

Perception of Death among Young Adults in Multicultural Peninsular West Malaysia: The Abrahamics and Dharmics

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Abstract

The topic of death perception is often a matter related to older people. As there is a paucity of studies with the young population, insights into their views would be helpful to healthcare professionals who may be confronted by events of death and dying. This study is aimed at exploring the perception of death among young adults of different religions in a multi-cultural and multi-faith society as in Malaysia. A total of 32 participants representing the main religious groups, i.e., Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism were recruited from the Klang Valley area of Peninsular Malaysia. Focus group discussions were undertaken with participants grouped according to their religious identifications. Five themes emerged from the data: (a) Belief in Afterlife, (b) Fear of Own Death, (c) Fear of Others' Death, (d) Preparation towards Death and Afterlife, and (e) Way of Living. In a diverse and polarised society such as in conservative Malaysia, insights into death perceptions of different main groups of people can play a significant role in the provision of health care.

Keywords: Perception of death, young adults, religions, peninsular West Malaysia

1. Introduction

One attribute associated with young people is that of a sense of invincibility as demonstrated by the high morbidity and mortality from trauma-related injuries due to attitudes and risk behaviours (Monneuse et al., 2008). For instance, in the Malaysian context, smoking behaviours are often adopted during adolescence because it gives them a sense of being unique and omnipotent as they seek the attention of peers (Lim et al., 2018). Owing to the addictive effects of tobacco smoking behaviours they tend to continue, leading to increased risk of smoking-related cancer and related mortality (Levitz, Bradley, & Golden, 2004; Gritz et al., 2021). Other examples include the aggressive illegal motorcycle street racing and death-defying stunts in many Malaysian cities with serious underestimation of the risks involved (Wong, 2011). Given the increased risks of mortality involved one question arising is *the perceptions of death* among young people in Malaysia.

2. Background

The topic of death evokes various emotions and thoughts primarily influenced by fear of the unknown (Holcomb, Neimeyer, & Moore, 2007). The experience of death is not something we can determine as we cannot hear from those who have died. People who have encountered near death experiences have reported enhanced perception of light and enhanced cognitive powers (Agrillo, 2011). Such experiences have been described as syncopal hallucinations (Lempert, Bauer & Schmidt, 1994). A study of near-death experience in 344 survivors of cardiac arrest reported 50% of them having awareness of being 'dead' with as many as 56% experiencing positive emotions, 29% observation of celestial landscapes, 24% out of body experience; 32% meeting with deceased person; 13% life review; and most having no fear of death but strong belief in an afterlife (van Lommel, van Wees, Meyers, & Elfferich, 2001). The interpretation of near-death experiences may be related to the social conditioning and beliefs of the experiencer, such as interpreting the experience in relation to their cultural and religious beliefs concerning life after death. Verifying such views remain a challenge.

2.1 The Topic of Death Anxiety in the Multicultural Malaysian Context

In general, the subject of death is mainly avoided from daily conversations (von Blanckenburg et al., 2021), often brushed off or spoken about in jest, even though it is a daily event, for someone, somewhere. It can be a confronting matter for humans tending to be influenced by personal experiences and socio-cultural beliefs (Lehto & Stein, 2009). Considering it to be a matter of certainty at some point in life it is not often discussed, raising the question of people's perception of death. Insights on them could be helpful particularly to healthcare professionals who may be faced with situations of impending death and actual death in the course of their work (Benore & Park, 2004). As anxiety over death and dying tends to be seen as a matter relegated to the older population most studies on the subject have also been on the elderly (Fortner & Neimeyer, 2010) including in East Asia (Wu, Tang, & Kwok, 2002) or particular categories of people, such as Muslims in Malaysia (Kasmo et al., 2015). However, as a multicultural society the lack of studies on the other ethnic groups suggests a gap in knowledge and understanding on the subject of death perceptions of significant segments of the community in Malaysia. Without knowledge and understanding of how people of different backgrounds may perceive the matter, the negative affective state of death anxieties may also be experienced by healthcare professionals posing a challenge to their capacity for functioning with competency in their helping roles (Nia et al., 2016). In the Malaysian context this is important because of the increasingly polarised society as a result of decades of political actions by the Malay-Muslim government which marginalizes people who are not of Malay-Muslim backgrounds (Chin, 2015; Ignatius, 2021). Society has become such that it is not common to see Malay-Muslims socializing with non-Malays. As a result, the non-Muslims have a largely vague and incoherent understanding of Islam (Salam, 2017) for reasons including the practices being rigidly dogmatic in nature and incongruent with rationalities. Furthermore, Islam tends to be inaccurately described and explained for understanding, being manipulated for political and personal gains (Hussin, Nawi, & Mohamad, 2015). Owing to the polarization of the ethnic groups, Muslims also do not have clear insights into others from the other ethnicities. Given the scarcity of literature on the issue in Malaysian society, a study on the perceptions of death of the different groups would be helpful for a clearer sense of perspective.

