

# Generation Z at the Crossroads: Psychosocial Challenges and Intergenerational Futures in Bhutanese Higher Education

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## Abstract

Bhutan's Generation Z (born 1997–2012) is navigating psychosocial challenges shaped by rapid social change, digital exposure and global aspirations. This paper draws on two national surveys (2016,  $n = 2,471$ ; 2023,  $n = 2,043$ ) of higher education students, examining mental health, substance use, risky sexual behaviour, bullying, resilience and optimism.

Findings reveal concerning levels of psychological distress, suicidality, current substance use, resilience and optimism. Migration aspirations have increased, reflecting tensions between traditional values and globalised influences.

Bhutanese Gen Z's openness to mental health conversations presents a strategic opportunity for youth-led reform. Coordinated, evidence-informed, and intersectoral interventions are urgently needed to strengthen resilience, belonging and optimism, and to revitalise Bhutan's youth policy in line with the country's vision of Gross National Happiness.

## 1. Introduction

Bhutan's Generation Z is coming of age in a rapidly shifting social and cultural landscape. Born between 1997 and 2012 (Popa, 2024), this cohort comprises the current generation of Bhutanese college students.

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Globally, Gen Z is recognised for its digital fluency, social awareness and desire for authenticity and inclusion (Matilda et al., 2025; UNICEF, 2025). Yet, they are also uniquely vulnerable to anxiety, depression and social comparison — pressures shaped by constant digital exposure, economic uncertainty and global crises (Akbar et al., 2024; Popa, 2024).

Raised amidst digital connectivity, global media and expanding educational access, Bhutanese Gen Z embodies both the aspirations and anxieties of a nation balancing tradition with transformation. While Bhutan remains committed to Gross National Happiness (GNH) as its development philosophy, emerging evidence suggests that many young people are grappling with psychosocial distress, substance use, bullying and optimism, issues that challenge the very foundations of GNH (Choden et al., 2019; Duncan, 2010; Nidup, 2017; Sherab et al., 2017; Sherab et al., 2024a, 2024b; Sherab & Howard, (in press), Tshomo et al, 2025).

These findings indicate that a large proportion of those surveyed would meet criteria for “not yet happy people”, according to the GNH Index (Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, 2022). These concerns were already flagged in UNICEF Bhutan’s Annual Report, which called for greater attention to adolescent mental health and social inclusion, as part of its equity agenda (UNICEF, 2022).

This paper draws on two national surveys conducted in 2016 and 2023, involving more than 4,500 students aged between 18-26, to capture the lived realities of Bhutanese Gen Z (Choden et al., 2019; Sherab et al., 2017; Sherab et al., 2019; Sherab et al., 2024a, 2024b; Sherab & Howard, in press).

While the overall prevalence of problematic behaviours was relatively low, concerning trends emerged: Increased alcohol, tobacco and betel nut use, low condom use, high psychological distress, and a growing desire to seek futures abroad. Over half of respondents did not identify as resilient, and bullying remained persistent.

These findings reflect a generation caught between inherited cultural expectations and the seductive pull of global lifestyles. By synthesising key findings, the paper aims to support stakeholders in developing coordinated, evidence-informed strategies that address the complex interplay of

psychosocial health, behavioural risks and structural influences shaping Bhutan's Gen Z.

### ***1.1 Youth Risk Behaviours and Psychosocial Vulnerabilities***

Bhutanese youth (15-24 years) today face a growing tension between traditional cultural values and global influences. As in many Western contexts, concerns around substance use, bullying, mental health, risky sexual behaviour and disengagement from education and employment, are rising (Ministry of Health, 2022; 2024).

These issues linked to reduced social cohesion and increasing “brain drain” were acknowledged in the 2011 National Youth Policy (Department of Youth and Sports, 2011), which recognised a widening generational gap shaped by globalisation and shifting economic realities. However, implementation has been hindered by fragmented coordination and limited strategic follow-through (Choden, 2016).

Youth vulnerability is not homogenous, as risk profiles vary widely depending on context and background, but a growing body of research has identified complex, overlapping individual, social and structural risk and protective factors that influence youth outcomes.

Early onset and continued substance use, risky sexual behaviour and bullying are consistently associated with lowered engagement in education, training and employment, as well as poorer physical and mental health, stigma and increased vulnerability to criminal activity (Annalakshmi & Venkatesan, 2018; Choden et al, 2019; Duncan, 2010; Hall et al., 2016; Patton et al., 2016; Paul et al., 2024; Sherab et al., 2019; VanBronkhorst et al., 2024).

