

Generations in Transition: Negotiating Transnational Identity and Gross National Happiness Among Bhutanese Youth in Perth

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Abstract

Bhutan is undergoing significant demographic and social transition as growing numbers of young people pursue education, employment and life opportunities beyond national borders. While youth out-migration is often framed in Bhutanese public discourse as a threat to cultural continuity and national development, far less attention has been paid to how young Bhutanese themselves experience mobility and negotiate identity, belonging and wellbeing outside Bhutan.

This paper addresses this gap by examining how Bhutanese youth living in Perth, Western Australia, construct transnational identities in relation to the philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH). Drawing on in-depth interviews with 20 Bhutanese youth aged 18–25, the study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach to explore everyday understandings of being Bhutanese abroad, meanings of home and belonging, and evolving notions of happiness and wellbeing.

The findings reveal that youth mobility does not signal detachment from Bhutan or rejection of GNH. Instead, young people actively negotiate inherited values and new social realities, producing hybrid identities shaped by family obligations, transnational aspirations, and lived experiences across borders.

GNH emerges not as a fixed policy framework, but as a moral repertoire that travels with people and is selectively adapted in mobile contexts.

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The paper conceptualises Bhutanese youth abroad as a generation in transition—neither bound by territorially fixed identities nor disconnected from the nation.

By foregrounding youth perspectives, the study contributes to debates on transnational identity, youth mobility and wellbeing, and offers policy-relevant insights into how nationally grounded philosophies of wellbeing may evolve in an increasingly mobile world.

1. Introduction

Bhutan is undergoing a significant demographic and social transition as growing numbers of young people pursue education, employment and life opportunities beyond national borders (Lhendup & Dema, 2025). Youth out-migration has become a defining feature of contemporary Bhutanese society, shaped by globalisation, expanding educational aspirations, and changing imaginaries of success and wellbeing (Lhendup & Dema, 2025; Pelden et al., 2022).

Within Bhutanese public discourse, this mobility is often framed as a national concern—linked to anxieties about brain drain, cultural continuity and the long-term sustainability of development grounded in the philosophy of GNH (Alaref et al., 2025; Pelden et al., 2022).

Yet far less attention has been paid to how Bhutanese youth themselves experience mobility and negotiate identity, belonging and happiness while living abroad.

Existing scholarship on Bhutan has largely focused on GNH as a national development framework, governance philosophy, or policy instrument (Dorji et al., 2025; Ura et al., 2012; Ugyel et al., 2023). While these studies have provided important insights into how wellbeing is conceptualised and measured at the state level, they offer limited engagement with how GNH is lived, interpreted and contested by individuals—particularly young people whose lives increasingly unfold across borders.

At the same time, broader literature on youth mobility and transnationalism highlights that young migrants are not passive subjects of movement but active agents who continuously negotiate identity, belonging and wellbeing

in relation to multiple places, cultures and social expectations (Schiller et al., 1995; Levitt & Schiller, 2004). Bringing these bodies of work into dialogue opens up critical questions about the future of nationally rooted wellbeing philosophies in an era of intensified mobility.

This paper addresses this gap by examining how Bhutanese youth living in Perth, Western Australia, construct and negotiate transnational identities in relation to GNH. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 20 Bhutanese youth aged 18–25, the study explores three interrelated questions: What does it mean to be Bhutanese outside Bhutan? How are ideas of belonging, happiness and “home” reworked in diasporic contexts? And how do family ties, cultural values and the principles associated with GNH travel, adapt, or strain when young people live abroad?

By situating individual narratives within Bhutan’s broader context of youth out-migration, an ageing population, and shifting social aspirations, the paper conceptualises Bhutanese youth abroad as a generation in transition—neither detached from the nation nor bound by territorially fixed identities.

Instead, these young people actively negotiate between inherited values and new social realities, revealing both the possibilities and limitations of GNH in a mobile world. In doing so, the paper contributes to debates on transnational identity, youth mobility and wellbeing, while offering policy-relevant reflections on how Bhutan might engage with its youth beyond national borders.

2. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design (Elbardan & Kholeif, 2017) to explore how Bhutanese youth living abroad negotiate identity, belonging and wellbeing in relation to Gross National Happiness (GNH). Given the study’s focus on lived experience, meaning-making, and subjectivity, in-depth semi-structured interviews (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021) were employed as the primary method of data collection.

The participants included 20 Bhutanese youth (10 men and 10 women) aged 18–25 comprising both students and workers residing in Perth, Western Australia. Participation was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent prior to the interviews.

Interviews were conducted in December 2025 and January 2026, either face-to-face or online, depending on participant availability. The interview guide was designed to elicit narratives around mobility, identity, belonging, family relationships, happiness, and perceptions of GNH.

