young adults in Singapore, the project aims to engage individuals who may inadvertently perpetuate mental health risks when interacting with children with obesity, by surfacing lived experiences and translating them into an interactive art exhibition that was used as an intervention to support risk communication mitigation.

The exhibition was in Funan Mall from 26 Jan - 1 Feb 2026 and welcomed about 3,000 visitors, including families, healthcare professionals and people living with obesity.



RESEARCH SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES

The project aimed to engage individuals who may be perpetuating the risk of mental health when interacting with children with obesity. The project team also sought to understand the lived experiences of childhood obesity and the perceptions of its impact on physical and mental health and translate the findings into an interactive art exhibition to amplify risk communication mitigation.

As part of the study, participants took part in a series of workshops and focus group discussions that combined dialogue with creative reflection. Through activities such as photovoice and drawing, they shared how their experiences were shaped by “people, places and processes”. These include interactions with family members, experiences in school, social media exposure and prevailing social and cultural attitudes.

Snapshot of focus group discussions

27 young adults between the ages of 21 and 29 participated in the focus group discussions. Over the course of a few sessions, they shared some of the challenges they faced and how they were processed.

- **Stigma:** Differential treatment and persistent labelling as “the fat kid,” even after weight changes.
- **Food environment:** Conflicting or misguided diet/weight-loss advice (including supplements); intergenerational feeding norms imposed at home.
- **Emotional/psychological impacts:** Ongoing fear of weight regain, distress around fluctuations, and reported depressive/suicidal thoughts linked to weight.
- **Lifestyle/physical activity:** Movement away from restrictive dieting toward broader health- and activity-focused goals.
- **Coping strategies:** Humour to manage social interactions and deflect bullying; concealment behaviours (e.g., hiding body shape, avoiding/altering weight-related disclosure).
- **Identity formation:** Growth in resilience and self-acceptance; reduced sensitivity to comments; redefining self-worth beyond appearance and prioritising enjoyment over fitting in.

COMMUNICATION & MITIGATION STRATEGIES

Empathy building

Show empathy through check-ins to understand the child's current position and journey. Be a supportive pillar for the child. Avoid blame or judgement but instead offer a listening ear and engage in empathetic communication to engage your child.

Role modelling

Parents are a child's first educator. At home, try adopting healthy habits including exercise and food options. Go on walks together and inform your child about nutrition and benefits of a healthy diet. This also applies to grandparents and educators who have substantial contact time with children.

Education & guidance

Parents should educate themselves and guide their children on nutrition and dieting at home. Educators need to be informed and trained on psychosocial impact and best practices to avoid singling students out.

Stigma awareness

Avoid language and practices that reinforce stigma or shame. Instead, aim to build up your child or student in a manner that gives them confidence and courage to take steps to overcome the mental and physical challenges of obesity.



VOICE EXHIBITION

The VOICE exhibition translates lived experiences such as stigma, shame, resilience, coping, identity into visual artworks and narrative fragments. Through photovoices, drawings, and reflective storytelling, the interactive exhibition went beyond statistics to show how everyday interactions with family, peers, schools, public spaces, and social norms can shape well-being into adulthood.



Visitors were invited to reconsider how words, assumptions, and “well-intentioned” interventions may leave lasting psychological traces. Interactive segments invited visitors to recount experiences of hurt and shame and at other spaces, offer words of love, support and encouragement.

PANEL SESSION



On 27 Feb, VOICE hosted a panel to officially launch the exhibition. Drawing on personal, clinical, and research perspectives, panellists discussed how early experiences of body judgment leave lasting marks on self-esteem and mental health, and are often reinforced by family, schools, healthcare, and social media. The panellists were:

- **Gayatri Singh**
- **Rani Dhaschaineey**
- **Keri McCrickerd**
- **Julian Wong (moderator)**

One key message the panel left attendees with was that intent isn't enough. Even well-meaning comments can cause harm. True accountability requires reflection and willingness to change.

The panel called for denormalising body-related comments, focusing on dignity and supporting children through role modelling and open conversations. Institutions and media were challenged to move beyond diet culture and foster healthier, more inclusive environments.



JOURNEY THROUGH THE VOICE EXHIBITION

Children often face pressures from both their internal and external environments to adopt certain lifestyles or make physical changes without fully considering their well-being and mental health. The impacts are carried on into adulthood and are amplified by societal expectations.

The following pages will give you a glimpse into the different exhibits at VOICE. Through 3D artefacts, photovoices, and interactive elements, the exhibition surfaces:

- Memories of being labelled, watched, or stigmatised.
- Emotional and mental states shaped by these memories.
- Lingering beliefs about self-worth, health, responsibility, and control.

We invite you to sit with the stories of childhood obesity: what is carried silently into adulthood, what becomes normalised, and what individuals are still trying to heal from.



1. FORMING A SELF

This exhibition segment brings the outcomes of the Draw a Child activity we had in our research to life by turning them into sculptures. Each child embodies their own set of quirks and traits that have been personified by our workshop participants.