We often make plans for our future, but ironically, not for death, when death is certain but future uncertain. It may make sense as a mental defense mechanism to deny it due to fear of the unknown, or even fear of the body being annihilated and so not being able to fulfill personal goals (Cicirelli, 1998), but the realities of its inevitability cannot be avoided.

For such an event of certainty, it would be rational for some emphasis towards being comfortable talking about death (von Blanckenburg et al., 2021). For instance, it could help facilitate addressing the issue in relation to the closely linked concept of human dignity considered to be of importance in eastern cultures such as through Confucian philosophy (Zhang, 2000). The East Asian belief is that the discussion of death is disrespectful and the mere mention of this term may lead to the event itself. Drawing from the experiences of terminally ill patients in Hong Kong, the *Dignity Model* is applicable (Chochinov, 2001). It suggests that culturally specific views of death can influence the individual's state of acceptance. Carers and family members are often obliged to care for the dying with no clear evidence of how the dying is viewing the final event. Some insights would be helpful, for example, where patients were not anxious about death itself but wanted to be independent and not be a burden to the family (Ho et al., 2013). It could be illustrated by the situation where both a patient and family know of the impending death. Still, the family would not discuss it with the patient for fear of causing distress. Likewise, the patient may be reluctant to open up discussions to protect the family from any distress. Hence, insights of some kind are essential considering the death can significantly impact those left behind. They could serve as facilitators for honest discussions that may help with the grieving process.

2.2 The Elusive Definition of Death

Acceptable definitions of death remain elusive as it appears to have multi-dimensions that may be at odds with one another. In the absence of brain activity, technological advances have enabled cardiopulmonary support to maintain life suggesting the need for a broader definition (Capron & Kass, 1979) to avoid controversies around the issue of criteria for death and organ procurement after the declaration of death (Menikoff, 1998). The standard definition of death under the Uniform Determination of Death Act (1980) (p.3) is the “- total failure of the cardiopulmonary system -” and “- irreversible loss of all brain functions -”. The clinical definition of being brain dead is acceptable from the Westernised prism. However, from the Eastern perspective, to the religious groups such as Buddhists, death is inevitable, and one should prepare for this in the way of living. Religion is silent about the soul, but the spirit will transcend to another being based on karma (Prophet & Spadaro, 2004).

Traditional cultural beliefs and factors play a large part in the meaning placed in some communities including talking about death and dying, and the language used around such discussions. For instance, “- passing -” is a more

accepted term for the spiritual belief of Australian aborigines around the life cycle (Queensland Health, 2015). They can determine how people perceive and respond to death. Such insights and understanding can help those taking on the helping role to manage the challenges more sensitively (Benore & Park, 2004). With significant impacts on those left behind there is a need for being comfortable in talking about death especially with loved ones (van der Geest et al., 2015) to lay out plans pragmatically when it should occur.

