

Influence of Family Values on Sexual Behaviour: A Qualitative Study of the Perceptions of Pre-Service Student Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Family values and culture play a crucial role in the sexual behaviour of young adults. Due to lack of research, it is difficult to understand how Bhutanese family values and culture impact the sexual behaviour of young adults. Bhutanese are known for taking pride in their family values and culture and this is vividly brought out in this paper as a context to the study being carried out. This study employed a qualitative approach to understand the perceptions of pre-service student teachers (16 Key Informant & 2 Focus Group Interviews) regarding the influence of family values on their sexual behaviour. The findings indicate a presence of strong influence of family values and culture on the sexual behaviour of young adults. However, the findings tentatively suggest that the age of parents, education of parents, region, and religion do not influence their sexual behaviour. This small-scale study sets a foundation for a more expansive study on the role of family values in shaping the sexual behaviour of college students. This paper also presents the implications of the findings.

Keyword: sexual behaviour, family, family values, culture, perception, college students/young adults

BACKGROUND

Life Skill based Comprehensive Sexuality Education (LSCSE), initially known as Life Skills Education (LSE) is offered as one of the non-credited modules for all the first-year student teachers which first started as a pilot programme at Paro College of Education (PCoE) in 2010 with the initiative and support from UNFPA, Bhutan (Tshomo, et al., 2020). Despite the intense content on comprehensive sexuality education delivered with varieties of strategies, there is evidence to show that there is not much impact on the student teachers' sex and sexual behaviour. Recent researches have shown a great concern over the sexual behaviour of colleges students with more than half of the participants engaged in sexual activity (Gurung & Tshomo, 2015; Sherab et al., 2019; Tshomo, et al., 2020). For instance, Tshomo et al.'s study reported 71% of the college students (N=380) experienced sexual intercourse (male = 92.1% and female = 57.6%) and most worryingly Sherab, et al. (2019) reported that only about 50% of the students have used condom. However, such trend of higher sexual activity among university students is similar worldwide with more than 75% in some cases (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2016; Dolphin, et al. 2017; (Hadžimehedovic, et al., 2017; Lee, et al., 2016; Menon et al., 2017) with poor use of condom. Such risky behaviour of the youth is a concern, especially for a small nation

like Bhutan where the national vision is promoting Gross National Happiness (GNH) and much of the system is based on values. While there is some research on knowledge about sex and sexuality, sexual identity, behaviour, and experiences of college students in Bhutan, there is dearth of information about the role of family values on college students' sexual behaviour. Given the society that is largely based on values and culture, it is assumed that family values would play a crucial role in determining the sexual practices of the Bhutanese youth. However, due to lack of research, this could not be ascertained.

Family plays an important role in bringing up the children and the values that they have grown up with has direct influence on the behaviours displayed by them. Family values form an integral part of every Bhutanese family and something to take pride in it. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in most of the Bhutanese families, there is an open communication with regard to many aspects of family life except for sex and sexual behaviour. It is something that is hardly talked about in the family at home. The reason could be because the topic on sex and sexuality to be discussed openly within the family is considered taboo in most of the Bhutanese family and culture (Sherab, et al., 2019; Tshomo et al. 2020). Hence, community values and fears about sexuality in young people tend to limit the availability of the basic information and education they need to understand and appreciate their changing bodies, leaving the transfer of knowledge about sex and sexuality to parents, families and professionals. Unfortunately, parents, health workers, and teachers themselves also often lack such information, or do not feel comfortable communicating about sexuality. As a result, young people tend to enter into sexual relations without the necessary knowledge or skills to negotiate for their own sexual health and welfare (WHO, 2002).

Many tend to ignore that sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout. It is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors. The study, conducted in US, has shown that the families report the change in the students' sexual behaviour during the transitional period but the individuals who were raised with good care of parents tend to show less frequent sexual behaviours (Wetherill, et al., 2009). The family supports in determining the sexual behaviour and creating awareness of the sexual values when they get to the colleges had been explored. However, such study has not been carried out in the Bhutanese society. Therefore, this study was conducted to see if the family values and culture make a difference in shaping young people's sexual behaviour.