2. PHOTOVOICES

This exhibition segment displays the Photovoices submitted by participants, some as physical artefacts. The Photovoices were separated into two sections – negative and positive. This separation was intentional so that audiences could process contrasting emotions and narratives in a more organised manner.



3. FITTING IN

This exhibition segment addressed the cultural expectations of body image through the medium of clothing. There was an interactive segment where visitors could reflect on certain hurtful comments and pen them down on a label to hang on the wired shirts, symbolising the effect of weighing someone down.



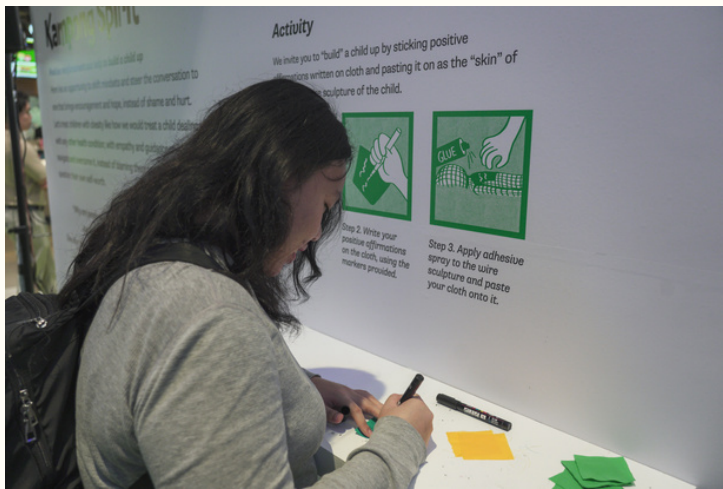
4. MAPPING OUR INFLUENCES

This segment portrayed the key people in various contexts that influenced participants' experiences, and highlighted the kinds of guidance individuals wished they had received from them. Visitors were invited to reflect on where their spheres of influence may be for current or future children living with obesity.



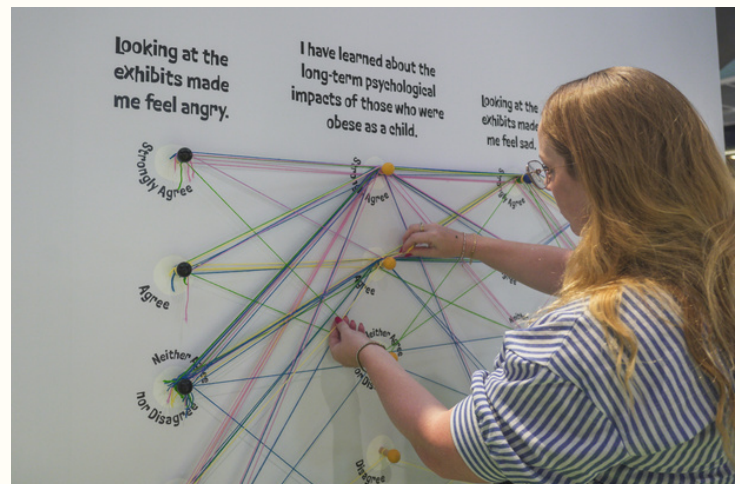
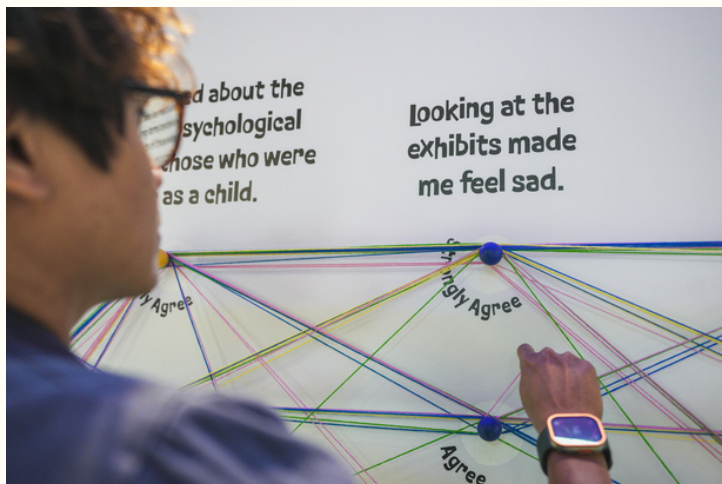
5. FORMING THE KAMPONG SPIRIT

The exhibition ended with a positive affirmation that visitors can collectively add to build up “skin” on the wire sculpture. There was an interactive segment where visitors could “build” a child up by sticking positive affirmations written on cloth and pasting onto the skeletal wire sculpture of a child.



6. STRING OF THOUGHTS

This last section gave visitors an interactive way to provide feedback upon completing the exhibition. They could pick a string that best described their profile and mark out their opinions based on the questions presented on the partition.