2.3 Influence of Religions in Malaysian Society

Religious doctrine and religiosity have been influential in shaping people's thoughts on death (Chan & Yap, 2009). From the Hindu perspective the concept of being reborn is prominent. Life does not begin with birth but is lived through many past lives, either as human beings or other living things, and will continue until one's soul, "- atma -" unites (Sharma, 1990). There is positivism in that death leads on to a new life with opportunities to accomplish unfinished business and to lead a better life. For Buddhism, the universe is the product of "- karma -". The aim is avoidance of suffering in the cycle of births and deaths ("samsara") and aspire to nirvana following enlightenment and elimination of karma (Walter, 2001). In Islam, death is inevitable when God (Allah) permits it (Sachedina, 2005) – ("Inshallah" – if Allah wills), as part of the divine plan that should not be resisted (Sheikh, 1998). Therefore, death is a matter to be determined by the Almighty God. With the belief in an afterlife, earthly death is a transition from the present world to the eternal via the day of judgement (Sheikh, 1998; Ross, 2001). For Christianity, death is a detachment of one's soul from the body (Decker, 2007) and emancipation of freedom from life on earth to eternal life with God (Holy Bible, Phil 1:24). Beliefs of such nature would suggest death as something to be looked forward to. While the religions present death in a positive light, perceptions of followers tend to be that of fear. Such a presentation raises questions as to why that may be so. They may include the strengths of beliefs, group effects from the community, personal experiences of seeing friends and relatives die, etc.

Notwithstanding the religions' portrayal of death with promising positive outcomes, fear of death remains, possibly influenced by various factors including individual perceptions (von Blankenburg et al., 2021). In attempting to explain the anxiety of death, *Terror Management Theory* (TMT) posits that humans deal with it by diverting towards cultural values and belief systems for their own comfort (Chan & Yap, 2009). They turn to religion as a coping strategy (Vail et al., 2010). Some become more religious and fervent with their belief in God (Norenzayan & Hansen, 2006) to deal with their fears and anxieties through hopes of an afterlife. Whilst religion is a crucial source of belief in an afterlife, Death Apprehension Theory suggests heightened anxieties from the uncertainty of extreme outcomes which could either be eternal life in heaven or eternal life in hell (Ellis, Wahab, & Ratnasingam, 2013). The theory based on a study with college students in the USA, Turkey and Malaysia asserts that fear is positively related to most religious beliefs and practices. It makes the assumption that fear of death is unavoidable due to the perceived association between death, pain and end-of-life pleasures. However, studies on religiosity and fear of death have been mixed. For instance, the survey by Patrick (1979), with Buddhists and Christians reported Christians to be less fearful in confronting death, but the opposite was found to be the case in a more recent study (Chaiwutikornwanich, 2014).

As a multicultural society, Malaysia is comprised of several ethnic groups. West Malaysia is formed of three predominant ethnicities i.e., Malay, Chinese, and Indian, with equally diverse religious heritage and beliefs amongst them. The prominent ones are Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2015). For perspective, the diversity in East Malaysia on the island of Borneo is far greater than in Peninsular West Malaysia. It would require a far more extensive study to incorporate representation from the whole country as it could be more complex because of a significant and more diverse indigenous population. At present, for the purpose of this study, it is suggested that the diversity with the four prominent religions in peninsular West Malaysia provides a rich field for the study of such nature. The insights gained would be helpful for health professionals who may be confronted with similarities or differences that may exist as findings from other countries with different cultural values may not be applicable. It is also known that the suicide rate in West Malaysia is highest among those below 30 years of age (Maniam et al., 2014). As discussed earlier, most studies on the subject tend to be with the elderly. Given that the highest suicide rate in Malaysia is among the young adults, the need for some studies on them are compelling. In the unfortunate situation of a person in palliative care (which also includes youths), some insights may also be of help to health care professionals in promoting good end-of-life care (Leiter, 2021). With the above background in mind, this study set out to explore the role of religions on the perception of death among young adults in Malaysia.

2.4 Aim of Study

The aim of the study is two-fold, directed at determining:

- 1) What are the perceptions of death among the young adults of different religious backgrounds in Malaysia?
- 2) What are the roles of religious beliefs in influencing death beliefs among the young adults of different religious beliefs?