CONCEPT OF VALUES

Values denote different meanings to different person, family, society, or a nation (Sherab, 2013). Existing literature indicate that values are largely depended on context as it varies across time, circumstances, space (Fyffe, 2006) and cultures. Therefore, what one person, family, society or nation values may not be of value to another person, family, society, and nation. Likewise, what is of value today may not be of a value tomorrow or after a certain period of time (Sherab, 2013). However, there seems to be a general consensus, that values basically refer to one's principles, fundamental convictions, aspirations, goals, attitudes, and beliefs that guide behaviour which leads to certain actions (Curriculum Corporation Australia, 2006;

Halstead & Taylor, 2000; Quisumbing & Leo, 2005). Values govern every aspect of human life. Our actions, behaviours, and thoughts are based on the values we hold.

IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY VALUES IN THE BHUTANESE CONTEXT

Values for a Bhutanese is fundamental. It forms unique identity and binds Bhutanese as a family. The beliefs and culture passed down from one generation to the next forms values. Every Bhutanese has their family values that relates to the village/region's practices and beliefs. According to the research conducted by Evans, on Bhutan National Values Assessment, Bhutanese desire strict moral/religious values (2010).

Bhutanese family is usually large and mostly joint family until recently. Its patrician family where head of the household is the oldest male family member. He will have authority to rule the family according to the values he received from his fore fathers. Seldon (2020) in her paper discusses that being Bhutanese means having a strong family value and culture. These unique traditional values, beliefs, and culture add to the identity and uniqueness of Bhutanese. His Majesty the king of Bhutan in his coronation Address to the Nation on November 7, 2008 pronounced that:

As citizens of a spiritual land, you treasure the qualities of a good human being – honesty, kindness, charity, integrity, unity, respect for our culture and traditions, love for our country and for God. Throughout our history our parents have upheld these values and placed the common good above the self. My deepest concern is that as the world changes, we may lose these fundamental values on which rest our character as a nation and people. It is critical that we are able to recognise Bhutanese character irrespective of how far we look back into the past or into the future. The Bhutan we see is vastly different - unrecognizable even - when compared to the Bhutan in the time of our first King. Yet, the character of our people and the nature of our fundamental values have remained unchanged.

As rightly emphasised, values as shared in the previous section is principles or standards of behaviour; one's judgement of what is important in life. It is a set of beliefs that guides individual character and conduct. Bhutanese have inherited beliefs and values that are considered to be right or wrong in accordance with the family or the society. Thus, Bhutan has a unique culture and a set of beliefs which has been practiced and inherited for generations (Pommaret & Tobgay, 2008; Tshomo, 2016).

For a Bhutanese *Tha-dam-tse* and *Ley-judrey* are important values. It means loyalty and obedience to parents, friends, elders, spouses, authority and to the country in general. This phrase will be repeatedly seen in most of Bhutanese books or in the speeches. Similarly, there are other beliefs which has been translated into values in the society. For instance, a woman should be coy and gentle. She should never have affairs before marriage. Thus, a child out of wedlock is a big sin or blasphemy to the family and society. No matter how the child is conceived the woman must bring the father. Otherwise, the child is considered to be a bastard that will bring ill luck to the whole village. These beliefs have been passed down for generations and informed the values of the family and eventually the sexual conduct of woman in the family. Any woman who conceives out of wedlock or from any causal relationship is considered as promiscuous and taints family name.

Even if a girl likes a man, she can never state that. It should be a man's right to woo a woman. It is considered macho for men to have as many girlfriends as possible. The old Bhutanese saying 'a bull can shit above the road as well as below the road' signifies the society's acceptance of men's infidelity. Whereas, society does not permit the same flexibility to women. Woman should not have more than one husband. Woman should not be seen with man before marriage or friendship between man and woman is not okay. Culture and beliefs of woman to be quiet limits her freedom of expression. She cannot express herself through her cloths or even makeup. Woman who dresses flashy, wears makeup or indulges in open conversation with men is interpreted as promiscuous.

Again, traditionally marriage outside one's caste or region is not accepted. A marriage should be mostly approved by the parents or the family members and it should be within the same region or caste. Polyandry was abolished and polygamy was restricted in the mid-20th century. Law in 1990s allowed men to have more than one wife.

