

## ROLE OF MEDIA IN CHILDREN'S CONCEPTUALIZATION OF DEATH

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### ABSTRACT

A qualitative study was conducted to examine the role of media in children's conceptualizations of death. Utilizing a convenience sampling strategy, 20 children aged 6 to 10 years, along with their mothers from the districts of Sahiwal, Faisalabad, and Lahore in Pakistan, were recruited for this research. Following the collection of demographic information, semi-structured interviews were conducted with both the children and their mothers. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis, which incorporated both semantic and latent approaches. Several themes emerged, including sources of exposure to death, children's curiosity about death, the role of media as an educational tool regarding death, emotional and behavioral responses to death as portrayed in media, and maternal perceptions of death representations in media in relation to their children's understanding of death. Key themes derived from children's interviews included their comprehension of life and death, religious interpretations of death, the reality of death as depicted in media, and their apprehensions regarding the portrayal of death in media. The findings indicated that media can have both detrimental and beneficial effects on children's conceptualizations of death. Among the children aged 5 to 6, the understanding of the irreversibility of death was the first concept to be grasped, followed by initial insights into applicability, cessation, and inevitability. By age 6 to 10, the majority of children demonstrated varying degrees of understanding of the five fundamental components of death, with the concept of causality being the last to be comprehended.

**Keywords:** Death, Age, Media.

### INTRODUCTION

Death is a complex and sensitive topic that can be difficult for both children and adults to understand and cope with. The media, including television shows, movies, video games, and social media, can play a significant role in shaping children's conceptualization of death. Human beings are solely species possessing capacity to mirror upon their own death, which makes them conscious and prone to experience anxious and threatened

concerning of their existence (Robah, 2017). Carry was the first psychologist to systematically describe children's intuitive biological concepts. Children's biological point of view on living objects, birth, and death is developed during preschool years (3-4 years). A cognitive system emerges during middle childhood at the age of 10 years (Slaughter, 2003). A child's comprehension of death is linked to their cognitive level, Piaget's cognitive development

theory suggested that children understand death at different ages, with ages 5-10 being when they grasp death as a biological event due to the breakdown of body functions (Slaughter, 2007).

According to (Harris, 2018) children often view death as a separation from loved ones rather than solely a biological event. This understanding is supported by religious beliefs in various cultures and raises questions about its presence in non-human primates and its development throughout prehistory. According to Lammon (2019), children understand death as the end of bodily and mental processes but are open to the idea of an afterlife, possibly due to a natural inclination to maintain connections with loved ones. Children's understanding of death varies based on their intellectual ability, chronological age, developmental stage, and previous experiences with death (Edwards & Titman, 2010). Children who witness death rituals and funerals develop an earlier understanding of death's universality, and those with serious illnesses and hospitalizations may have a more advanced understanding of death causation (Slaughter, V 2005). Culture and religious beliefs play a significant role in a child's understanding of death conceptualization, with spiritual beliefs layered on top of the biological abstraction of death to create a more sophisticated understanding. (Longbottom, 2018).

Media has become a significant part of everyday life during the 20th and 21st centuries. In Pakistan, there are around 100 million mobile users and 29 million internet users, a large majority of internet users regularly consume social media and other applications like YouTube and online games (Gallup, 2016 and Qadeer, 2016). Media, including news, entertainment, social media, Cartoons, movies, TV shows, and video games all contain content related to death that significantly influences children's understanding of death. (Chassiakos, 2016). According to Singer (2012), only 3% of content related to death is portrayed in books, while 75% of animated children's movies contain death scenes. Mainstream mass media such as books, plays, and films reflect on death, and digital forums such as video games and cartoons encourage users to focus on death awareness and its impact on their lives, as noted by Longbottom (2018).

Media exposure can affect children's perception of death, and lack of parental supervision with violent video games can promote immoral values. Parents can be divided into two types when it comes to discussing death with their children: those who are open and willing to talk about it, and those who avoid the topic to protect their children. Children with open parents develop a mature perception of death, while those with avoidant parents may feel anxious and confused (Hunter & Smith, 2008). The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends limiting screen media exposure for children less than 18 months and providing guidance for children between 18 and 24 months (Vandewater, 2007).

Excessive media use can have harmful effects on children's psychological well-being, particularly in relation to death-associated anxieties. On-screen deaths can be particularly traumatic for children. Guidelines from the World Health Organization suggest that children under one year should not be exposed to screens, while children between two to four years should have no more than one hour of sedentary screen time per day (Domingues & Montanari, 2017). It is important to have age-appropriate discussions with children about media usage and to regulate their access to media.

