

Substance use, mental health and sexual behaviour of university students in Bhutan

Kezang Sherab¹, John Howard², Sherub Tshomo¹, Karma Tshering³



Background

The Kingdom of Bhutan is often characterised as ‘the last Shangrila’, and has adopted ‘Gross National Happiness’ as the foundation of wellbeing and development. Exposure to other lifestyles and values have been embraced by many young Bhutanese creating tensions with traditional culture and values; much of this associated with concerns about substance use, sexual behaviour and mental health.

Methods

Self-administered survey of 2471 of students in 8 campuses of the Royal University of Bhutan across Bhutan. Measures included: substance use, sexual behaviour and mental health.

Results

The **most popular reason** for the use of various substances amongst the college students was **curiosity**, except for alcohol and cough syrup.

Alcohol was consumed for *having fun* and **Cough syrup** for *relieving pain*.

The other most popular reasons for using various substances were the *influence of friends, media, and stress*.

Reasons such as *parental influence and boredom* played minor roles.



Substance use among the students was relatively low and sexual risk behaviour by over 50% of sexually active students. Lifetime use of cannabis at 11.8% for male college students was far lower the 2016 WHO student survey which found 28.3%. Use of doma (betel nut) warrants attention, given know health risks, and despite cultural acceptance.

Substance	Gender	Never (%)	Rarely/ Occasionally (%)	Twice/ week/ daily (%)
Tobacco	Overall	83.0	5.0	3.0
	Male	71.6	8.0	4.9
	Female	94.4	2.1	1.1
Baba (Chewing tobacco)	Overall	88.2	2.3	2.4
	Male	79.1	3.7	4.4
	Female	97.6	0.8	0.3
Alcohol	Overall	43.0	38.3	3.8
	Male	31.2	44.0	5.6
	Female	55.0	31.7	1.9
Doma (betel nut)	Overall	37.9	34.8	7.9
	Male	34.4	34.5	9.2
	Female	41.3	35.3	6.3
Inhalants (glue, dandruff, petrol, etc.)	Overall	91.9	2.1	0.5
	Male	85.9	2.9	0.7
	Female	98.1	1.2	0.1
Cannabis, ganja, marijuana	Overall	88.2	3.0	0.7
	Male	78.3	5.7	1.1
	Female	98.2	0.3	0.2
Nitrazepam N10 --	Overall	96.0	0.8	0.2
	Male	92.7	1.5	0.3
	Female	99.6	0.2	0.0
Diazepam -- Anti-anxiety	Overall	99.1	0.2	0.0
	Male	98.5	0.3	0.0
	Female	99.9	0.0	0.0
Cough syrup e.g., COREX	Overall	93.2	4.2	0.4
	Male	95.0	2.6	0.1
	Female	91.9	5.9	0.5

Spasmo-proxyvon SP - Pain relief	Overall	97.2	0.8	0.1
	Male	95.9	1.6	0.1
Relepin - Pain relief	Overall	99.7	0.0	0.0
	Male	99.0	0.1	0.0
'Brown sugar' Lower grade Heroin	Overall	98.8	1.4	0.1
	Male	98.3	0.2	0.0
Heroin	Overall	99.4	0.4	0.0
	Male	98.4	0.4	0.0
Heroin	Overall	99.3	0.0	0.1
	Male	99.0	0.2	0.0
Heroin	Overall	99.9	0.0	0.0
	Female	99.9	0.0	0.0



Most substances were perceived to be harmful to extremely harmful. For example, Doma (betel nut), despite its level of use, was viewed as harmful/extremely harmful by 58.5%, alcohol by 78.8%, Baba (chewing tobacco) by 83.1% and tobacco by 86.1%. However, Doma was reported as safe/mostly safe by 21.3% (with 20.3% not sure), and Alcohol by 10.7%.

Cannabis was seen as safe/mostly safe by 4.6%, and harmful/ extremely harmful by 82.5%.

About 70-80% viewed Nitrazepam, Diazepam, SP [*dextropropoxyphene hydrochloride, paracetamol*], Relepin [*Dextromethorphan, dicyclomine hydrochloride, paracetamol*], heroin and brown sugar as harmful/extremely harmful.

Mental health concerns were identified by about 10% of students. Suicidal ideation reported by 12.7%, and suicide attempts by 3.7%

Symptom	None (%)	Little (%)	Some (%)	Most (%)	Always (%)	
So sad nothing could cheer up	Overall	34.5	37.9	18.7	7.3	1.6
	Male	42.3	35.0	15.1	5.9	1.7
	Female	26.4	41.0	22.6	8.7	1.4
Nervous	Overall	22.8	34.5	33.6	7.6	1.4
	Male	29.3	33.6	30.7	5.0	1.4
	Female	15.7	35.2	37.1	10.6	1.4
Hopeless	Overall	27.9	30.4	26.3	12.3	3.1
	Male	34.6	28.7	25.3	8.7	2.7
	Female	20.5	32.1	27.7	16.2	3.5
Restless and fidgety	Overall	23.0	32.0	27.6	14.6	2.7
	Male	27.6	30.5	26.4	13.1	2.4
	Female	17.9	33.2	29.3	16.5	3.2
Everything an effort	Overall	26.0	27.7	24.4	14.2	7.7
	Male	31.1	24.8	21.8	14.3	8.0
	Female	20.6	31.4	27.0	14.2	6.9
Worthless	Overall	41.4	30.5	16.6	7.5	4.0
	Male	48.2	28.5	14.8	5.7	2.7
	Female	34.1	32.0	18.8	9.6	5.5



Conclusions

Although the current findings for substance use among the surveyed college students in Bhutan are not alarming, but taken together with data for suicidality there are enough reasons for educators, health workers and policy makers to be concerned.



¹ Paro College of Education, Royal University of Bhutan; ²National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, Faculty of Medicine, UNSW;

³UNFPA, Bhutan

John Howard, jphoward.work@gmail.com