



Fear of Death Among the Youth: Gender Perspective in Nepalese Context

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Abstract

Background & Objective: Death is an inevitable truth though people perceive it differently. The study investigates the attitudes of Nepalese youth towards death, addressing a significant research gap in understanding how cultural, religious, and social factors shape their perceptions.

Methods: A quantitative cross-sectional study was conducted with 196 college students using a random sampling technique. The Death Attitude Profile-Revised (DAP-R) was employed to measure attitudes toward death, utilizing a five-point Likert scale. The reliability and validity of the instrument were assessed through KMO and Bartlett's Test, factor loading values, and Cronbach's Alpha.

Key Findings: The results indicated a notable difference ($p < 0.05$) in death anxiety between genders, with females exhibiting higher levels of anxiety compared to males. The study found that a significant percentage of respondents expressed discomfort and anxiety regarding the concept of death, highlighting the need for targeted interventions.

Conclusion & Recommendation: The findings underscore the necessity for educational programs that address death anxiety, particularly among young women. Future research should explore the underlying reasons for gender differences in death attitudes and consider cross-cultural comparisons to enhance the generalizability of the results. Implementing support programs could contribute to improved mental health and quality of life for the youth.

Keywords: Anxiety, Death, Gender, Nepal, Youth

1. Introduction

Death is an inevitable truth so every living creature has to accept death. There are different definitions and understandings of death. Biologically, death is the permanent cessation of all the vital functions of an organism, which initiates progressive decay in cellular and organ functions until the ultimate decomposition of the body. This definition aids in decisions on organ donation, end-of-life care, and many other important issues that are connected with medicine and have a bearing on ethics and legality (Borgstrom & Ellis, 2017). Philosophically, the thought of death raises very deep questions about existence, identity, and the very meaning of life. This feeling implores one to ponder over his mortality—the dispensation and the nature of one's consciousness. Knowledge about death can profoundly affect the way that people conduct their lives, considering what is important and whom they value and protect (Palgi, 1984). Similarly, culturally, many rituals, beliefs, and practices associated with death vary across different societies and religions. Cultural perspectives help in ascribing meaning to death regarding how people perceive and cope with this phenomenon of death, giving meaning to bereavement practices funeral rites, and afterlife perceptions (Borgstrom & Ellis, 2017). Psychologically, death is the source of all fears, grieving, and acceptance. Grieving follows rules of cultural norms and is a matter of subjective personal experiences that result in varied responses to mourning among various societies (Palgi, 1984). According to a majority of Eastern philosophies, and especially in Hinduism, the focus is always on reincarnation. Death is not an end in itself; it is but a means of transiting into another state of being (Karki et al., 2024).

There are different perceptions of death and dying. Perception of death differs from person to person. Death attitude refers to an individual's beliefs, feelings, and behaviors toward death and dying (El et al., 2018). Similarly, death anxiety refers to the fear or apprehension that individuals experience when they contemplate their mortality or the concept of death (Menzies & Menzies, 2020). A study highlighted that COVID-19 survivors experience significant psychological burdens, including symptoms of depression and generalized anxiety, which are more prevalent than in the general population. Fear of death was positively associated with depression scores when considered in isolation ($b = 0.049$, $t = 3.557$, $p < 0.001$), this association became non-significant when accounting for the number of somatic or mental symptoms experienced during the infection (Speichert et al., 2022). Similarly, another study of elder women expressed a sense of acceptance toward death. However, some of them also expressed fear of death, particularly concerning the manner of dying. They express a desire for a peaceful death, free from pain and suffering, which gives evidence of the need for proper palliative care (Chimariya et al., 2024). Age was found to be negatively correlated with death anxiety, suggesting that older patients may experience less death anxiety (Hong et al., 2022). Many people experience fear or anxiety about death, often stemming

from the unknown nature of what happens after death or concerns about suffering (Mohammadi et al., 2022).