## Literature Review

Death is a complex and sensitive topic that can be difficult for both children and adults to understand and cope with.. A recent study by Gilmore and colleagues (2021) found that exposure to media that portrayed death in a realistic and meaningful way (such as news articles about death or books about grief) was associated with a more mature and nuanced understanding of death in children. On the other hand, exposure to media that portrayed death in a sensationalized or unrealistic way (such as horror movies or violent video games) was associated with a more distorted and fearful understanding of death. Another recent study by Zhong and colleagues (2021) examined the impact of social media on children's understanding of death. The study found that exposure to social media content related to death (such as posts about grief or memorial pages) was associated with a more positive and accepting attitude towards death in children. However, exposure to graphic or violent content related to

death on social media was associated with higher levels of anxiety and fear in children.

Literature suggested that, children up to the age of five or six years old understand death as a biological event and have a complete idea of the body's physiology required to sustain life (Slaughter, 2005). Another study conducted by (Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007) with children aged (4-8 years), using a death interview questionnaire, found that 69% of the children understood the concept of cessation and viewed it as the cessation of all biological and mental functions. A study on death conceptualization among children aged 5 to 9 years from various cultural backgrounds found that cultural and religious differences influenced their understanding of death. Study was conducted with 188 British and Pakistani children aged 4-7 found that cultural and religious backgrounds influenced the perception of sub-components of death. British groups shared similarities, while Pakistani children understood irreversibility earlier. All three groups showed little understanding of causality a component of death. Cultural-specific experiences, particularly those arising from living in rural versus urban settings, influenced children's reasoning about death (Panagiotaki, 2015)

Earlier studies suggested that childhood understanding of death is influenced by environmental factors. A study of 337 children aged 10 years from four different religions found that Jewish and Christian children had a better understanding of death than Muslims and Druze (Florian, 1985). Moreover study with 40 elementary school children found that children construct their own thoughts about death, influenced by social, cultural, and time-specific perspectives (Ahmadi, 2019).

(Bonoti et al., 2013) studied how children's concept of death varies with age and personal experience. They studied 52 children aged 7 to 11 found that personal experience of death led to more realistic views. Age influenced development of death components. A study with 30 boys and 30 girls aged 4 to 9 years found that children's understanding of death improves with age, but their verbal expressions and play may not match until around 8 or 9 years of age. Children's play was opposite to what they said, suggesting difficulty in understanding and accepting the concept of death (Weininger, 1979).

Previously conducted study with children found that children as young as 4 or 5 years old understood the inevitability and universality of death, and their understanding become more biological as they aged. Children distinguished between biological explanations of death and spiritual beliefs about afterlife, with cognitive capacity, disease history, and previous experience playing less significant roles (Panagiotaki, 2018).

Earlier study compared the concepts of death between early, middle, and late adolescence and analysis showed that middle school children considered death as separation from family and friends, high school children thought about what happens after death, and college students thought more about afterlife and personal mortality (Nope, 1997). Previous findings also showed that the understanding of the subcomponents e.g. inevitability and irreversibility developed earlier than cessation and causation, with differences observed when the reference object was a person versus an animal (Lazar, 1991).

In addition high exposure to violent video games negatively correlated with children's death concept and fear of death, but positively correlated with escape acceptance. (Yee, 2019)

Media exposure generally increased both conscious and unconscious death-related fear and anxiety (King, 2002). Older study of young people found that meaningful films that showed the protagonist surviving instead of dying reduced death-related anxiety. Participants who had thought about their own death appreciated such movies more as they provided an anxiety buffer to cope with existential fear (Rieger & Hofer, 2017). Moreover television use was associated with less understanding of death, including irreversibility and increased violence attributions (Hennefield, 2019).

## Purpose of study

The present study aimed to enhance the understanding of death in children to improve their experience of life, as death conceptualization among children is a growing concern for researchers. In Pakistan, research on this topic is limited. The study specifically focuses on the role of media in children's death conceptualization, as literature suggests it can have both positive and negative effects. (Khawaja, 2012). The findings of this study can provide

valuable insights for other researchers studying the role of media in children's understanding of death.

## Research Questions

- How does death understanding develop in 6–10-year-old children in relation to the acquisition of four key subcomponents of death (irreversibility, inevitability, universality and causality)?
- To what extent media contributes in children's conceptualization of death?
- What type of effects (either positive or negative) media plays in developing children concept about death?

