

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AFTERLIFE BELIEFS AND DEATH ANXIETY AMONG EDUCATED (UNIVERSITY GOING) YOUNG ADULTS IN PAKISTAN, PUNJAB

Haiqa Abdul Sattar^{*1}, Faiz Mohiuddin², Imtiaz Ahmad Dogar³

^{*1,2,3}Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Sciences, Faisalabad Medical University, Faisalabad, Pakistan.

¹haiqaabdulsattar51@gmail.com, ²rehabfoundation@live.com, ³psycon2005fsd@yahoo.com

Corresponding Author: *

Haiqa Abdul Sattar

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17810482>

Received	Accepted	Published
18 October 2025	27 November 2025	03 December 2025

ABSTRACT

The present study examined how afterlife beliefs relate to death anxiety among educated young adults in Pakistan, where ideas about divine reward and punishment are an important part of religious and cultural life. Previous findings on this relationship have been mixed, with some studies showing that these beliefs reduce fear of death, while others report weak or inconsistent trends (Pandya & Kathuria, 2021). Very little research, however, has explored this topic through culturally specific measures in Muslim-majority contexts (Al-Issa et al., 2021). To address this gap, the current study investigated whether stronger afterlife beliefs are associated with lower levels of death anxiety among university students. A quantitative, cross-sectional design was used, and data were collected from 200 educated or university going young adults aged 18–25 years through convenient sampling. Two validated instruments were administered: the Islamic Afterlife Reward and Punishment Belief Scale (IARPB) (Al-Issa et al., 2021) and the Revised Death Anxiety Scale (RDAS) (Thorson & Powell, 2015). Correlational analysis showed a significant negative association between afterlife beliefs and death anxiety, indicating that stronger belief in divine consequences corresponds with reduced death-related anxiety. Regression results further confirmed that afterlife beliefs significantly predicted death anxiety and accounted for 11% of its variance. Gender differences were also observed, with females reporting higher death anxiety than males, although both groups showed similar levels of afterlife beliefs (Dadfar & Lester, 2017). MANOVA results demonstrated that prayer frequency influenced afterlife beliefs, but death anxiety did not differ meaningfully across prayer, age, or private religious practice groups. Overall, the findings suggest that afterlife beliefs in reward and punishment may help lessen death anxiety in educated young adults by offering a sense of meaning and psychological reassurance in the face of mortality (Vail et al., 2019). These results highlight the value of culturally grounded religious beliefs for understanding how young adults interpret and cope with existential concerns and offer implications for future research, counselling, and spiritual support for young adults in religious societies. **Keywords:** Afterlife beliefs, death anxiety, young adults, prayer frequency, educated/university students, existential psychology

INTRODUCTION

LITERATURE REVIEW

Death has long been recognized as one of the most fundamental realities of human existence, yet awareness of mortality often triggers fear, worry, and emotional discomfort. This fear, commonly referred to as death anxiety includes concerns about the dying process, the possibility of pain, and uncertainty about what may follow physical death (Abdel-Khalek, 2017). Although death anxiety is considered universal, its intensity varies substantially across individuals depending on cultural background, personal worldview, and religious orientation (Pandya & Kathuria, 2021); (Jong, 2021). For some people, thoughts about death evoke reflective curiosity, while for others these thoughts produce marked psychological distress that may disrupt daily functioning (Menzies et al., 2024). Because of this variation, researchers have long emphasized the importance of understanding the psychological mechanisms that shape responses to mortality.

Across cultures, religious and spiritual beliefs play a critical role in helping individuals navigate fears related to death. Belief in an afterlife, the idea that human life continues in some form beyond physical existence, commonly provides comfort, meaning, and reassurance (Jong et al., 2018); (Vail et al., 2019); (Weber & Pargament, 2017). Within Islam, afterlife beliefs hold deep theological and moral significance. Islamic teachings emphasize resurrection, divine judgment, accountability, and eternal consequences, offering believers a structured understanding of what happens after death (Al-Issa et al., 2021). This dual framework presents both the hope of paradise and the fear of hell, creating a complex psychological response; the promise of reward may reduce death anxiety, whereas fear of punishment can heighten it (Henrie & Patrick, 2014).

