

## AWARENESS OF THE EFFECTS OF CANNABIS (*GANJA*) AMONG MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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### **Abstract:-**

*This study aims to identify the Malaysian public university students' knowledge about cannabis, their experiences of touching cannabis and coming in contact with friends involved in the abuse of cannabis. A total of 6818 randomly selected students from 20 Malaysian public universities (MPU) were involved in this study. This study implements a quantitative approach using percentage and frequency. Drug Knowledge, Experience and Friends Questionnaire (Kamarudin et al., 2010) were employed for data collection. Results of the study showed that only a small number of the respondents had the experience of touching cannabis and know of friends who are using the drug. Less than 25% among male and female students in both categories had knowledge about the effects of using cannabis. The findings of the study revealed that MPU students' knowledge about the effects of cannabis and the risks associated with its use were scarce.*

**Keywords:-** Cannabis; ganja, higher learning institution, students

## INTRODUCTION

Cannabis, locally known as '*ganja*' (gandzə) is the most commonly used illicit drug in Malaysia. Despite not being a drug producing country, the use and abuse of drugs by adolescents have become one of the most disturbing health related phenomena in Malaysia (Fauziah, Nen, Nur Saadah, & Sarnon, 2012). According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (2012) there are between 119 and 224 million cannabis users worldwide. Cannabis is a substance that is swallowed or smoked (Weller, 2000) and will produce hallucinations and a sense of temporary well-being, followed by extreme fatigue.

According to Cobb (2001), Johnson and Gertein (1998), and Robin (1995), within the past three decades, cannabis use has grown widespread among adolescents and young adults in many countries. About 33% of college students who are marijuana users reported that they first experimented with cannabis when they were 18 years old or older (Gledhill-Hoyt, Lee, Strote, & Wechsler, 2000). The involvement of adolescence in cannabis use begins with smoking (Awosusi and Adegboyega, 2010; Omigbodun & Babalola, 2004) and this has the potential to lead to a more destructive use of illegal drugs (Pickard et al., 2000). Involvement in the abuse of cannabis without exception occurs among university students. Several studies have shown that marijuana is the most commonly used illicit drug among this age group with approximately 25% of college students using marijuana within the past year (Bell, Wechsler, & Johnston, 1997). Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, (2010, 2011) found that cannabis is the most widely used illicit substance, both in the general population and among college students.

Studies reveal that cannabis can lead to poorer achievement and lower expectations for academic success (Brook, Gordon, Brook, & Brook, 1989; Donovan, 1996), family problems (Brook et al., 1989; Newcomb & Bentler, 1988), a greater likelihood of using other drugs (Kandel, 2003), cognitive impairments (Pope & Yurgelun-Todd, 1996; Solowij, Michie, & Fox, 1995), adverse effects on long-term physical health (Sherman, Roth, Gong, & Tashkin, 1991; Tashkin et al., 1987), and higher levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Fergusson, Horwood, & Swain-Campbell, 2002; Green & Ritter, 2000; Patton et al., 2002). According to Bell et al., (1997) students living in co-educational dormitories or have five or more close friends are 1.41 times more likely to use cannabis than those who lived in a same sex dormitory or had fewer than five friends.

The current trend of substance abuse among youth is a major national concern. It is troubling because it has derogatory effects on youth such as health and behavioural problems, or even death. Due to its negative effects on health, economy and social wellbeing, Malaysian government has declared drug abuse to be the nation's '**NUMBER ONE**' enemy in 1983 and ever since then, the fight against drugs was aggressively conducted by widening the awareness scope at all age levels (Fauziah et al., 2011). Cannabis is one type of drug that is banned in Malaysia. The mandatory death sentence is also imposed on drug traffickers. Subsequently, the Malaysian government through the Ministry of Education intends to ensure a drug-free environment for Malaysian Public University students (MPU) in 2015. Studies involving a total of 16,252 students were conducted by Kamarudin et al. (2010) found that Malaysian MPU students are free from drugs (<1%). These findings are important to ensure that the MPU can produce future leaders who are expected to determine the direction and transform the country to achieve future excellence. However, continued efforts need to be made, to ensure sustainability in dealing with the drug abuse problem in the future. MPU students need to be equipped with in-depth knowledge about the dangers of drug abuse. Such knowledge is crucial so students will be able to prevent themselves from being involved in drug abuse or to be involved as drug mules.

Most of the studies published in Malaysia in the past decade focused on illegal substances. Unfortunately, the issue and problems surrounding cannabis have not been properly addressed. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to establish the understanding that MPU students have about the effects of cannabis abuse.

## Methods

A survey method was used to explore MPU students' knowledge about cannabis, experience of touching cannabis and the experience of having contact with MPU friends who abuse cannabis. A total of 6818 senior and junior students were selected randomly from 20 MPUs. In this study, awareness about cannabis was referred to which includes knowledge about the effects of cannabis, having experience touching cannabis and having friends who use cannabis. In order to collect the data on this three aspects: Drug Knowledge, Experience, Friends Questionnaire (DAKEF) by Kamarudin et al., (2010) was employed for this study. The questionnaire consisted of two sections namely. Section I items comprised of demographic information including gender, age, ethnic origin and CGPA and section II had items that solicited for information on the types of drugs (e.g. cannabis, ecstasy, morphine, etc.). Respondents were asked to indicate the type of drugs by ticking either "Yes" or "No" in listed in this section. In view of the objective of the study, the researchers only focused on cannabis in the data analysis. For example, when asked about the respondent's knowledge regarding the effects of using cannabis, the respondent needs to choose between "Yes" or "No." Similarly, when asked about the experience of touching cannabis, the respondent also needs to choose between "Yes" or "No" and so on and so forth. A descriptive analysis was chosen for data analysis.