3. Method

Clearance for conducting the study was obtained from the University Research and Ethics Committee [IMU JC No.: BPS I-1/14(04)2016]. This study was conducted using basic qualitative research design to explore the perception of death among young adults of different religions in West Malaysia. More specifically, the young adults involved in this study are university students and recent graduates from the health professions, namely: nursing, pharmacy, dentistry, medicine and psychology. Their educational level is a helpful criterion for the articulation of their thoughts in response to the questions posed in an interactive manner which would enable clarification of ideas. Focus group discussions (FGD) was adopted as the tool in gathering data from the participants as it is an excellent way for collecting data based on group norms and to discover the issue that is not normally discussed by people in their own daily conversations (Kitzinger, 1994; Macnaghten & Myers, 2004). The approach was adopted instead of interviews to minimize the possibility of embodying the preconceived ideas of the interviewer, thus enabling free discussion among participants from the key points provided (Rice, 1931, p.561 cited in Krueger, 1988, p.18). Instead of individual interviews, having a few participants at a time can be conducive as some young adults need social support to talk with greater confidence (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

3.1 Participants and Sampling

A total of 32 participants (17 women and 15 men) for this study were recruited through purposive sampling by snowballing from the Klang Valley area. This sampling method is conducive for gathering data when participants are required for the provision of the most pertinent information (Merriam, 2009). Their ages ranged from 20 to 28 years (mean = 22.3) and all of them reported having been brought up according to their respective religions.

The participants were selected based on a set of inclusion criteria: a) those who are either of Islamic, Christian, Hindu or Buddhist religious affiliation, b) young adults who are of age between 18 to 35 years old, c) those who are able to converse well in English, and, d) those who are not experiencing any physical and/or mental health issues.

The FGDs were held in a meeting room. A total of eight (8) groups were conducted and the homogeneity of each group was maintained according to their religious affiliations, i.e., Muslims (2 groups), Christians (2 groups), Hindus (2 groups), and Buddhists (2 groups). Each group comprised of four participants, as shown in Table 1. To assist with process management, the FGDs were organized on separate days for each religious grouping. The Muslims were undertaken on one day, followed by Christians on the following day, Hindus on the next, and then Buddhists.

Table 1. Number of participants in each focus group

Group	Muslims	Christians	Hindus	Buddhists
1	4 participants			
2	4 participants			
3		4 participants		
4		4 participants		
5			4 participants	
6			4 participants	
7				4 participants
8				4 participants

The duration of FGDs varied from 40 to 70 minutes, depending on when saturation of data was achieved.

3.2 Procedure

Explanations for the study (including information sheets) were provided to participants and their signed informed consent was obtained prior to commencement. They were also informed that the discussions would be audio recorded to assist in capturing data and reassured of all data being treated with strict confidentiality. Their rights to

withdraw from the FGDs at any time in the process were also reinforced. The FGDs were guided by questions based on the study on Death Apprehension Theory (Ellis, Wahab, & Ratnsingan, 2013) to elicit participants' perspectives of death and understand the role of their religions in influencing and shaping their lives views on death. Debriefing sessions were undertaken at the conclusion of each FGD.

3.3 Data Analysis

The audio recordings of the FGDs were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), in which the data underwent several phases of analysis where codings and re-codings were undertaken to arrive at common major themes. The transcriptions were read several times alongside the audio recordings to get clear familiarity of their content. The initial stage of the coding was done through the identification of the contents considered relevant to the established research questions. Similar codes or those that were found to be within the same categories were then grouped together in searching for potential themes. The themes then underwent further refinement processes before they were finalized, defined, and named accordingly. The most suitable transcripts were then adopted to demonstrate the identified themes.

4. Limitations of Qualitative Research

Focus groups are an established method for data collection in the social sciences. It enables discussions which facilitate generation of collective insights on the topic of interest. Although suitable for the nature and purpose of the current study, there are also limitations which, if not well managed by researchers could stifle the quality of data derived from the group discussions. They include the size and composition of the groups and such aspects as age, gender, personality, ethnicity, and lived experiences (Hopkins, 2007; Moore, McKee, & McLoughlin, 2015). Their impacts on group dynamics could determine the substance of output.

5. Findings

The data analysis extracted several evident key concepts. They comprised of themes seen to be fundamental in explaining the two research questions that this study aimed to address: a) the perception of death among young adults of different religions in Malaysia, and b) the role of religious beliefs in influencing one's thoughts and views of death. The identified themes are classified as (a) Beliefs in the afterlife, (b) Fear of Death, (c) Beginning of Suffering for Others, (d) Preparation towards Death and Afterlife, and (e) The Way of Living.