## Materials and Methods

### Sample and Research Design

(N= 20) children aged 6-10 years and their mothers (20) (n=10 girls and n= 10boys) were selected through the convenient sampling technique from different cities of Punjab and Phenomenological research design was used.

### Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Children belong to intact families and studying in classes (1 to 5) from both private and government schools were included. While children having any physical/psychological disorder/illness were excluded from study also children who were in bereaved period or seen any death in last 12 months were also not included.

### Measures

**Demographic Sheet.** Demographic sheet was designed including age, name, gender, birth order, and total number of children, socioeconomic status, religion, family structure, residence, prior death

experience, digital media usage and visualizing content related questions.

**Interview Schedule.** A questionnaire about media used (particularly designed for this study) to screen out those children which are frequent users of electronic media consisted of 8 questions both closed and open-ended questions. Moreover, semi-structured interviews were also conducted on children and their mother's.

### Procedure

Initially, permission for conducting an interview and audio recording was sought from all parents and ethical committee of schools through a consent form .The demographic sheet was filled, and interviews approximately (40-45 minutes) were conducted separately from children and their mothers. Two-part questionnaire was made based on literature, one for children and second for mother. Interview was consisted of 15 questions. Each interviewee was assigned a code, for example, respondent 1, 2, 3 etc. Later the audio was transcribed on paper for analysis.

### Data analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to analyze qualitative data of semi structured interviews of participants by identifying, analyzing and generating themes of data. In this procedure, six steps including familiarization, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes as well as defining and naming themes had been done. (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

### Findings

The main findings of the study are discussed in the following table.

**Table 1. Major Themes and Sub-Themes Based on with reference to the coding of Mother's interviews (N=20)**

Major themes	Sub themes
Sources of death exposure	Real life death exposure Media as an exposure of death
Inquisitiveness about death	Curiosity about reality of death After life curiosity
Responses of children towards death in media	Negative emotions Behavioral responses Positive emotions Indifferent responses

Maternal appraisal of death portrayal in media	Media as a source of learning about death Fear of death Issue of sensitivity Confusion.
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**Table 2: Major themes and frequencies with reference to the coding of children's interviews (N=20)**

Major themes	Sub themes
Life and death understanding	Reality of life and death Universality Irreversibility Causality Inevitability
Religious conceptualization of death	How death occurs Afterlife depiction in media
Reality of death portrayed in media	Perception about death
Children apprehension of death depicted in media	Emotional aspects

This table was executed using theory given approached of death understanding by their five subcomponents (Longbottom, 2018).

## Discussion

Children's comprehension of death is correlated with a variety of factors. Age, cognitive capacity, death experience, media exposure, maternal competence, and their relationships with children's comprehension of the idea of death were the specific variables of interest (Kenyon, 2001). The first major theme that has emerged during interviews of mothers is "Maternal responses on death exposure" (Table.1). Mothers were interviewed as part of a research about how often their kids were exposed to death. They claimed that children encounter death both directly and indirectly, with electronic media serving as a common source of death representation. The study also discovered that one of the most important elements influencing parents' decisions to talk to their children about death is a firsthand experience of death, and the relationship between direct experience of death and children's death conceptions may be mediated through parental communication.

The second major theme that has been discussed is "Inquisitiveness about death" (Table.1). Children are very inquisitive and concerned about death, as according to mothers, and they often ask questions about what occurs after death, where the deceased

go, and what happens in the afterlife. Children display interest in subjects like Heaven, Hell, and life after death and learn about death and the afterlife from media like movies and dramas. Overall, it seems that kids find talking about death to be fascinating. "Media as a source of learning about death" is most prominent theme. Mothers claimed that children's perceptions of mortality are influenced by a variety of factors, including the media. Research has shown that kids frequently use media for this (kola, 2014). Children learn about death from media including movies, plays, cartoons, news, and YouTube, which promotes awareness of and generalization of death notions.

Another overarching issue that came out of the mother's interviews is "Children's emotional and behavioral response to mortality presented in media." (Table.1) (Lengua et al ; 2005) found evidence that children's mental health has been significantly impacted by television portrayals of terrible events like suicide attacks. Furthermore, Cantoor (2005) criticized contemporary technologies, such as video games, movies, and the internet, for heightening children's anxiety responses, particularly with relation to death. Children generally experience unpleasant emotions towards and avoid on-screen death scenarios, according to mothers. This includes abhorring death scenes and avoiding dramas or films that feature death. Youngsters also exhibited unfavorable reactions to cartoon death depictions.