All these beliefs which are traditionally passed down for generations forms values and they discipline the behaviour of any Bhutanese. For some family the value means family dignity thus any child who does not follow might be considered as disloyal. Thus, these values have been dictating how an individual behaves. More so sexual behaviour is sensitive. Nobody wishes to be set as outlaws, so most Bhutanese at least follow the values or pretend to fit in the values set by the family and the society. However, with modernization and exposure to Western world such values have been changing rapidly. These may not be true and relevant specially in the towns and cities and more so with youths (Sherab, et al., 2019).

INFLUENCE OF FAMILY VALUES ON CHILDREN'S SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

According to Praphu (n.d), children learn values from their parents and other family members, community, religious teachings, teachers and their peers which influence decisions of an individual about sexual relationships, friends, money and work. Similar thought was being expressed by Leaming, (n.d.), remarking that every member of the family in Bhutan is taught the habits, customs, songs, food, dress and manners that were handed down for generations in their community and these are considered as family values. Thus, every child grows up inheriting the family values. He even stated that Bhutanese stamps the family culture on a child. Bhutanese parents exercise absolute authority over their children. The older generation (between 1930s-1950s) fostered a more traditional set of values like obedience to cultural norms, high regard for authority, and maintenance of strong family ties (Lama, 2016). Bhutan thus with rich inherited family values and big family system has varied family values. The parents love controlling their children as they are concerned about their children's future. The head of the family demands that the members stay within the family values. A child who is obedient enough to abide every single rule of the family is considered a good child. Thus, in Bhutan parental monitoring is necessary and considered as duty. Interestingly, research elsewhere have shown that parental monitoring of their children especially the children attaining adolescents tend to show less sexual activity and fewer sexual partners (Huebner & Howell, 2003; Rai et al., 2003 cited in Wetherill, et al., 2009). There is an indication that parents influence the behaviour of their offspring (Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005; Wamoyi, et al., 2014; Pop & Rusi; 2015). Lickona (1993) rightly asserts that sexual behaviour is determined by values, not mere knowledge. He argues that students in UK who have value orientations have

high self-regard, consider their religious faith important, have strong moral codes. These students are significantly less likely to be sexually active than peers who lack these values. He further claims that such students achieve much higher grades in schools. Rupp and Rosenthal (2007) affirm that values also provide an important avenue for keeping away adolescents from risky situation and activities as they grow and develop their decision-making skills.

Furthermore, research has shown that individuals with more conventional sexual values approve fewer sexual behaviours (Patrick & Lee, 2008; Taris, 2000; Taris & Semin 1998) and individuals with more liberal values approve more frequent and risky sexual behaviours (Knox, et al., 2001 cited in Wetherill, 2009). Studies have also revealed that family structure have impact on how young children portray their sexual conduct. According to Wight, et al., (2006), those children who live with one biological parent are more likely to have sexual intercourse in their early teens and males are far more likely to do so if living with neither. However, there is lack of research in the Bhutanese context to ascertain the role of family values in their children's sexual behaviour.

PARENTAL GUIDANCE AND CHILDREN'S SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

Several studies have revealed that parental involvement on sex education has an effect on children as it can lead to positive sexual behaviour. There is evidence to show that parental guidance delays sexual engagement, encourages protected sex and also reduces unplanned pregnancy amongst the youths (Ashcraft & Murray, 2017; Moeti, 2015; Wight, et al., 2006;). Those children who are educated by parents on sexual abuses are less likely to be sexually abused as well (Manyike, et al., 2015; Xie, et al., 2015). Research in Bhutan has shown that college students are sexually active and also practice risky sexual behaviour (Sherab, et al., 2019; Tshomo, et al., 2020). However, there is dearth of information about parental guidance and children's sexual behaviour which was the intent of this study to explore.

Kaufman (2011, as cited in Moeti, 2015) argues that parents should be the children's first source of sex education to protect them from risky sexual behaviour as they grow up. In the study by Shtarkshall, et al., (2007) they term the word sexual socialization to parental education at home on sex education. It is a process through which an individual acquires understanding of *ideas, beliefs, values, shared cultural symbols, meanings and codes of conduct*. According to their study, sexual socialisation is about parents emphasising their most held home or societal values on their children. Early knowledge on sex education such as messages on physical differences between men and women, beliefs and values on masturbation, nudity, usage of sexual language are important aspects of parental guidance. Their study indicates that both educators and parents have essential roles in imparting sexual literacy. They also considered the importance of cultural beliefs and values as sex education is discussed.