Rather than treating GNH as a fixed policy framework, questions encouraged participants to reflect on how values associated with GNH were experienced, re-interpreted, or challenged in their everyday lives abroad.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed thematically (Clarke & Braun, 2016) using an iterative coding process (Richardson & Urbanke, 2001). Initial open coding (Cascio et al., 2019) was followed by the development of broader analytical themes through comparison across interviews. Analysis was informed by transnational and youth identity scholarship, while remaining attentive to participants' own categories of meaning.

3. Findings

Analysis of the interviews revealed four inter-related themes that illuminate how Bhutanese youth in Perth negotiate identity, belonging and wellbeing in transnational contexts.

3.1 Being Bhutanese Outside Bhutan: Identity as Contextual and Negotiated

Participants consistently described Bhutanese identity as something that became more conscious and reflexive after leaving Bhutan. While identity was often taken for granted at home, living abroad required young people to actively articulate what being Bhutanese meant to them. This process was shaped by encounters with cultural difference, racialisation and questions from others about Bhutan, happiness and national identity.

Several participants expressed a heightened sense of pride in Bhutanese culture, values and national distinctiveness, particularly when contrasted with perceived individualism in Australian society.

At the same time, identity was described as situational — understood differently in Bhutanese community spaces, universities, workplaces and

family interactions. As one participant noted, “In Bhutan, you don’t think about being Bhutanese—it’s just normal. Here, you have to explain it, and that makes you think more about who you are.”

Rather than indicating detachment from Bhutan, this reflexivity indicates a more complex form of attachment, in which identity was selectively maintained and re-interpreted. Participants positioned themselves as simultaneously Bhutanese and global, resisting fixed or singular notions of belonging.

3.2 Home and Belonging: Living In-Between Places

Ideas of “home” emerged as emotionally layered and often ambivalent. While Bhutan remained a powerful reference point associated with family, cultural familiarity and emotional security, participants also described growing attachments to Perth through education, friendships and everyday routines. Many struggled to locate home in a single place, instead describing it as relational and shifting.

For some, home was tied to people rather than geography. As one participant explained, “Home is where my parents are, but my life is here now. It’s confusing because both feel true.” Others described a sense of partial belonging in both places—feeling like outsiders in Australia while also experiencing distance from peers in Bhutan whose life trajectories had diverged.

This sense of in-between-ness was not necessarily experienced as negative. For several participants, it offered flexibility, perspective and expanded horizons. However, it also generated emotional strain, particularly when participants felt pressure to eventually return to Bhutan, despite uncertainty about opportunities, expectations, or personal aspirations.

3.3 Happiness and Wellbeing Beyond Bhutan: Reworking GNH in Everyday Life

Participants frequently referenced ideas associated with GNH when reflecting on happiness and wellbeing, but rarely in formal or policy terms. Instead, GNH appeared as a set of moral values—balance, contentment, responsibility to family, and social harmony—that shaped how youth evaluated their lives abroad.

Many contrasted the material opportunities available in Australia with what they perceived as stronger community ties and emotional security in Bhutan. This comparison often produced a nuanced understanding of happiness as multidimensional rather than materially driven. As one participant observed, “Here, life is comfortable, but it can feel lonely. In Bhutan, even if you have less, you feel more connected.”

Participants also acknowledged that living abroad had expanded their definitions of wellbeing to include personal autonomy, mental health awareness, and freedom of choice—dimensions they felt were less openly discussed in Bhutan.

Rather than rejecting GNH, youth described adapting its values to new contexts, selectively retaining elements that resonated while questioning others that felt restrictive or mismatched with their lived realities.

3.4 Family, Obligation, Moral Tensions

Family expectations played a central role in shaping how participants experienced mobility and wellbeing. Many described strong moral obligations to parents and extended family, particularly as first-generation migrants or students abroad. These obligations were often framed in emotional terms—gratitude, responsibility and guilt—rather than explicit demands.

Participants spoke of pressure to succeed academically or professionally, not only for personal advancement but to justify their absence from home. At the same time, uncertainty about return generated anxiety, especially when family members assumed eventual repatriation. One participant reflected, “My parents think this is temporary, but I don’t know anymore. That makes me feel guilty, even when I’m doing well.”

These tensions highlighted the limits of nationally grounded wellbeing frameworks such as GNH, when confronted with mobile life courses. While values of collective wellbeing and familial responsibility remained influential, participants often struggled to reconcile these with emerging aspirations for independence and self-defined happiness.

Therefore, the participants did not position themselves as detached from Bhutan or dismissive of GNH. Instead, they actively negotiated identity

and wellbeing across borders, producing hybrid understandings shaped by mobility, family ties and evolving aspirations. Their experiences reveal GNH not as a static national philosophy, but as a set of values that travels with people—adapted, strained and reworked in transnational contexts.

4. Discussion: A Generation in Transition in a Mobile World

The findings of this study position Bhutanese youth in Perth as a generation in transition—shaped by mobility, yet deeply embedded in familial, cultural and moral frameworks associated with Bhutan and GNH.