Children have also shown emotional responses to death and fictional dead people in media, including grief, sadness, and empathy. When their favorite movie character passed away, they wept and expressed their sadness. They also expressed concern for the deceased's welfare and wondered how they would manage without their family.

"Maternal appraisal of death portrayal in media" (Table.1) is another maternal issue that emerged from the interviews. In interviews with Pakistani mothers, the issue of how media portrays death emerged as a concern. They believe that media confuses children about the reality of death, affecting their perceptions of it. According to Martin (2002), violent and death-related media can have harmful effects on children, including imitation and lasting psychological impacts. This includes movies, TV shows, video games, cartoons, and newspapers. With children watching several hours of TV per day, what they see can affect their attitudes and behaviors. The portrayal of death in media may also negatively impact children's mental health, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, where fear of dying is heightened. While some mothers see media as a tool for teaching kids about mortality, the study concludes that media has both positive and negative effects on children's perceptions of death.

The first major theme that was emerged from children's interviews is "Life and Death understanding" (Table. 2). The study found that children aged 7 to 8 have an understanding of the inevitability and universality of death, while those aged 6 have no concept of life and death. Children aged 8 to 10 have a clear understanding of all components of death, including its biological causes. Exposure to death is the most powerful source of learning about death, as argued by Longbottom (2018). Hoffman (2007) suggests that the different rates of development of sub-concepts of death may be due to the development of specific mechanisms or differences in their complexities. Understanding death is complex and involves personal beliefs, cultural norms, religious teachings, and conceptual understanding (Slaughter, 2005). Children between 8 to 10 years old have a full understanding of the essentials of life and death, while children aged 6 to 7 years have limited understanding of these concepts. By the age of ten, children from all cultures generally understand that death is an irreversible and

unavoidable process for all living things. They tend to hold two parallel conceptions of death: one biological, in which the deceased is seen as a dead body, and another afterlife or religious, in which the deceased is seen as having passed on to another form of existence. (Paul,2018). Another important subject that came out of the conversations with childrens is "Religious conceptualization of death" (Table. 2). Religion has a major impact on how people feel about dying and whether they believe in the afterlife (Jessie, 2011). Religious beliefs regarding death, such as the idea that death is decreed by a higher power and the existence of an afterlife, were held by the children in the study. They were also aware of the Day of Judgment and burial customs. Parents and Islamic teachings from books and films influenced their worldview.

The main focus of the interviews is "Children's experience of death as depicted in media" (Table. 2). It appears that parents and teachers think they should avoid discussing death-related topics with young children (Richardson, 1993). Parents and teachers tend to avoid discussing death-related topics with young children, but children often learn about death from media such as television, video games, and fairy tales. However, these media often depict death in a violent and unrealistic manner, which can lead to misconceptions about death. Children aged 7-8 tend to believe that the portrayal of death in media is real, while those aged 9-10 understand that it is fake. However, there is still confusion among children due to misrepresentations of death in media and real life. Movies for children often soften the portrayal of death, which can be psychologically damaging them. (Sumiala, 2013; Lee, 2009)

The last major theme that emerged from children's interviews is "apprehension of emotions about death depicted in media". Children showed many emotional and affective responses for on screen death. It is reveled in the present research that children showed dislike, sad, empathetic and sympathetic expressions for both dead and death in TV and mobile. The bloody and horrible death depiction in media creates the thanatology and repeated thoughts about own death as seen in dramas and movies. They also exhibited the sorrowful, grief, upset, shocked, sympathetic and empathetic expressions for death and dead in media.

Majority respondents said that “I started cry while watching death in movies because he is dying and will away from his family”. How he/she will live alone in grave, who will give them food etc. They stated that “I am not happy to see someone die, I don’t like death, death is bad, and I feel bad for dead and death in dramas and movies” hence, manifested disgust expressions for death videos displayed through multiple digitalized platforms.

## Conclusion

Media has a significant impact on how children perceive death. Encouraging healthy media usage and parent-child contact can help children better understand death, leading to a healthier and more mature perspective.

## Implications of the study

In the light of current study findings, the implication of the study is that the content children exposed on screen should be shielded. Parents also must communicate with children for the better understanding of death so that children do not perceive death as something not acceptable. The counseling plans could also be arranged in schools to avoid the anxiety about death. The themes that emerge from this study can also be used for construction of indigenous scale about children’s conceptualization of death.

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