## Analysis

### Demographic

Table 1 summarizes the demographic information of the students who participated in the study. The analysis shows that 25.1% (n = 1712) of the male students and 23.8% (1622) of the female students are the senior category and 25.7% (n = 1821) of the male students and 24.4% (n = 1663) of the female students are in the junior category. The mean age of the students is 21.4. The students are divided into two ethnic groups in the study namely, Malays students and non-Malay students.

**Table 1: Demographic Sample**

Gender	Category	Malay		Non Malay		Total	
		%	n	%	n	%	n
Male	Senior	34.6	1224	13.8	488	48.5	1712
	Junior	37.2	1315	14.3	506	51.5	1821
Female	Senior	38.2	1255	11.2	367	49.4	1622
	Junior	39.0	1282	11.6	381	50.6	1663
Total		74.4	5076	25.6	1742	100.0	6818

**Knowledge about the Effects of Cannabis According to Gender and between Students' Categories**

As shown in Table 2, less than 25 percent of the male and female students in both categories have knowledge about the effects of using cannabis.

More than 50 percent of male students in both categories have no knowledge about the effects of using cannabis. Junior male students (51.5%; n=1821) who represent a higher percentage do not know the effects of using cannabis compared to senior students (48.5%; n=1712). Similar findings were obtained from female students from both categories, junior female students (50.6%; n=1663) have no knowledge about the effects of cannabis use is and their percentages is higher than the senior students female (49.4%; n=1622).

**Experience of Touching Cannabis According to Gender and Students' Categories**

The experience of touching cannabis in this study refers to the experience the students may have had holding cannabis in whatever form.

**Table 3: Experience of Touching Cannabis According to**

Gender	Category	Experience of Touching Cannabis					
		Yes		No		Total	
		%	n	%	n	%	n
Male	Senior	.5	19	47.9	1693	48.5	1712
	Junior	.5	19	51.0	1802	51.5	1821
	Total	1.1	38	98.9	3495	100.0	3533
Female	Senior	.4	13	49.0	1609	49.4	1622
	Junior	.3	9	50.4	1654	50.6	1663
	Total	.7	22	99.3	3263	100.0	3285

As shown in Table 3, less than 2% of MPU students have had an experience touching cannabis. It is found that the number of MPU male students (1.1%; n=38) is higher in comparison to female students (.7%; n=22) who have had experience touching cannabis. For senior and junior boys, the data shows more than 50% have never touched cannabis. The same findings are obtained from the female students from both categories, with more than 50% have never touched cannabis.

**Friends Involved in Using Cannabis According to Gender and Students' Categories** The friends referred to in the study represent any friends of the respondents who have used cannabis.

**Table 4: Friends Involved in Using Cannabis According to Gender and Students' Categories**

Gender	Category	Friends Involve Using Cannabis					
		Yes		No		Total	
		%	n	%	n	%	n
Male	Senior	1.7	60	46.8	1652	48.5	1712
	Junior	1.9	67	49.6	1754	51.5	1821
	Total	3.6	127	96.4	3406	100.0	3533
Female	Senior	.9	28	48.5	1594	49.4	1622
	Junior	.8	26	49.8	1637	50.6	1663
	Total	1.6	54	98.4	3231	100.0	3285

As shown in Table 4, less than 4% of the respondents have friends who are involved in using cannabis. Only 3.6% among the male MPU students know that their friends are involved in using cannabis compared to just 1.6% among the female students. More than 45% male and female junior and senior students do not have any friends who are involved in using cannabis.

**Discussion**

The involvement of adolescents in using cannabis is a common problem, although the use of cannabis is a legal offence in Malaysia. The findings of the study revealed that the knowledge about the effects of cannabis among MPU students was insufficient and the students have poor knowledge of the risks associated with cannabis use. This occurs probably due to several factors, among which include the MPU students' ignorance about the dangers of drugs, the fact that they are less involved or scarcely participate in drug abuse campaigns, the fight against cannabis are not given sufficient attention compared with other types of drugs, and finally they may consider the use of cannabis as not a serious threat. The results also revealed only 2% of the sample had experience of touching cannabis. This happens probably due to the

influence of their friends. It can be seen through the result of this study that 4% of the sample had a friend who is involved in the use of cannabis. This finding is consistent with others studies that show the influence of friends as a major factor that contributes to the involvement of adolescents in abusing drug.

### Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be deduced that a small number of the respondents had the experience of touching cannabis and know friends who are using cannabis. Less than 25% among male and female students in both categories have knowledge about the effects of using cannabis. Knowledge about the consequences of drug abuse is critical to young people, especially among MPU students. There is ample evidence to indicate that drugs can have detrimental effects on adolescents. Therefore, effective interventions need to be mobilized. Sustainable efforts need to be organized in educating MPU students to become more aware of the dangers of drugs. A study conducted by Shafiq et al. (2006)'s discovers that the greater the knowledge of harmful effects of these substance, the less likely that the consumption of such substance will occur. Therefore, student's counsellor should develop and mobilize programmes such as workshops or awareness drives in campuses throughout the country using new media that could educate a wider audience of the MPU student population about the negative effects of cannabis use.

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