Whether the rich family values and parental authority on the child has only positive influence on their sexual behaviour is still debatable. It has been observed in Bhutan that with modernisation and free access to social media, younger generation seem to be open with their relationship (Dorji, 2015; Sherab, et al., 2017; Tshomo, et al., 2020). They seem to defy age old tradition of waiting for parents to pick their partner. This trend might be a positive development since younger generation are being open about their choice of sexual partners and deciding their own future. Hence, this study explored the following research question.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How does family values help shape the college students' sexual behaviour?

METHODOLOGY

As the study intended to understand the role of family values in shaping the college students' sexual behaviour, a qualitative research approach was chosen. Qualitative methods are considered useful in discovering the meaning that people give to events that they experience (Merriam, 1998). A semi-structured interview and focus group discussions (FGD) were employed as the primary methods of data collection as it allowed for an in-depth understanding of feelings, thoughts, and intentions (Merriam, 1998) of the college students about the role of family values in shaping their sexual behaviour. The interviews were conducted virtually through Zoom in English due to Covid 19 restrictions. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. These transcripts were then coded individually. The researchers independently coded the interviews to ensure that the codes were consistent with the data and the major themes were identified.

SAMPLING

All participants were selected on voluntary basis stratified by course levels. A total of sixteen 16 students (8 male & 8 female), four each from each of the four course levels participated for semi-structured interviews and 10 students for two FGD enrolled in different programmes. The FGD participants were a mixed of students from all levels (5 females & 5 males). All interviews and FGDs were conducted online using Zoom as the students were not available on campus due to Covid-19 pandemic. All interviews and FGDs were transcribed later for analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

First, interview transcripts were reviewed several times, searching for "recurring regularities" (Merriam, 1998, p. 180). The quotes and phrases from the interviews that were significant to the study were highlighted. The process involved going back and forth through the transcripts until categories emerged that were consistent. This resulted to the emergence of six major themes: i) Education of parents and sexual behaviour of participants; ii) Locality and participants' sexual conduct; iii) Age of parents and sexual behaviour of participants; iv) Family values and participants' sexual conduct; v) Parental guidance and sexual behaviour; and vi) Participants' personal values and sexual behaviour. A detailed discussion of each of these themes are presented in the following sections.

Theme one: Education of parents and sexual behaviour of participants

The type of communication between college students and their parents regarding sex related issues resulted in mixed responses. Majority of the participants (75%) with illiterate parents blatantly denied having open communication with their parents regarding sex related issues. They justified the lack of communication as a result of their parents' lack of education and said that they do not feel comfortable. For instance, one participant stated, "It is considered sin to talk about sex related issues with one's parents." They were of the opinion that if their parents were educated, they would have been open with their parents. However, this is not true, on further probing, half of the participants (50%) with literate parents also shared that they did not have open communication with their parents when it came to sex related issues as they do not feel comfortable. On the other hand, a quarter of the participants with uneducated parents

stated that they are open with their parents in discussing about sex related issues. Similarly, half of the participants with literate parents agreed having open communication with their parents but only of same gender. Hence, findings suggest that the education of the parents is not the key determine of whether there would be open communication between parents and children or not with regard to sex related issues.

Therefore, based on the findings of this study, it can be tentatively concluded that the sexual behaviour of participants cannot be linked to the education of the parents. Among the participants of educated parents, three out of four participants claimed not being involved in sexual relationship and eight participants out of twelve with uneducated parents claimed as not being involved in sexual relationship. This is a clear indication that the education of parents does not have direct implication on the sexual behaviour of their children.