Different cultures have varying beliefs and practices surrounding death, which can shape individuals' attitudes. For example, some cultures celebrate death as a transition, while others may view it with sadness and fear (Mohammadi et al., 2022). In the Nepalese context, there is no study on the attitude toward death among the youth so this study can be new. It will add new knowledge to the death study.

The earlier studies on death and dying quite viscerally attempt to examine various facets of death—biological, philosophical, cultural, and psychological. It therefore reflects how the awareness of death is universally realized—how death affects mental health and cultural practices over death, the perceptions of death across ages, and cultures. A research gap exists concerning the attitudes of young Nepalese toward death. Though many studies have looked into death anxiety and attitudes from different cultural and age groups for years now, insufficient work has been done on how young people in Nepal perceive and consequently respond to the concept of death. This gap is important, as knowing the attitude of the youth toward death can be of much help and give insights into how much cultural, religious, and social factors are used in forming the worldview, hence may help advance appropriate educational and psychological interventions in the context of a Nepalese population. Therefore, a study about the attitudes toward death in Nepalese youth would be a novel contribution to the existing body of knowledge.

2. Research Methods

The study was based on a quantitative research design. It was a cross-sectional study. The data was collected from 196 college students. The sample size was calculated by considering the 95% confidence level, 7% margin of error, and 50% prevalence. The random sampling technique was adopted to select the respondents. It was a perceptual study so students were asked to respond to their answers in a five-point Likert scale. The study adopted the standard instrument of the Death Attitude Profile-Revised (DAP-R) which was developed by Wong, P.T.P., Reker, G.T., & Gesser, G. The DAP-R is a multidimensional measure of attitudes toward death, encompassing fear of death (Wong et al., 1994).

The study has tested the reliability and validity of the research instrument. The data was pre-tested then it was translated into Nepali language to ensure its readability and understandability. The study has calculated the KMO and Bartlett's Test, factor loading value, and Cronbach's Alpha test to check the data quality (Table 1).

Table 1: KMO and Bartlett's Test

KMO and Bartlett's Test			
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.817	
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	333.703	
	df	21	
	Sig.	.000	
		Factor Analysis	Reliability Statistics

	Factor Value	Loading	Cronbach's Alpha
Death is no doubt a grim experience	.563		.777
The prospect of my death arouses anxiety in me	.685		
I become disturbed thinking about the end point of death	.723		
I have an intense fear of death.	.716		
The subject of life after death troubles me greatly	.689		

Source: Field Survey 2024

Table 1 gives the results of two important tests used in factor analysis: Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. The KMO value is 0.817, indicating that the sample is enough to conduct factor analysis. The Chi-Square Approximation in Bartlett's Test of Sphericity is 333.703, with 21 degrees of freedom and a significance of 0.000, so the variables are likely to be correlated and, therefore, factorizable. The table also contains factor loadings and Cronbach's Alpha concerning death anxiety only for certain items. The range of the factor loadings is from 0.563 to 0.723, while Cronbach's Alpha is 0.777, indicating that the scale has acceptable internal consistency.

3. Findings

3.1 Death Perception

The study used the standard survey questionnaire to measure the attitude toward the fear of death among the respondents. There are seven items used to measure the fear of death attitude. Table 2 below presents the results of a survey regarding attitudes toward death, grouped by gender.

Table 2: Death Perception

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total	Average Mean	Chi-Square
Death is no doubt a grim experience	Male	12.3%	12.3%	23.3%	23.3%	28.8%	100.0%	3.4384	.033
	Female	1.7%	16.4%	19.0%	28.4%	34.5%	100.0%	3.7759	
	Total	5.8%	14.8%	20.6%	26.5%	32.3%	100.0%	3.6582	
The prospect of my death arouses anxiety in me	Male	16.4%	20.5%	31.5%	24.7%	6.8%	100.0%	2.8493	.470
	Female	14.7%	16.4%	27.6%	25.9%	15.5%	100.0%	3.1121	
	Total	15.3%	18.0%	29.1%	25.4%	12.2%	100.0%	3.0051	
I become disturbed thinking about the end point of death	Male	17.8%	20.5%	38.4%	11.0%	12.3%	100.0%	2.7945	.045
	Female	9.5%	22.4%	28.4%	27.6%	12.1%	100.0%	3.1034	
	Total	12.7%	21.7%	32.3%	21.2%	12.2%	100.0%	2.9949	
I have an intense fear of death.	Male	16.4%	26.0%	27.4%	27.4%	2.7%	100.0%	2.7397	.220
	Female	12.9%	37.1%	23.3%	19.0%	7.8%	100.0%	2.7155	