5.1 Beliefs in the Afterlife

The common perception of death that was shared by participants from the four religions is that they see death as a form of physical cessation (of the body) only, whilst the soul of the dead continues to live on. They acknowledged that this world is a temporary phase for them, and that death acts as a transition platform to the next phase of life.

"To me, death, it's just the ending of your current life... Their soul is still there but... physically, they actually stop functioning." Buddhist FGD 1.

"...It's the loss of function of the human being, which is probably due to you know, losing life... death is not the end of life..." Muslim FGD 1.

"... I would say death, especially here, is like a physical death ... although it's not proven scientifically that we have a spiritual side, I think that is the part that we are referring to that lives on..." Christian FGD 1.

"... Death is like a progression point to whatever comes later on...so it's like our phase on earth as living beings in this body is over..." Hindu FGD 2.

All the four groups shared similar perceptions of separation between the physical and spiritual being. The primary difference in terms of their concept of afterlife is whether they will be there for eternity either be in heaven or hell, which happens to be the core beliefs among the Muslims and Christians, or they will be reborn or reincarnate in this present world again as mentioned by the Buddhists and Hindus. A difference is that in Hinduism there is a belief in reincarnation with transmigration of the soul, whereas, in Buddhism, they believe in re-birth – soul is not a belief. Examples can be seen from the quotations below.

"... I mean, you would still go to heaven and hell... but that's the end... so, basically, it's embarking on a journey of eternity..." Christians FGD 1.

"... death is like a place for you to wait to go to heaven and hell..." Muslims FGD 1.

"...the popular Hindu belief - you die then you can incarnate as different sort of living being on this earth..." Hindu FGD 1.

"... according to Buddhist religion, death is just ending of one's life and we do believe we have afterlife but the

only difference between Buddhist and other religions such as Muslim and Christians is we don't have so-called heaven place that we can go to because we are reborn as another living thing..." Buddhist FGD 2.

The distinction is clear between the Abrahamic religions (Islam and Christianity) in terms of the departure from the physical body of the soul to a dual dimension heaven or earth, compared with the Dharmic religions (Hinduism and Buddhism) where there is another form of life on earth. This similar beliefs of the two main religious groupings are consistent with the philosophies based on the shared roots of Islam and Christianity (Abrahamic) on one hand, and Hinduism and Buddhism (Dharmic) on the other.

5.2 Fear of Death

Death is often perceived as something that is terrifying by most groups. This can be seen from two perspectives, one, is the fear of their own death. This was clearly mentioned by the Muslims and the Christians, due to their readiness in having to face death. The other aspect is the uncertainty of the afterlife as well as the idea of it being eternity.

"... it might be scary because even though you know your time is up, but you might be like 'Oh, am I ready to face it?'" Muslim FGD 1.

"I think it's the unfamiliarity of it... It's a huge transition between living in this world and then dying and moving into a different world..." Muslim Group 2.

"Scary... because in a way, you think about it, it's eternity..." Christian FGD 1.

This sense of fear, based on the discussions, might also have the potential to be implanted by society in terms of the ways in which people talk about death and also the media portrayal in their dramatized forms. Such experiences can be easily etched into their memories to evoke their sense of fear to overtake their religious beliefs:

"... yeah, here they focus more to teaching kids to be afraid of death... like this is where you gonna be punished and they do all focus on the punishments... but not on the rewards..." Muslim FGD 2.

"... because it's usually like one sentence of going to heaven and then if you are bad, then you go to hell and hell is a terrible place, you don't wanna be there. That was how I receive it..." Christian FGD 1.

The other perspective of fear was portrayed very clearly among the Buddhists where they fear the loss of their loved ones. While they can readily accept their own death, the death of others is seen as something that is very disturbing to them.

"... Actually, I'm not afraid of death for myself, but I am afraid of death for my family members and the closed ones." Buddhist FGD 2

"I think I'm not afraid of death but if let's say that happens to any of my closed ones, I will be very scared of it." Buddhist FGD 1.

The fear, they believe, are in relation to the loss of attachment and support that would have to be faced after the death of their loved ones.

"Because someone who is close to you are going to leave, means that you are going to lose somebody in your life. Because you are afraid that you will lose the support, that's why you have the fear." Buddhist FGD 2.