Empirical findings reflect this dual nature. Research shows that reward-focused afterlife beliefs tend to buffer existential fear and increase psychological resilience, whereas punishment-focused beliefs may elevate distress and uncertainty (Pandya & Kathuria, 2021); (Jong, 2021); (Menzies et al., 2024). Because of these differences, scholars argue that afterlife beliefs should be studied as multidimensional rather than

unidimensional constructs, particularly by distinguishing between beliefs in divine reward and those in divine punishment (Al-Sabwah & Abdel-Khalek, 2006). Treating afterlife beliefs as a single construct risks obscuring their nuanced effects on mental health and existential well-being. Young adulthood is a particularly important period for studying these dynamics. This developmental stage, typically spanning the late teens to mid-twenties, is characterized by identity formation, self-exploration, and the evaluation of inherited belief systems (Arnett, 2019). University students, in particular, encounter diverse ideas and experiences that may reinforce or challenge their spiritual and existential worldviews (Chan & Yap, 2009). When young adults interpret afterlife beliefs through a compassionate and reward-oriented lens, these beliefs may promote hope, meaning, and psychological strength. However, when religious interpretations emphasize divine punishment, guilt, or fear, students may experience greater death anxiety and uncertainty (Bassett & Bussard, 2018).

In Pakistan, where Islam is deeply woven into social, cultural, and familial structures, afterlife beliefs are central to moral identity formation (Al-Issa et al., 2021). Religious teachings on accountability after death are widely emphasized through education, family traditions, and public religious discourse. Despite this centrality, empirical work examining how afterlife beliefs relate to death anxiety in young Pakistani adults remains limited (Dadfar & Lester, 2017); (Saroglou & Muñoz-García, 2018). Much of the existing research relies on broad measures of religiosity, which fail to capture distinctions between reward-based and punishment-based beliefs (Weber & Pargament, 2017). As a result, there is a need for culturally specific tools that can help researchers assess these constructs in a meaningful and contextually appropriate manner. The development of the Islamic Afterlife Reward and Punishment Belief Scale (IARPB) offers such an opportunity. This scale differentiates between belief in divine reward and belief in divine punishment, allowing a deeper understanding of how these dimensions independently relate to psychological outcomes (Al-Issa et al., 2021). When combined with updated measures of death

anxiety, such as the Revised Death Anxiety Scale (RDAS), researchers can more accurately explore how afterlife beliefs shape fear, uncertainty, and emotional responses to mortality among Muslim youth (Thorson & Powell, 2015); (Sarhadi & Mazloom, 2025); (Chang et al., 2021).

Despite theoretical advances, significant gaps remain. Many studies connecting religiosity and death anxiety have been conducted in Western, Judeo-Christian contexts, limiting their cultural applicability to Muslim-majority societies (Neimeyer et al., 2004). Moreover, young adults in Pakistan frequently encounter sociocultural change, exposure to secular influences, and intellectual questioning, which may reshape how they internalize religious concepts, including afterlife beliefs. During this stage of identity exploration marked by career uncertainty, social comparison, and evolving responsibilities, young adults often engage in symbolic encounters with mortality through personal reflection, academic learning, or media exposure. Understanding how afterlife beliefs influence death anxiety in this population is therefore both conceptually important and practically relevant for youth counselling and mental health interventions (Abdel-Khalek & Thorson, 2006).

The relationship between afterlife beliefs and death anxiety is also grounded in several major theoretical perspectives. Existential theory highlights death as an ultimate human concern and argues that religious beliefs provide continuity, coherence, and meaning that reduce existential distress (Yalom, 2008); (Schnell, 2025). However, existential frameworks acknowledge ambivalence: benevolent afterlife images ease anxiety, while punitive interpretations intensify it (Routledge & Juhl, 2010); (Vergani et al., 2019). Empirical studies support this duality by showing that stable spiritual orientations protect against death anxiety, whereas guilt-laden religious interpretations increase emotional vulnerability (Dezutter et al., 2008); (Pandya & Kathuria, 2021). The religious coping framework similarly emphasizes that individuals draw on religious beliefs to manage stress and existential uncertainty. Positive religious coping such as trust in divine mercy reduces death anxiety, while negative coping such as fear of divine punishment

heightens distress (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2015); (Weber & Pargament, 2017); (Al-Sabwah & Abdel-Khalek, 2006). These findings indicate that afterlife beliefs interact closely with one's coping style, influencing whether faith enhances resilience or contributes to psychological burden (Abu-Raiya et al., 2016).