Theme two: Locality and participants' sexual conduct

Among the sixteen interview participants, six were from the Eastern Bhutan, five from South and five from West. Three participants out of six from Eastern and two out of five participants from Southern regions acknowledged being involved in sexual activity. Meanwhile, all five participants from Western region denied being involved in sexual activity. The FGD participants who were from all the three regions also had mixed responses. All the participants from the Western region claimed not involved in sexual activity, whereas the other participants from East and South had varying answers. Those participants who claimed to be involved in sexual relationship on asking for their opinion about sex before marriage said it is a biological desire and natural. One participant comment, "If there is a mutual consent, there is nothing wrong in it. In fact, it will bond the relationship." However, all participants did not share the same thoughts. Participants who were not involved in sexual relationship were of the opinion that it is wrong to have sex before marriage. According to one participant from East, "It is unethical and undignified. One has to maintain one's dignity." A participant from South argued, "It is against the family values and not accepted in the society." Similarly, A participant from West asserted, "Sex before marriage can lead to so many complications like, teenage pregnancy, abortion, depression and suicide." The participants from West shared similar thoughts saying it is shameful and the parents would not like it.

Though, none of the participants from West claimed to have sexual involvement, their justification and the justification of other participants not involved in sexual relationship from East and South shared the same sentiments as unethical, leading to lots of problems and not acceptable in the society.

Theme three: Age of parents and sexual behaviour of participants

This study revealed no correlation between the age of parents and the sexual behaviour of the participants. The age of parents ranged from 40-50, 50-60 and 60-70. Maximum of the interview participants (ten) had parents belonging to age group of 40-50, three with age group 50-60 and three with 60-70 categories. Among the participants belonging to parents of age group 40-50 category, majority of the participants (80%) strongly disagreed to the notion of sex before marriage. Whereas, all participants belonging to parents of age group 50-60 category seemed to be okay with sex before marriage. Participants of parents belonging to age 60-70

category seemed to be of mixed opinion. This is a clear indication that the age of parents does not impact the sexual behaviour of their children.

Theme four: Family values and participants' sexual conduct

This study revealed a strong association between the participants' family values and their sexual behaviour. The findings showed that almost a third (69%) of the participants objecting to sex before marriage seemed to have strong grounded cultural values. While asking about the kind of family values they uphold, the participants talked about their families being religious, adhering to strict discipline, obeying and respecting elders and deep faith in *tha-damtsi* and *lay-judrey*. One participant shared, "My family is very religious. We believe that it is sin to have sex before marriage." Another participant said, "My family believes in marriage within our own caste and we need to respect that." Many seemed to be guided by the Bhutanese values of *tha-damtsi* and *lay-judrey*.

Theme five: Parental guidance and sexual behaviour

According to both the interview and FGD participants, parental guidance matters a lot in determining the sexual behaviour of the children. They were of the opinion that if parents are caring, supportive, providing guidance and modeling good behaviour, their children are bound to listen and follow them. They also shared their thoughts that problematic children are the children of those parents who are not stable in relationships, troubled family, not being good models and botherless parents. One participant commented, "If parents are decent and conservative, the children follow the path of their parents." Another participant argued, "Children who grow up with parents providing lots of attention and guidance tend to be sexually responsible. Whereas children neglected by parents tend to be irresponsible in their sexual conduct." All the participants also harped on the same point that the family values matter a lot in shaping the sexual conduct of their children.

Environment that children grow up in and its impact on their sexual conduct emerged as one of the pertinent points for discussion both during the interviews and the FGDs. Almost all the participants brought up the topic on the importance of the environment in shaping the sexual behaviour of the children. For instance, one participant commented, "If parents keep on changing their partners, children are destined to follow them." Similarly, another participant stated, "Children of careless parents, no advice, no care, are definite to be easily influenced by their peers and indulge in all sorts of activities." This is an indication of the importance of parental guidance and positive role modelling in shaping the sexual behaviour of the children.