Interestingly, there is a clear distinction presented between the Abrahamic group and the Dharmic group. For instance, in both the Muslims and Christians, the focus tends to be on what would happen to the self. On the other hand, for the Dharmic Buddhists, there is a preoccupation about the others rather than themselves. Such insights can make a significant difference in the context of healthcare provisions.

5.3 Beginning of Suffering for Others

Death also left a negative perception on the Hindus whereby they see it as a point where their loved ones will start to suffer once they die.

"When you die, maybe your suffering will end but it would be the beginning of the suffering of the people around you..." Hindu FGD 2.

"... When it comes to their suffering, it's something that you do not know how long or how bad it is going to affect them..." Hindu FGD 2.

Those who are of Hindu religions feel as if they are the ones who are responsible for causing the pain on others and knowing that they would not have the control to make things better for their loved ones concerns them even more. In relation to the point about the Abrahamic and Dharmic groups mentioned in the previous section, this point

about the suffering of others demonstrates a clear distinction of differences in focus between the two main groups.

5.4 Preparation towards Death and Afterlife

In understanding the roles of religions in influencing the thoughts of death among its believers, one of the themes that have been identified was that religions play a role in helping to prepare oneself towards death. This was significant among the Muslims and the Christians. Again, this point reinforces the distinctive difference in emphasis on the self, in the case of the Abrahamic group, and on the outward focus for the others in the Dharmic group.

“It’s like am I prepared to face it? – that’s the first statement about it. Like am I really prepared for it and how should I prepare for it.” Muslim FGD 1.

“I really think it’s either heaven or hell for us....” Christian FGD1

Again, this point reinforces the distinctive difference in emphasis on the self, in the case of the Abrahamic group, and on the outward focus for the others in the Dharmic group.

5.5 The Way of Living

The Buddhists and Hindus claimed that their religions guided them towards how they should be living their life in this world and did not emphasise so much on the concept of death. The prominent idea of an afterlife served practical meaningful purposes on the here and now of their day-to-day living as they engage with others.

“Hinduism is more of leading your life rather than thinking about what’s gonna happen. It’s more about the journey...” Hindu FGD 1.

“... we emphasize more on being better beings, better human kind of thing than we talk about death” Buddhist FGD 2.

In living their life, their religions (Buddhism and Hinduism) encourage them to practice good manners and good attitudes to ensure that they will be reborn into better beings in their next life.

“We are trying to do goodness. At the end of the day, we all know we must do some sort of goodness because we are going to die. Yeah... so, we do as much as we can.” Hindu FGD 1.

“The moral... of our religion is actually just to tell us... do good things.” Buddhist FGD 1.

The emphasis is about living one’s life in a way that would be for the good of others with mindfulness rather than being preoccupied by one’s own needs.

6. Discussions

The findings highlighted both, the common perceptions of death that young adults of different religions have and the specific perspectives on how individuals from each of the religious groups perceived death. The portrayal is that all the four religious groups believed in the existence of life after death in one form or another, in which death acts as a platform for them to move on to another life. All the groups appear to agree that life on earth is just a temporary phase and that one’s soul or being would continue to live on. The distinct difference that was identified in the content of the data was the concept of the afterlife that each religious group has. They fall under the Abrahamic or Dharmic philosophies – based on their respective geographical roots. The Muslims and Christians (Abrahamic) believe in an eternal afterlife where one’s soul will either end in heaven or hell, based on God’s judgment of their worldly deeds. A different view of the afterlife was shared by the Buddhists and Hindus (Dharmic) where both believed in the notion of reincarnation. Although they were of different ethnicities, their beliefs were influenced by religious teachings.

Although death seems to be regarded as a terrifying event for one to go through in their life, the fear of it does not necessarily incline towards their own death but their fear in losing someone significant as shown by both the Dharmic religious groups. This sentiment did not arise from the Abrahamic groups. Such a distinctive observation between the two main groups is significant in the provision of health care. Understanding of the distinctions could provide guidance to healthcare professions in times when they should be confronted with issues of death and dying. Insights into such distinctions could be significant to the development and maintenance of therapeutic relationships fundamental in healthcare.