Cultural psychology perspectives further highlight that the meaning of afterlife beliefs varies across societies. In Muslim-majority contexts, the content of religious beliefs is often more important than the overall level of religiosity (Richert & Corriveau, 2022). Islamic teachings integrate death awareness into prayer, ritual practices, and moral reflection, making afterlife beliefs a deeply embedded component of psychological life (Ghuloum et al., 2024); (Saroglou & Muñoz-García, 2018). These cultural influences reinforce the need for population-specific tools like the IARPB to accurately examine belief patterns (Dezutter et al., 2008); (Chang et al., 2021).

Terror Management Theory (TMT) also provides a robust framework for interpreting death anxiety. TMT proposes that awareness of mortality evokes existential terror, which individuals manage by adhering to cultural worldviews that promise meaning, continuity, or immortality (Pyszczynski et al., 2015); (Spitzenstätter & Schnell, 2020). In this model, benevolent afterlife beliefs reduce anxiety, while punitive interpretations intensify it (Routledge & Juhl, 2010); (Vergani et al., 2019). In Islamic contexts, mortality awareness is often understood as spiritually meaningful, encouraging moral reflection and submission to divine will (Al-Issa et al., 2021); (Chan & Yap, 2009).

Together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that death anxiety and afterlife beliefs are closely intertwined. Reward-oriented beliefs tend to buffer existential fear, whereas punishment-oriented beliefs may exacerbate it (Jong, 2021); (Vail et al., 2019). These distinctions help explain inconsistencies in studies that relied on broad religiosity measures rather than clearly defined belief dimensions (Bassett & Bussard, 2018); (Dezutter et al., 2008). Given the centrality of afterlife doctrines in Islamic culture and the unique developmental trajectory of young adults, examining these constructs within a Pakistani context fills a notable empirical and cultural gap.

The present study aims to address this gap by examining the relationship between afterlife beliefs, specifically reward and punishment dimensions, and death anxiety among educated young adults in Pakistan. Using culturally validated tools such as the IARPB and RDAS, the study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how beliefs content shapes emotional responses to mortality. The findings contribute to psychological theory, enrich cross-cultural research on death anxiety, and offer practical implications for counselling and spiritual guidance for young Muslim adults.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study were:

1. To examine the relationship between afterlife beliefs and death anxiety among young adults.
2. To analyse how punishment and reward beliefs relates with death anxiety.
3. To explore the predictive role of afterlife beliefs on death anxiety.
4. To explore the extent to which belief in the afterlife can predict death anxiety.
5. To explore how age and frequency of religious practices differ in afterlife beliefs and death anxiety.

Hypotheses of the study

H1. There will be a significant relationship between afterlife beliefs (Punishment and Reward) and death anxiety among young adults.

H2. Afterlife beliefs will significantly predict the level of death anxiety in educated young adults.

H3. There will be significant differences of afterlife belief across gender.

H4. There will be significant differences of afterlife beliefs across different age groups, frequency of prayer and private religious practices in influencing death anxiety.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional, and correlational design to investigate the relationship between Islamic afterlife beliefs and death anxiety among young adults in Pakistan. The target population consisted of university students aged 18–25 years, a developmental stage characterized by identity exploration and ongoing refinement of spiritual and existential beliefs (Arnett, 2019). Convenient sampling was used for feasibility and accessibility, and participants were recruited in person from various public and private universities. The final sample comprised approximately 200 students, a size suitable for correlational and group comparison analyses commonly used in psychological research.

Participants and Eligibility Criteria

Participants were eligible if they were currently enrolled university students aged 18–25, fluent in English, and willing to provide informed consent. Individuals younger than 18 or older than 25, those reporting neurological or psychiatric disorders, and those who submitted incomplete questionnaires were excluded. These criteria ensured that all participants were capable of understanding the survey items and responding reliably.