### ***1.2 Mental Health, Resilience, and Wellbeing***

Mental health challenges among youth are increasingly recognised as urgent public health concerns (Dema et al., 2019). Recently, Bhutan has declared mental health as the 6<sup>th</sup> killer disease (Ministry of Health, 2022). Bhutanese college students report concerning levels of psychological distress, suicidality and optimism.

Globally, Gen Z is particularly vulnerable to anxiety, depression and social comparison, pressures shaped by constant exposure to digital media,

economic uncertainty and global crises (Akbar et al., 2024; Popa, 2024; UNICEF, 2025). Resilience and optimism are key protective factors, with evidence showing that positive connections with family, adults and schools can reduce health risks (Mesman et al., 2021; Rutter, 2006).

In exploring the psychosocial challenges faced by Bhutanese youth, particularly Gen Z, it is essential to consider frameworks that go beyond clinical definitions of mental health. Samuel (2022) conceptualises belonging as a multidimensional human right, encompassing interpersonal connection, rootedness in nature, civic agency, and a sense of purpose.

These dimensions offer a valuable framework for interpreting Bhutanese Gen Z's psychosocial landscape, particularly their reported experiences of isolation, disconnection and migration aspirations. A lack of authentic belonging, whether in family, institutions or national narratives, may be a key driver of distress and disengagement (UNICEF, 2025).

### ***1.3 Digital Influence and Migration Narratives***

Social media plays a dual role in the lives of Bhutanese youth, as a space for connection and a source of pressure. According to the Bhutan Media Foundation (2021), Gen Z in Bhutan spends over 210 minutes daily on social media, well above the global average.

This intense digital engagement exposes them to idealised portrayals of life abroad, contributing to migration aspirations and feelings of disillusionment. Choden (2023) highlights how social media also fosters stigma around mental health, especially among youth with low digital literacy. Increasingly, young Bhutanese use online platforms to portray idealised lives abroad, masking the challenges they face in high-cost environments (BCMD, 2023; Dias & Patidar, 2023; Kuensel, 2022; Sharma, 2023; Tobgay, 2022; Wangchuk, 2024).

### ***1.4 Policy Gaps and Youth Agency***

Despite the existence of a National Youth Policy, Bhutan has made limited progress in developing effective intersectoral strategies. Media and academic voices continue to call for renewed attention to youth issues (BCMD, 2023; Choden, 2016; The Druk Journal, 2021).

UNICEF Bhutan's 2022 Annual Report further emphasises this gap, noting that while youth mental health and education were prioritised in post-pandemic recovery budgets, implementation remains fragmented and under-resourced (UNICEF, 2022).

Choden (2016) notes that during the 2013 National Day address, the King acknowledged Bhutan's strength in planning, but warned of a gap between commitments and outcomes. This issue persists across sectors, including youth policy, due to bureaucratic inertia, lack of coordination, and inconsistent stakeholder engagement (BCMD, 2023; Dias & Patidar, 2023; Kuensel, 2022; Sharma, 2023; Tobgay, 2022; Wangchuk, 2024).

Likewise, Bhutan has had two Suicide Prevention Action Plans, 2015-2018 and 2018-2023, referring to the whole of population and not youth-specific (Dorji et al, 2017; Royal Government of Bhutan, 2015; 2018). Outcomes are unclear and challenges evident.

The review of the implementation of the first plan (2015-18) (Ministry of Health, 2018) outlined that while an extensive and impressive range of activities had been undertaken, the number of suicide deaths reported showed a slight increase. However, it would be unreasonable to assert that there had been no or limited impacts on reduction of deaths at such an early stage of implementation. The situation may well improve over time and with the consolidation and expansion of activities across relevant sectors.

That said, the challenges identified during implementation of such a comprehensive well-formulated action plan (as noted in the action plan for 2018-2023, Royal Government of Bhutan, 2018) provide learnings and cautions for other policies and action plans related to improving the wellbeing of the young people of Bhutan.

Importantly, Gen Z's openness to mental health conversations presents a strategic opportunity to reduce stigma and build responsive systems. Their willingness to seek help and advocate for change makes them ideal partners in designing youth-centred mental health policies (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024).