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total	Average Mean	Chi-Square
Total		14.3%	32.8%	24.9%	22.2%	5.8%	100.0%	2.7092	
The subject of life after death troubles me greatly	Male	27.4%	21.9%	30.1%	13.7%	6.8%	100.0%	2.5068	.439
	Female	17.2%	27.6%	27.6%	19.0%	8.6%	100.0%	2.7414	
Total		21.2%	25.4%	28.6%	16.9%	7.9%	100.0%	2.6480	
The fact that death will mean the end of everything as I know it frightens me.	Male	13.7%	35.6%	30.1%	12.3%	8.2%	100.0%	2.6575	.375
	Female	9.5%	29.3%	27.6%	22.4%	11.2%	100.0%	2.9655	
Total		11.1%	31.7%	28.6%	18.5%	10.1%	100.0%	2.8418	
The uncertainty of not knowing what happens after death worries me	Male	31.5%	24.7%	23.3%	15.1%	5.5%	100.0%	2.3836	.276
	Female	18.1%	31.0%	25.9%	20.7%	4.3%	100.0%	2.6207	
Total		23.3%	28.6%	24.9%	18.5%	4.8%	100.0%	2.5510	

Source: Field Survey 2024

The data presented for the statement, "Death is no doubt a grim experience," the degree of agreement for males and females is as follows: strongly agree, 28.8% for males versus 34.5% for females. In terms of the mean, it is 3.4384 for males, compared to females at 3.7759, indicating that there is stronger agreement among females. The resulting p-value from Chi-Square is 0.033, indicating a statistically significant difference between genders. Similarly, in the statement "The prospect of my death arouses anxiety in me", a lower percentage of the male population, 6.8%, can be found to strongly agree compared to the female population with 15.5%. The overall average mean for females is higher, 3.1121, compared to that of males, 2.8493; however, with a p-value of 0.470, there is no significant difference between genders.

The response "I become disturbed thinking about the end point of death" is strongly agreed on by 12.3% of males and 12.1% of females. Males had a higher percentage of neutrals with 38.4%, while females were only 28.4%. The mean was significantly higher in females at 3.1034 compared to males, where it was 2.7945, with a p-value of .045. For "I have an intense fear of death," more females, 37.1%, disagree as compared to males, 26.0%, with similar average means for both genders, males having 2.7397 and females 2.7155, with a p-value of 0.220, showing no significant difference. In the statement "The subject of life after death troubles me greatly, a higher percentage of males at 27.4% strongly disagree as compared to females at 17.2%, with the females returning a slightly higher average mean at 2.7414 as compared to the males at 2.5068, though the p-value of 0.439 indicates there is no significant difference. For the final statement, "The uncertainty of not knowing what happens after death worries me," there are more males who have a strong perception of disagreement than females, with the overall average mean for females at 2.6207 and 2.3836 for males, though the p-value of 0.276 indicates no significant difference.

3.2 Gender differences in fear of death attitude

The table of group statistics, and independent samples t-test results showing the comparison in the fear of death between males and females are portrayed. According to the group statistics, the mean fear of death score for males with N = 73 is 2.7671, while the standard deviation is 0.74021. For females, this is exactly 3.0049, with N = 116 and a standard deviation of 0.79259. It returns a standard error mean of 0.08663 for males and 0.07359 for females, thus females, on average, have a slightly higher fear of death compared to males.