Consistent with transnational scholarship, these young people do not experience migration as a rupture from the nation but as an ongoing process of negotiation across social fields that span multiple places (Schiller et al., 1995; Levitt & Schiller, 2004). Identity, belonging and wellbeing emerge not as fixed attributes but as relational and situational, continually reworked through everyday practices and interactions.

The reflexive engagement with Bhutanese identity observed among participants echoes broader studies of migrant and diasporic youth, which show that identity often becomes more consciously articulated in contexts of difference (Anthias, 2012; Brah, 2005; Vertovec, 2001).

For Bhutanese youth, living abroad heightened awareness of cultural values and national distinctiveness, while also enabling selective attachment rather than unquestioned adherence. These findings challenge binary framings of youth out-migration as either cultural loss or national disloyalty, instead aligning with research that conceptualises youth mobility as a site of creative identity-making and hybrid belonging (Conradson & Latham, 2005; van Geel & Mazzucato, 2017).

Experiences of “home” and belonging further illustrate this in-between condition. Participants’ descriptions of home as relational and emotionally layered resonate with literature that conceptualises belonging as dynamic and multi-sited rather than territorially fixed (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Ralph & Staeheli, 2011).

While such in-between-ness has often been associated with marginality or displacement, several participants in this study experienced it as enabling

flexibility and expanded horizons, reflecting more recent scholarship that recognises the productive dimensions of transnational lives (Erel, 2010).

The study also contributes to wellbeing scholarship by foregrounding how nationally grounded wellbeing philosophies such as GNH are lived and re-interpreted beyond their territorial origins.

Participants' accounts suggest that GNH travels with people not as a formal policy framework but as a moral repertoire of values—balance, responsibility and relational wellbeing—against which new experiences are evaluated. This supports critiques of state-centric wellbeing frameworks that emphasise the need to understand wellbeing as practiced and negotiated in everyday life rather than solely measured through indicators (Sollis et al., 2025; Sollis et al., 2024; Sangha et al., 2024).

At the same time, participants' expanded understandings of wellbeing—encompassing autonomy, mental health awareness and self-realisation—reflect global youth discourses that increasingly prioritise individual psychological wellbeing alongside collective values (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Côté, 2014; Eckersley, 2011).

Family obligations emerged as a key site of tension, highlighting the limits of GNH when confronted with mobile life courses. While values of collective wellbeing and filial responsibility remained influential, participants struggled to reconcile these with uncertain futures and evolving aspirations.

Similar tensions have been documented among migrant youth elsewhere, where intergenerational expectations intersect with structural constraints and transnational opportunity structures (Carling & Collins, 2018; Levitt & Schiller, 2004). These findings suggest that the challenge for Bhutan is not youth mobility per se, but the misalignment between static national imaginaries of wellbeing and increasingly mobile biographies.

Taken together, the findings underscore the importance of recognising Bhutanese youth abroad as active agents in the evolution of GNH. Rather than signalling the erosion of national values, their experiences reveal how GNH may need to adapt in response to mobility, diversity and changing life courses.

Youth perspectives thus offer critical insight into how philosophies of wellbeing can remain relevant in a world where movement is no longer exceptional but central to the contemporary experience.

5. Conclusion: Youth, Mobility and the Future of GNH

This paper has examined how Bhutanese youth living in Perth negotiate transnational identities, belonging and wellbeing in relation to GNH. By foregrounding youth voices, the study moves beyond dominant policy and public narratives that frame out-migration primarily as loss or risk, instead revealing young people as active agents navigating mobility, aspiration and inherited values.

The findings demonstrate that Bhutanese youth abroad are neither detached from the nation nor fully contained by territorially fixed identities. Rather, they occupy an in-between position as a generation in transition, continually negotiating what it means to be Bhutanese, to belong, and to live a “good life” across borders.

The study contributes to broader debates on transnational identity and wellbeing by showing how nationally rooted wellbeing philosophies such as GNH are lived, adapted, and sometimes strained in mobile contexts. GNH emerges not as a static framework exported intact beyond Bhutan, but as a moral repertoire that travels with people—selectively retained, re-interpreted, and reshaped through everyday experiences abroad.

This underscores the importance of moving beyond state-centric or indicator-based understandings of wellbeing, towards relational and practice-oriented perspectives that better reflect contemporary life courses. From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that Bhutan’s challenge is not youth mobility itself, but the growing misalignment between static national imaginaries of wellbeing and increasingly transnational biographies.

Engaging with youth abroad require recognising their continued emotional, moral and cultural attachments to Bhutan while also acknowledging their evolving aspirations and hybrid identities. Policies that frame migration solely in terms of return or loss, risk alienating a generation whose futures may remain geographically dispersed but socially connected.

More broadly, this study highlights the need for wellbeing frameworks to grapple with mobility as a defining feature of modern life. As movement across borders becomes increasingly central to youth transitions globally, philosophies such as GNH may need to evolve by re-imagining how wellbeing is nurtured, sustained and shared beyond the nation-state.

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