Globally, UNICEF (2025) highlights that Gen Z demands collective action and insists on being "in the driver's seat" when shaping policies that affect

them. These insights suggest that Gen Z should not be viewed merely as a vulnerable group, but rather as a generation poised for transformation if provided with the right structures of support.

However, in the Bhutanese context, the absence of systematic research makes it difficult to ascertain whether their attitudes and behaviours differ significantly from those of their global peers.

This study investigates the psychosocial health of Bhutanese Generation Z in higher education by examining current patterns of bullying, substance use, sexual risk behaviour, mental health, optimism and resilience, tracing how these indicators have shifted between the 2016 and 2023 surveys, and identifying the policy and practice implications needed to inform a renewed Youth Policy that is responsive to Gen Z realities.

## **2. Research Approach**

This manuscript draws on two national surveys conducted in 2016 and 2023, involving 2,471 and 2,043 Bhutanese higher education students respectively (Sherab et al., 2017; Choden et al., 2019; Sherab et al., 2024a, 2024b). Both surveys examined key psychosocial health indicators, including mental health, substance use, risky sexual behaviour and bullying.

The 2023 survey, administered online to a representative sample from 16 of Bhutan's 17 college campuses, retained all items from the 2016 survey and expanded its scope to include resilience, optimism and future orientation. In addition to demographic and family background data, the survey explored support systems and students' plans to stay in or leave Bhutan, because of growing concerns about "brain drain".

Mental health was assessed using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6) (Kessler et al., 2010), alongside questions on suicidality. Resilience was measured using the six-item Brief Resilience Scale (Fung, 2020), reflecting its importance to overall wellbeing (Nicholls & Staines, 2021).

The survey also included questions on substance use, motivations for use, perceptions of safety, sexual orientation and sexual behaviour. Respondents were invited to share open-ended comments, offering qualitative insights into their experiences. Findings related to bullying and discrimination

from the 2023 survey have been reported separately (Sherab et al., 2023; Sherab & Howard, in press).

### 3. Data Analyses and Ethics

Data analyses were mainly descriptive. However, where relevant, inferential statistics such as Chi-Square tests were carried out using SPSS (Cooksey, 2007). A few open-ended responses were included.

The overall findings of the current survey were compared with the findings of the 2016 survey results (Choden et al., 2019; Sherab et al., 2017; 2019). Ethical clearance for this study was granted by the Centre for Educational Research and Development, Paro College of Education, Royal University of Bhutan.

### 4. Results

Female students comprised 58.3% of those surveyed, with a mean age of 19 years, while 40.8% were male with a mean age of 20 years. Only 4.1% were married, but 37.8% were in a relationship.

Almost half of the sample were in their first year of college (46.3%), with 33.2% in second, 11.6% in third and 8.9% in fourth year or higher. The majority resided in college hostels (80.4%), 9.5 % away from the college with family, 6.7% lived with friends and 3.5% lived alone.

#### 4.1 Bullying

There was a non-significant reduction from the 2016 prevalence of 45.2% to about 36% of students surveyed in 2023 reporting experiencing at least one form of bullying. The most frequent forms were having lies told about them (35.5%), being left out or ignored (33.8%), and having others turned against them (30.9%). Significantly fewer students reported bullying others (10%) compared with the 2016 survey (18.1%); the most frequent being by excluding/ignoring others.

Almost one in five (19.1%) of those who reported experiencing bullying admitted to bullying others. A greater number of the students appear to be emotionally bullied, followed by being verbally bullied and being physically bullied.

## **4.2 Discrimination**

About 46% of participants reported being discriminated against, a significant reduction from the 2016 prevalence of 51.3%. The forms of discrimination reported include people acting superior to them (45.8%), and people treating them as if they were not smart (41.1%). About one third (30.4%) of those bullied experienced discrimination.

The associations between being bullied, bullying others, and discrimination and substance use, sexual debut, mental health and wellbeing, resilience, and optimism were explored. Those who experienced bullying had a greater burden of negative associations. It is interesting to note the associations for those who bullied others. Their mental health and wellbeing also appear compromised and many who bullied others were also bullied.

Those who experienced being bullied consumed alcohol, doma [betel nut], tobacco, cannabis and glue more frequently, had higher suicidality and psychological distress, lower resilience, saw their future outside Bhutan, and were more likely to use condoms in casual sex, but less likely for commercial sex, than non-bullied peers.