Table 3: Gender differences in fear of death attitude

Group Statistics										
		Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean				
Fear of Death		Male	73	2.7671	.74021	.08663				
		Female	116	3.0049	.79259	.07359				
Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Fear of Death	Equal variances assumed	.156	.694	-2.060	187	.041	-.23780	.11546	-.46557	-.01003
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.092	160.929	.038	-.23780	.11367	-.46228	-.01332

Source: Field Survey 2024

Independent sample t-test is conducted to ascertain whether the mean difference between males and females is significant. As indicated by Levene's Test for Equality of Variances, the variances are equal since F = 0.156 and Sig.= 0.694; hence, one can assume the equality of variances. The results from the t-test give a significant difference in scores on the fear of death by gender. t = -2.060, df = 187, Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.041. The mean difference is -0.23780 with a standard error difference of 0.11546. At 95% confidence, the confidence interval for the mean difference is from -0.46557 to -0.01003. The result implies that the difference in death fears in females is greater as compared to their male counterparts and at the same time there is a statistically significant difference between males' and females' attitudes.

4. Discussion

The present study found that there was a gender difference in the level of death fear, with average women having a higher fear level of death than men: their means being 3.0049 and 2.7671, respectively. This difference is detected by an independent samples t-test. The obtained mean difference was -0.23780, and the confidence interval at the 0.05 level was from -0.46557 to -0.01003. The standard deviations of the two groups were close, indicating that the scatter around the average within each sex was roughly identical. In some previous research, women experience death anxiety at higher rates than men, and women generally have more sources of death fear than men (Abdel-Khalek, 2007; DEPAOLA et al., 2003). Similarly, another previous study revealed that carried out among newly diagnosed patients with cancer in Pakistan found a higher magnitude of fear of death among women than among men (Sarfraz et al., 2022). Furthermore, in a study devoted to the fear of COVID-19 among Iranian married people, it was shown that women report a significant reduction in their sexual function due to the fear of the virus, which was not observed for men (Minaei Moghadam et al., 2022). This already points to some kind of gendered response to fear and anxiety, with women exhibiting more general psychological effects as a consequence of fear-related stimuli—supporting the present finding where women recorded a higher average fear of death.

Numerous studies have investigated gender differences in death anxiety. While the specific methodologies and measures of death fear vary, a consistent pattern emerges: women often report higher levels of death anxiety than men (Eshbaugh & Henninger, 2013). Similarly, another study examined gender differences in death anxiety among US high school and college students. Using a standardized death anxiety scale, they found that women reported significantly higher levels of death anxiety compared to men (Pierce et al., 2007). Additionally, another study investigated gender differences in death anxiety among Iranian adults. Their results revealed that women reported higher levels of death anxiety and stronger death avoidance behaviors than men. This study further corroborates the gender difference in fear of death (Nazarzadeh et al., 2014). All these studies support the findings presented in the original data. However, according to a study by Fortner and Neimeyer, there was no significant difference in death anxiety between men and women (Fortner & Neimeyer, 1999).

A study found the effect of death educational input on emotional behavior about death among undergraduate students. The education factor could play a role in reducing fear, especially in women, who were more susceptible to fear (Testoni et al., 2019).

5. Conclusion

This finding shows that there is a significant gender difference in the fear of death, with female participants indicating a higher level of fear of death compared to male participants. The observed statistical significance associated with the result, $p < 0.05$, suggests this observed difference could be considered unlikely to have been due to random chance. The fact that the significance continued in both tests, where equal and unequal variances were assumed, adds weight to the conclusion.

6. Recommendation

Given the fact that women reported more intense fear of death, there is a solid ground for planning and implementing psychological support and intervention focused on this particular anxiety in women. The studies in the future could be directed toward exploring the reasons for such a gender difference and also construct plans for the reduction of the fear of death, which might contribute to better mental health and quality of life. In addition, replication in diverse populations or cross-cultural settings would add to generalizability and thus more appropriate general guidance on support programs.

Conflict of interest: There is no conflict of interest

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