Table 4.1:
Basic Demographic (N=200)

Characteristics	Categories		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age	Minimum	18	21.72	2.072
	Maximum	25		
Gender			<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
	Male		54	27
	Female		146	73
Age Groups	18-19		30	15

	20-22	99	49.5
	23-25	71	35.5
University	Public	133	66.5
	Private	67	33.5
Residence Type	Day scholar	154	77
	Hosteller	46	23

Measures

Afterlife Beliefs

Afterlife beliefs were defined as convictions about continued existence after physical death, including the concepts of resurrection, divine judgment, reward, and punishment. These beliefs were assessed using the **Islamic Afterlife Reward and Punishment Belief Scale (IARPB)**, a culturally grounded instrument specifically developed for Muslim populations (Al-Issa et al., 2021). The scale includes five items rated on a 5-point Likert continuum (strongly disagree to strongly agree). Higher scores reflect stronger endorsement of Islamic teachings about afterlife consequences. Previous research has reported good internal consistency for this measure, with Cronbach's alpha values around .82, supporting its reliability for use with young adults in Muslim-majority contexts (Al-Issa et al., 2021).

Death Anxiety

Death anxiety was conceptualized as fear, dread, or cognitive concern about death and dying, encompassing emotional, attitudinal, and existential elements (Abdel-Khalek, 2017). It was measured using the **Revised Death Anxiety Scale (RDAS)**, a 25-item true/false instrument widely used across cultures (Thorson & Powell, 2015). Higher scores indicate greater anxiety. The RDAS demonstrates strong psychometric properties, with Cronbach alpha of reliability value .804 including high internal consistency and validity across diverse populations (Sarhadi & Mazloom, 2025); (Thorson & Powell, 2015).

Procedure

Data collection commenced after obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the researcher's university. Participants were approached in classrooms, libraries, and social areas across multiple universities in Punjab,

Pakistan. They were informed about the study's purpose, voluntary nature, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw. After signing informed consent, they completed a questionnaire packet containing the IARPB, RDAS, and demographic questions. Completing the packet required approximately 10-15 minutes. Age was later categorized into three groups (18-19, 20-22, and 23-25 years) for additional analyses.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS Version 26. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, and standard deviations) summarized demographic characteristics and scale scores. Pearson product moment correlation was used to examine the association between afterlife beliefs and death anxiety because both variables were continuous and normally distributed (Pandya & Kathuria, 2021). Additional analyses, including independent-samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA, explored differences across gender and age groups. Prior to conducting these analyses, assumptions such as normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity were checked and met, ensuring the suitability of the chosen statistical procedures.

Ethical Considerations

The study complied with APA (2017) ethical guidelines, and IRB approval was obtained before data collection. Participants were assured of anonymity, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of participation. No identifying information was collected, and all participants were debriefed at the end of the survey. Measures were taken to ensure no psychological harm or coercion occurred during data collection, aligning with established ethical standards

RESULTS

The study sample (N = 200) consisted predominantly of young adults aged 18–25 years (M = 21.72, SD = 2.07), with females representing 73% (n = 146) and males 27% (n = 54). Most participants were in the 20–22 age group (58%, n = 116), enrolled in public universities (66.5%, n = 133), and identified as day scholars (77%, n = 154). The majority resided in urban areas (79.5%, n = 159). Regarding religious practices, 51.5% reported daily prayer, and 41.5% engaged in

private religious activities daily, indicating generally high spiritual engagement.

Descriptive statistics for the study variables showed that participants reported moderate to high levels of Islamic afterlife beliefs (IARPB: M = 21.6, SD = 3.43, $\alpha = .61$) and death anxiety (RDAS: M = 54.5, SD = 10.89, $\alpha = .78$). Both scales demonstrated acceptable reliability, and skewness values (-1.63 for IARPB; $-.76$ for RDAS) were within normal limits, confirming suitability for parametric analyses.

Table 4.3

Pearson Correlation Between Islamic Afterlife Reward and Punishment Belief scale, Punishment Belief, Reward Belief and Revised Death Anxiety Scale (N=200)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Islamic Afterlife Reward and Punishment Belief (IARPB)	–		
2. Punishment Belief (IARPB2)	.35**	–	
3. Reward Belief (IARPB3)	.76**	-.004	–
4. Revised Death Anxiety Scale (RDAS)	-.33**	-.243**	-.259**

Note. IARPB= Islamic Afterlife Reward and Punishment Belief. **p < .01 (two-tailed).

As presented in Table 4.3, the overall afterlife belief score showed a weak but statistically significant negative association with death anxiety ($r = -.33$, $p < .01$). This indicates that individuals who endorsed stronger beliefs in divine reward and punishment tended to report lower levels of anxiety related to death.