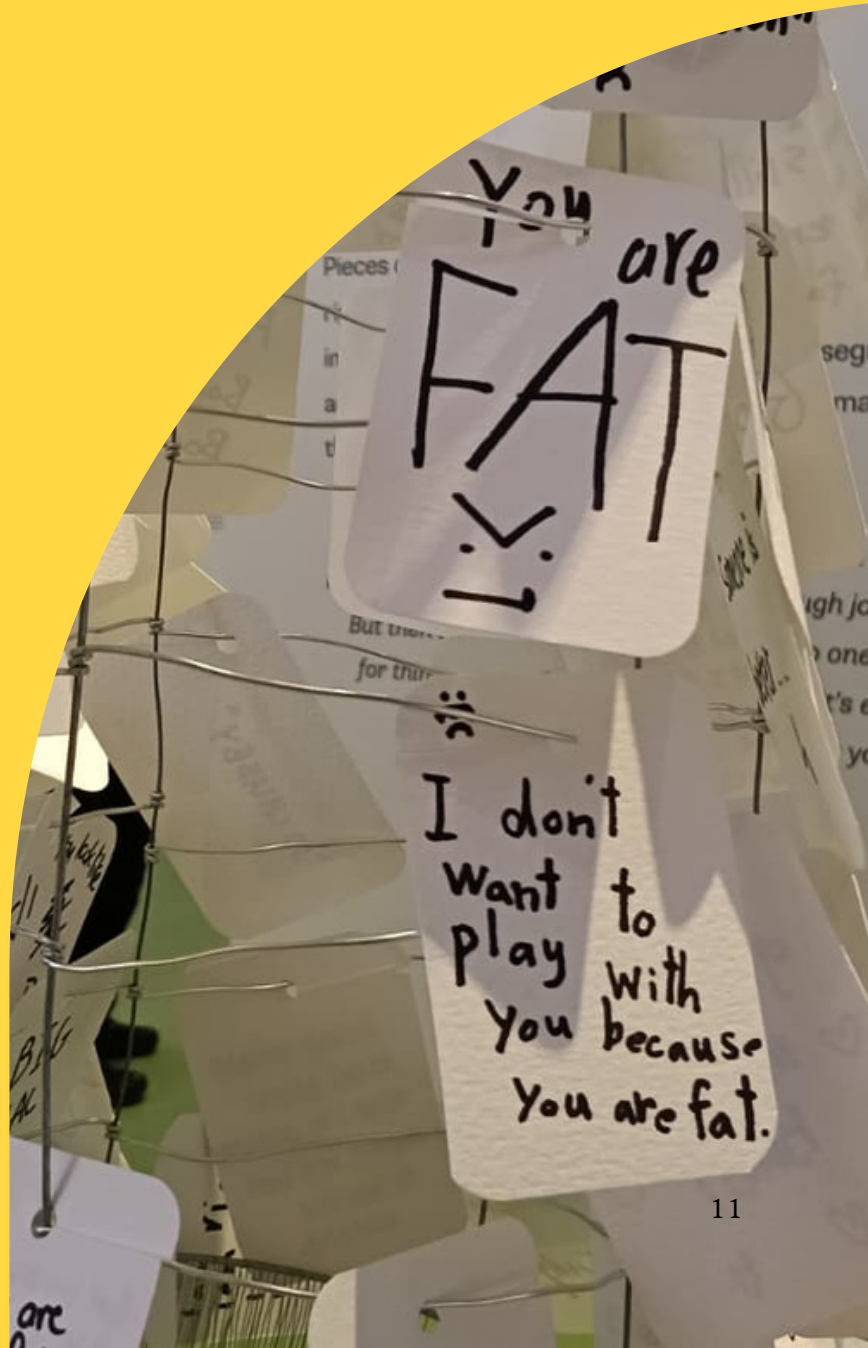
These insights do not argue against obesity interventions. Rather, they underscore the need for weight management efforts to be delivered in ways that are sensitive to children's mental and emotional wellbeing.

Prof Leonard Lee, IPUR Director



You're hyper-visible but invisible at the same time, or there's moral judgment that you must lose weight because you're not part of the ideal.

Focus group participant



ABOUT IPUR

The LRF Institute for the Public Understanding of Risk (IPUR) is the premier institute focusing on public risk perception and communication in Asia, a region which faces acute and growing risks relating to public health, the environment, climate change and emerging technologies. We investigate what people are worried about, where the gaps are between the public's understanding of these issues and the experts' risk assessment, and what interventions can help to bridge these gaps.

Launched in 2017, IPUR was established through funding from the Lloyd's Register Foundation and the National University of Singapore. IPUR strives to shed light on some of the most pressing societal matters which are subject to uncertainty.

By dedicating ourselves to transform the risk communication landscape and enhance the public understanding of risk, we seek to improve lives with maximum impact.

ABOUT BISI

At BISI, the international team of researchers aims to improve population health and well-being by accelerating evidence-based practice through the use of behavioural and implementation science.

The team of research, policy and practice experts works with policy makers, organisational leaders, practitioners and providers to design, implement and evaluate transformative healthcare policies and programmes, in order to deliver and sustain better patient- and system-level outcome. BISI aims to establish Singapore-based, global thought, education and research leadership in behavioural, implementation and health system science.



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We also express our deepest appreciation to our participants for sharing their experiences openly and bravely. Thank you for trusting us with your stories, without you this project would not have been remotely possible.



Scan the QR code to read more about the VOICE exhibition.