Theme six: Participants' personal values and sexual behaviour

Despite some of the participants having acknowledged being sexually involved before marriage, all do not seem to support sex before marriage. On asking the participants about their personal stand with regard to sex before marriage, their reactions were surprising. All of them were of the opinion that one should not get involved in sexual relationship before marriage and expressed this to be carried out by their children in the future. They shared their thoughts that their children should not get involved in physical relationship till they get married, complete their education, and become independent. They justified by sharing their family beliefs, "sin to have sex before marriage and not acceptable in the society." The participants also reiterated the point that every family should be guided by family values, parents should be good role

models and that the children should be taught about *tha-damtsi and lay-judrey*. This claim by the participants is quite intriguing for the fact that all of them irrespective of their conduct emphasised on the importance of family values in helping shape the sexual behaviour of children.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to find out if family values influence sexual behaviour of children. The data collected from the pre-service student teachers revealed a number of factors such as, communication, education, environment, personal values, beliefs, culture, tradition, religion, parental guidance, and family values that determine the sexual behaviour of children. Amongst these factors, parental guidance, support, and family values appear to play a prominent role in shaping positive sexual behaviour of children.

Several studies have revealed that parental involvement on sex education helps delay sex engagement, encourage protected sex and also help reduce unplanned pregnancy amongst the youths (Ashcraft & Murray, 2017; Moeti, 2015; Wight, et al., 2006;). Although this study revealed that 50% of educated parents and 75% of uneducated parents of the participants did not have open communication with their children with regard to sex education, yet, the participants emphasised on the importance of responsible sexual behaviour. Interestingly, most of them were against sex before marriage. Hence, it can be concluded that in the Bhutanese context parental guidance and support seem to be a source of motivation for the children to be sexually responsible. This corroborates with the earlier findings of Wetherill, et al. (2009) that high school students who were raised with good care of parents tend to show less frequent sexual behaviour.

Parental guidance matters a lot in determining the sexual behaviour of the children. The data from this study revealed that guidance from the parents shaped the positive sexual behaviour of their children. A family that is caring, supportive, and models good moral behaviours made greater impact on the sexual behaviour of their children. This confirms the earlier findings of Praphu (nd), that children learn values from their parents and other family members, which influence decisions of an individual about sexual relationships, friends, money and work. In Bhutan parental monitoring is necessary and considered as a primary duty.

Findings from this study clearly showed that children who were guided and supported by parents showed less sexual activity and fewer sexual partners and that children neglected by parents tend to be irresponsible in their sexual conduct. This supports the existing literature that parents influence the sexual behaviour of their children (Po & Rusi, 2015; Ream & Savin-Wight & Remes, 2014; Williams, 2005) not mere knowledge (Lickona, 1993). Lickona's (1993) basic argument is that students who have value orientations are likely to get good grades in school, have high self-regard, consider their religious faith important, and have strong moral codes are significantly less likely to be sexually active than peers who lack these values. This is further supported by Rupp (2007) who affirms that value orientation also provides an important avenue for keeping away adolescents from risky situation and activities as they grow and develop their decision-making skills.

Bhutanese traditional values and culture seem to be impacting the sexual behaviour of children. There is also a clear indication that personal/family values, societal acceptance, and the community culture also impact on the decision of sexual behaviours. Students perceive that sex before marriage is unethical, undignified, and against the family values that is not accepted in the society. Findings showed that sex before marriage can lead to so many complications like, teenage pregnancy, abortion, depression and suicide. These are clear indications of the impacts made on the participants as a result of their family values.

Findings from this study also suggest that besides parental guidance and support, religion, local culture, age old Bhutanese culture and tradition also impact the sexual behaviour. Therefore, cultural and religious values and beliefs draws individuals towards a more positive/responsible sexual behaviour. Bhutan has a set of unique culture and set of beliefs, which has been practiced and inherited for generations (Tshomo, 2016), such as *Tha-dam-tse* and *Ley judrey*. It is apparent that the influence of such traditional values plays a significant role in delaying sexual conduct and avoiding undesirable sexual behaviours and more importantly practicing positive sexual behaviour. Findings from this study confirms existing literature that that traditional set of values like obedience to culture, norms, high regard for authority and maintenance of strong family ties makes positive influence on sexual behaviour of children (Lama, 2020).

Findings from this study although cannot be generalised to the larger context due to the small nature of the study has various implications. More specifically, it is crucial that parents exhibit positive role model to their children and promote traditional values. Parents must also initiate communication with their children in terms of sex and sexuality and provide timely guidance. This is important for teacher candidates as they have to be role models for their students as they take up full-fledged teaching. However, to further ascertain the current findings and to make it conclusive, large-scale research in the future is being recommended.

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