What seems like important elements contributing to one’s fear of their own death is the whole idea of an eternal afterlife with uncertainties on what is to be expected and the readiness to face it. This was portrayed among the Muslims and the Christians. Although guided by their Holy Book, i.e., the Quran and the Bible, respectively, on the anticipation of the afterlife, the fear element may well be compounded by society as they tend to emphasize more

on the punishments and pain that one would have to go through in the afterlife instead of the blessings rewarded by God.

Apart from this, the matter of fear towards the death of others was highlighted, particularly by the Buddhists. For Buddhists, death is not an absolute end – but it does mean the breaking of all ties that bind us to our present existence. Therefore, the more detached we are from this world and its enticements, the more ready we shall be to die (Walshe, 1978). Interestingly, the Buddhists in this study can accept their death more readily but not those who are close to them due to the humanistic value they place on their relationships. In this regard, death is not the loss of support but a form of farewell to the deceased – a reason why Buddhists have a hard time in letting go of someone who has died. In such a case, one possible buffer for the Buddhists who are mostly of Chinese ethnicity in Malaysia, is the belief in ancestral worship which helps maintain a sense of connection following death (Hsu, O'Connor & Lee, 2009). It provides a sense of peace in the afterlife because a worshipped ancestor would not become a wandering ghost (Liu & van Schalkwyk, 2019). The difficulty in letting go of someone might also be a reason why the participants mentioned that they would tend to invest a lot on health essentials that would help to prolong the lives of their loved ones, possibly due to sociocultural conditioning.

Death is perceived negatively as it is seen to inflict pain on others whom the deceased have left behind. As Buddhists, the Hindus see their own death as a beginning of other's suffering as they are unsure of how others would manage their emotional state and how long it would affect them when they are gone.

In understanding the role of religions in shaping one's view of death, this study also identified evident key findings in which religions can either help prepare oneself towards death and the afterlife, as was prominently seen among the Abrahamic, or to guide oneself in the way of living, as observed by the Dharmic. Essentially, the Dharmic philosophy is about the spreading of goodness in life rather than a concern with death. At the individual level, the concepts of the topic are open to debate as they may not have sufficient knowledge of death and dying. Perhaps preparation for death is not an issue that is addressed adequately in many faiths as discussion of the subject is not necessarily welcome.

6.1 Comparison with Past Reports

The aim of this study was to gain insights on the perception of death among the young adults of different religions in Malaysia as well as to understand the role of religious beliefs in shaping one's idea and view of death. Religions was incorporated in this context of the discussion as it is suggested that they play a significant role in equipping one with the rules and thoughts of death (Beit-Hallahmi, 2012).

The theme of afterlife beliefs was identified by Rosenbalt, Walsh and Jackson (1976) and more recently by Ellis, Wahab and Ratnasingan (2013). They were found to be central to most religions and a significant aspect that influenced perceptions on death. The specific beliefs on the concept of afterlife were also consistent with earlier reports aligned with Buddhists and Hindus being more inclined towards believing in the concept of reincarnation (Sharma, 1990; Walter, 2001), while the Muslims and the Christians held on to their beliefs in having an eternal afterlife (Decker, 2007; DeSpelder & Strickland, 2011; Ross, 2001; Sheikh 1998).

While earlier studies have found that beliefs in the afterlife could be associated with the reduced fear of death (Jorajuria, Forsyth, & Evans, 2003; Lee et al., 2013; Roshani, 2012; Wen, 2010), the findings from this study seems to support the assumptions from Death Apprehension Theory (Ellis, Wahab, & Ratnasingan, 2013), where belief in the afterlife was theorized to be an essential aspect in leading to fear towards one's own death. However, there is no evidence from this study to support two aspects proposed by the theory – beliefs in God and perceived characteristics of God. Instead, it was indicated by the Muslims and the Christians, that their fear of death was imposed by society and religious institutions through their narrative of punishments to be endured in the afterlife. It is reflected by the notion of torture in the afterlife as one of the main reasons for fearfulness (Abdel-Khalek, 2002).

In terms of fear towards the death of others, in general, and without distinct associations with religions, it has been reported that fear of death is highly related to the thought of the loss of loved ones (Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003). In the case of Buddhists, their fear of death was reported to be due to their inability to free themselves from the cycle of re-birth (Prabhu & Glucklich, 1989; Cheng, 2017).