When examining the subscales separately, similar patterns emerged. The punishment belief subscale demonstrated a small yet significant negative correlation with death anxiety ($r = -.243$, $p < .01$), suggesting that a stronger conviction in post-death consequences was associated with reduced fear and apprehension about mortality. Likewise, the reward belief subscale also showed a significant negative association with death anxiety ($r = -.259$, $p < .01$), indicating that believing in positive afterlife outcomes corresponded with lower death-related fear.

The relationships among the belief components

were also notable. The overall afterlife beliefs score was moderately correlated with both punishment belief ($r = .35$, $p < .01$) and reward belief ($r = .76$, $p < .01$), confirming that the total belief construct is strongly informed by these two subdomains. However, punishment belief and reward belief showed no meaningful relationship with each other ($r = -.004$), indicating that individuals may hold these beliefs somewhat independently rather than as a unified dimension.

Taken together, the findings suggest a consistent pattern: stronger afterlife-related beliefs, whether about reward, punishment, or a combined framework, are associated with lower levels of death anxiety among young adults. These results align with theoretical perspectives that view religious belief systems as providing existential comfort, moral structure, and psychological reassurance in the face of uncertainty about death.

Table 4.4:
Linear Regression Predicting Death Anxiety from Afterlife Beliefs (N = 200)

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% <i>CI for B</i>
Constant	77.43	4.66	—	16.60	.000	(68.23, 86.62)
Islamic Afterlife Reward and Punishment Belief (IARPB)	-1.06	0.21	-.33	-4.97	.000	(-1.48, -.64)

Note, $R = .333$, $R^2 = .111$, Adjusted $R^2 = .107$, Dependent variable= Revised Death Anxiety Scale. $p < .001$

Linear regression analysis indicated that afterlife beliefs significantly predicted death anxiety among university students. The model was statistically significant, $F(1, 198) = 24.72$, $p < .001$, explaining 11% of the variance ($R^2 = .111$). The IARPB emerged as a significant negative predictor ($\beta = -.33$, $t = -4.97$, $p < .001$; $B = -1.06$, 95% CI [-1.48, -.64]), indicating that stronger beliefs in divine reward and punishment are associated with lower levels of death anxiety. These results suggest that afterlife beliefs may serve as a protective cognitive framework against death-related fears.

Regression diagnostics confirmed that key assumptions were satisfactorily met. The Normal

P-P plot indicated that residuals were approximately normally distributed, with only minor deviations. The scatterplot of standardized residuals against predicted values showed a random distribution, supporting homoscedasticity. The Durbin-Watson statistic (1.703) suggested no autocorrelation, and Cook's Distance values (0.000–0.670) indicated no influential outliers. Overall, the regression model met assumptions of normality, homoscedasticity, independence, and absence of influential cases, confirming its appropriateness for further analysis.

Table 4.5
Independent-Samples t-tests for Gender Differences in Afterlife Beliefs and Death Anxiety (N = 200)

Variable	Male (<i>n</i> = 54) <i>M (SD)</i>	Female (<i>n</i> = 146) <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Islamic Afterlife Reward and Punishment Belief (IARPB)	21.42(4.03)	21.69 (3.18)	78.80	-.437	.66	0.074
Revised Death Anxiety Scale (RDAS)	51.61 (10.55)	55.60 (10.85)	97.15	-2.35	.021	0.37

Note, M=Mean, SD=Standard Deviation, P=Significance, f= degree of freedom, CI=Confidence Interval, $p < .05$.

An independent samples t-test revealed no significant gender difference in Islamic Afterlife Reward and Punishment Belief (IARPB), $t(198) = -0.437$, $p = .66$, indicating that males ($M = 21.42$, $SD = 4.03$) and females ($M = 21.69$, $SD = 3.18$) reported similar afterlife beliefs. However, a significant gender difference was observed in death anxiety, $t(198) = -2.35$, $p < .05$, with females ($M = 55.60$, $SD = 10.85$) exhibiting higher death anxiety than males ($M = 51.61$, $SD = 10.55$). This

suggests that female participants experienced greater fear and concern related to death.