## **4.3 Mental Health, Wellbeing, Resilience and Optimism:**

While overall most students did not report many symptoms of psychological distress, between 10% and 19% reported experiencing some symptoms most of the time or always. For example, feeling everything was an effort (19.1%), nervous (18.1%), hopeless (17.6%), restless and fidgety (17.4%), worthless (15.8%) or sad (10.3%). These were much higher than in the 2016 survey, with indications of possible depression. Data from both 2016 and 2023 showed that female students experienced more psychological distress compared with their male counterparts.

Despite low reporting of current symptoms, suicidal ideation was reported by 9.5% of males and 10.4% of females, and 5.4% (1.8% male; 3.4% female; 0.2% others) reported having made an attempt to end their life; higher than for the 2016 sample (Sherab et al. 2017). Females were slightly more likely to report both suicidal ideation and suicide attempts.

Low levels of substance use overall were reported by the college students surveyed for most substances, other than for doma (betel nut), alcohol and tobacco. However, there were increases in current (i.e. at time of survey) use

of alcohol, tobacco, baba, doma and cough syrup. Contraception was used by 27.7%, and condom use was generally less than 62% overall. There has been an increase in condom use compared with 2016 data.

Around 45% of the participating college students appeared to see themselves as very or somewhat resilient for three of the six items in the survey (“I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times.” “It does not take me long to recover from a stressful event,” and “I usually come through difficult times with little trouble”). Thus, about 55% did not see themselves as resilient or were unsure. Only about one third (27.8%) believed that they quickly get over setbacks in their life.

Overall, over two thirds of the participating college students felt very optimistic (40.6%) or somewhat optimistic (25.6%) about their futures after graduating. Another quarter (25.3%) were unsure, and 8.5% were not optimistic. Of concern was the finding that only one third (36%) of the participating college students saw their future in Bhutan, with 10.4% reporting they saw it in another country, and 53.6% in Bhutan and another country.

## 5. Discussion

The findings from the 2016 and 2023 surveys reveal that Bhutanese Generation Z in higher education face complex psychosocial challenges that cannot be understood in isolation. To make sense of these patterns, the discussion is organised into three interconnected themes: Psychosocial vulnerabilities, structural and contextual drivers, and policy and practice implications.

### 5.1 *Psychosocial Vulnerabilities*

Although the overall prevalence of problematic behaviour among Bhutanese higher education students was relatively low, the findings raise important concerns for Generation Z, who now comprise the majority of tertiary learners.

Suicidal ideation, increased current use of alcohol, tobacco and betel nut, low condom use, and over half of respondents not identifying as resilient, signal psychosocial vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities are compounded by the fact that many students expressed a desire for futures outside Bhutan,

reflecting a generational tension between rooted cultural values and global aspirations.

Bullying remains a persistent issue, with high prevalence despite a slight decline since 2016. Being bullied was strongly associated with psychological distress, suicidality, substance use, and reduced resilience. The PEMA Centre's anti-bullying guidelines (2022) and UNESCO's global guidance (2016; 2017) provide frameworks for institutional change, yet their implementation and impact remain unclear.

Without transparent reporting and accountability mechanisms, bullying continues to undermine students' wellbeing. Post-graduation implications are significant: Students who experience bullying may replicate harmful behaviours in professional roles—particularly in fields such as teaching, nursing and counselling, where the reach and impact on youth and vulnerable populations are especially wide. Education is a known protective factor, particularly for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, and strategies to enhance retention and wellbeing are essential.

## ***5.2 Structural and Contextual Drivers***

The vulnerabilities identified are not isolated but shaped by broader social and cultural dynamics. Digital immersion exposes youth to idealised global lifestyles, fuelling migration aspirations and social comparison. Bhutanese Gen Z spend significantly more time on social media than the global average, which increases exposure to idealised portrayals of life abroad and contributes to psychosocial strain. Experiences of bullying and discrimination erode belonging and optimism, while fragmented policy implementation weakens institutional support (Drakos, 2024).

The generational tension between rooted Bhutanese values of Gross National Happiness, family and tradition and globalised influences, such as social media and migration narratives, places Gen Z at a crossroads. As noted in the introduction, UNICEF (2025) underscores Gen Z's insistence on agency, highlighting their determination to actively shape the policies and solutions that affect them. Rather than being passive recipients, they position themselves as leaders in driving collective action.