Death has been described as a pain of loss by traditional Chinese teachings as they often think of death as a form of misfortune (Tang, Wu, & Yan, 2002). However, it is not entirely seen as a suffering for Hindus, possibly due to an emphasis by Hindu literature on embracing death as a natural phenomenon where one will have opportunities for leading a better life during their next life (Sharma, 1990).

In understanding the role of religions in influencing one's view of death, Puolimatka & Solasaari (2006) stated that the answers to the issue of death and guidance on the expectations of the afterlife are offered by all religions. While this was clearly reflected among the Abrahamic religious groups during the focus group discussions, a different theme was highlighted from the Dharmic in which their religions' focus is on the way of living in this world, i.e., in the here and now. It is consistent with the core principles in Buddhism of "Inn" and "Ko", also referred to as cause and effect, which plays a role in guiding their way of living and spreading of goodness (Chen, 2001). Likewise, in Hinduism, it is considered helpful to think of a way of living in practical terms rather than an emphasis on religion, per se (Thomson, 2014).

In relation to patients in hospice care, insights into individual's perceptions can go some way towards providing a buffer from the challenges of anxieties as one is about to die. For instance, instead of the preoccupation with death itself, it is also known that patients who are dying may also be inclined towards consideration of the small pragmatic things like having a special favourite meal with a loved one (Stuart, 2021)

6.2 Limitations and Future Improvement of the Study

One of the limitations of this research is that the participants' *level of religiosity* was not considered. Although previous studies (Harding et al., 2005; Gedik & Bahadir, 2014; Suhail & Akram, 2002; Wen, 2010) have found inconsistent results in the relationship between religiosity and death anxiety, for this qualitative study, the levels of religiosity could have influenced the focal thoughts towards death. It is therefore suggested to be prudent for future studies of such nature to incorporate the matter of religiosity as a key variable. Furthermore, this study did not consider the diversities within the various religious groups. For example, in the case of Christians, there are relatively clear distinctions in relation to life matters such as between the Jehovah Witness, Catholics, Mormons, Evangelicals, non-denominational, etc. Although, the philosophical underpinnings may be on the eternal concept of afterlife (Cohen et al., 2005), there may well be fundamental differences on their perceptions of life after death (Lester et al., 2002). In terms of manageability of data, it may be helpful in such cases of multi-denominational groups within the main religions, for separate studies to be undertaken with more participants.

Perhaps, if presented with a narrative of death as one which is positive such as in terms of peace, tranquillity, and heavenly, the fear of it may not be as intense. As it stands, death is often associated with pain and suffering from illnesses or trauma from accidents and wars. Therefore, the differential presentation of death being associated with suffering may evoke fears of death as opposed to being something to look forward to if perceived as one linked with peace and tranquillity, or even celebrations of joy in being able to transition a better place. It would be good to determine if the subjects have experienced death of others and how it affected them, as many of the issues may also be related to social conditioning and socio-cultural perspectives.

6.3 Implications for Future

Death is inevitable and can happen at any time including when it is least expected. In the case of unexpected tragedies, the traumatic events are highly distressing for all who may be affected. Studies have identified coping mechanisms to be varied (Bonanno, Westphal, & Mancini, 2011). Hence, it would be helpful in situations requiring psychological support, for helpers to be well prepared to provide culturally sensitive and appropriate care. This requires understanding on the perspectives of death and the influence of religion in shaping thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs in a multicultural society such as in Malaysia. They are based on the knowledge that death-specific religious beliefs are important aspects in the loss and bereavement process (Benore & Park, 2004).

7. Conclusion

The findings from this study have highlighted the differences in perception of death among the young adults of different religious backgrounds in Malaysia. It identified two main beliefs groupings i.e. Abrahamic and Dharmic, from the four different groups which comprised of individuals from different ethnicities. It is an indication of the major influence of religions through the narratives taken on board by individuals. The insights could be of help to the healthcare professions, not only in clinical settings but also in instances where their assistance is called upon such as following natural disasters or major incidents.

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Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare that there are no competing or potential conflicts of interest.

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