This tension amplifies psychosocial strain, as young people navigate between cultural rootedness and global aspirations. Post-graduation implications

are significant — unresolved vulnerabilities may continue in professional roles, perpetuating cycles of distress and harmful behaviours.

### ***5.3 Policy and Practice Implications***

Addressing these challenges requires systemic reform. A renewed National Youth Policy must integrate intersectoral collaboration, youth agency and evidence-informed strategies.

Zero-tolerance policies on bullying and discrimination, with transparent reporting and accountability mechanisms, are essential. A rapid audit of schools and colleges could assess existing policies, reporting mechanisms, and support services, while curriculum reviews may identify gaps in addressing bullying and discrimination.

The WHO's Health Promoting Schools model (WHO, 2021; 2022) and whole-school approaches to bullying (Pearce, 2024) offer holistic frameworks for fostering physical, mental and social health. While underutilised in Bhutan, their principles align well with GNH and the Four Immeasurables (Buddhist values of loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy and equanimity) and could be adapted to develop Health Promoting Colleges. UNICEF Bhutan's 2022 report supports this direction, highlighting the need for integrated, youth-friendly services and stronger institutional accountability in addressing the wellbeing of young people.

Royal Thimphu College's Student Success Project exemplifies how values-driven approaches can be embedded into higher education. Grounded in the Four Immeasurables, the programme draws deeply from Bhutan's cultural and spiritual heritage. Faculty-student collaboration empowers learners to co-create solutions to challenges, such as academic stress, social isolation and stigma around mental health.

Interventions include mindfulness practice, emotional check-ins, peer mentoring, wellness workshops, storytelling circles, and digital outreach efforts that reflect Gen Z's preference for authenticity, agency and collective action.

By embedding the Health Promoting Colleges model into Bhutan's higher education system, institutions can move beyond reactive responses to psychosocial challenges. Establishing campus-wide wellness policies that

integrate mental health, substance use prevention, sexual health and anti-bullying measures, and creating multidisciplinary wellness committees (faculty, students, counsellors, health professionals) can enhance the capacity of higher education to better meet student needs. Visible leadership commitment is required, where college leaders champion wellbeing as part of GNH values.

Similarly, the challenges of implementing a well-informed, focused and comprehensive action plan to address the risk of suicide can provide valuable insights for strengthening youth policy (Dorji et al., 2017; Ministry of Health, 2018; Royal Government of Bhutan, 2018). Establishing and sustaining a broad, coordinated system that engages diverse partners, organisations, and sectors requires time, ongoing support and consistent monitoring. Furthermore, identifying both potential barriers and available assets is essential to ensure long-term sustainability.

Finally, the influence of social media and migration narratives must be considered in shaping youth aspirations and policy responses. Gen Z's digital immersion and global exposure demand nuanced, culturally grounded strategies to foster optimism, belonging and resilience.

As Samuel (2022) argues, belonging is a fundamental human right encompassing interpersonal connection, ecological rootedness, civic agency, and a sense of purpose. The absence of authentic belonging, whether in family, institutions or national narratives, may be a key driver of distress and migration aspirations among Bhutanese youth. Addressing this gap requires youth-led, values-driven interventions that foster connection, meaning, belonging and a belief that they matter.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study highlights the urgent psychosocial challenges facing Bhutanese Gen Z in higher education, including their concerns about their psychological wellbeing, suicidality, substance use, resilience and optimism.

These trends reflect a generational crossroads between cultural rootedness and global aspirations, amplified by digital immersion and migration narratives. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated, evidence-

informed, and intersectoral strategies that place youth wellbeing at the centre of national education and development agendas.

The way forward lies in revising outdated youth policies, institutionalising “Health Promoting Colleges” by adapting WHO’s Health Promoting Schools model, expanding mental health systems, and fostering resilience and belonging through culturally grounded, youth-led initiatives.

Gen Z’s openness to mental health conversations and desire for agency presents a strategic opportunity. By recognising Gen Z not as passive recipients but as active architects of change, Bhutan can transform current vulnerabilities into opportunities for reform. In doing so, higher education will serve not only as a site of learning but also as a foundation for national wellbeing and sustainable futures rooted in Gross National Happiness.

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