A MANOVA examined differences in afterlife beliefs and death anxiety across age, frequency of prayer, and private religious practices. Results indicated a significant multivariate effect for frequency of prayer, Pillai's Trace = .095, $F(10, 388) = 1.938$, $p = .039$, partial $\eta^2 = .048$, whereas age ($p = .257$) and private religious practices ($p = .402$) showed no significant effects. Follow-up

ANOVAs revealed that prayer frequency significantly influenced afterlife beliefs, $F(3, 194) = 2.94, p = .037$, with individuals praying daily ($M = 22.14, SD = 2.96$) or several times a week ($M = 20.87, SD = 2.99$) reporting stronger beliefs than those praying occasionally or rarely.

Death anxiety did not differ significantly across prayer frequency, $F(3, 194) = 1.87, p = .101$, nor did age or private religious practices affect afterlife beliefs or death anxiety. These findings suggest that frequency of prayer is the key demographic factor associated with stronger afterlife beliefs, while age and private religious practices do not meaningfully differentiate participants' beliefs or death-related anxiety.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between Islamic afterlife beliefs and death anxiety among young adults in Pakistan, with particular attention to punishment and reward beliefs as separate dimensions. The hypotheses were tested through correlational, regression, group comparison, and multivariate analyses. Overall, the findings offer meaningful insight into how culturally embedded spiritual beliefs shape existential concerns in emerging adulthood. These results also align closely with established theoretical frameworks such as Terror Management Theory (TMT), existential perspectives, and religious coping models, providing a coherent foundation for interpreting the outcomes.

The first hypothesis proposed a significant relationship between afterlife beliefs both punishment and reward dimensions, and death anxiety. Consistent with expectations, the results showed a statistically significant negative correlation between overall afterlife belief and death anxiety ($r = -.33, p < .01$). This pattern was also observed for punishment belief ($r = -.243, p < .01$) and reward belief ($r = -.259, p < .01$), indicating that higher endorsement of afterlife-related beliefs is associated with lower death-related fear. These findings support the argument that beliefs in divine judgment, moral accountability, and post-death continuity may offer psychological reassurance (Jong, 2021), thus reducing anxiety about mortality. Previous studies

similarly report that religious worldviews help individuals regulate existential fears by offering meaningful interpretations of life and death (Vail et al., 2019) and by providing structured frameworks for moral and emotional stability (Weber & Pargament, 2017). In Islamic cultural contexts, afterlife beliefs are deeply intertwined with spiritual identity, reflecting a worldview in which death is integrated into daily consciousness and moral reflection (Al-Issa et al., 2021). The current findings reinforce this perspective by showing that strong afterlife beliefs may serve as a buffer against death anxiety among young adults. Interestingly, while both reward and punishment beliefs were correlated with lower death anxiety, they were not significantly associated with each other ($r = -.004$). This independence suggests that individuals may selectively internalize beliefs related to divine mercy or divine punishment rather than accepting them as a single construct. Previous literature similarly highlights that punishment beliefs may intensify distress for some individuals while reducing it for others, depending on how they integrate ideas of accountability and hope (Henrie & Patrick, 2014); however, the present findings lean toward a protective interpretation, possibly because participants viewed punishment within a broader spiritual framework emphasizing justice rather than fear. The second hypothesis stated that afterlife beliefs would significantly predict levels of death anxiety. Regression analysis supported this hypothesis, revealing that afterlife belief scores were a significant negative predictor of death anxiety ($\beta = -.33, p < .001$), explaining 11% of the variance. These findings align with formulations in existential and TMT literature, which assert that religious worldviews reduce mortality-related distress by offering symbolic or literal immortality (Pyszczynski et al., 2015) and by grounding individuals in culturally meaningful belief systems (Routledge & Juhl, 2010). Moreover, the predictive value of afterlife beliefs underscores their role as a cognitive-emotional resource that shapes how young adults understand death, uncertainty, and the meaning of life (Schnell, 2025); (Chang et al., 2021). The relatively modest variance explained (11%) also highlights that although afterlife beliefs contribute to lowering

anxiety, other psychological, social, and developmental factors likely interact with these beliefs, warranting further investigation.

The third hypothesis examined gender differences in afterlife beliefs. Consistent with the t-test results, no significant gender differences were found for afterlife beliefs, indicating that both males and females endorsed similar levels of belief in divine reward and punishment. This aligns with research showing that in collectivistic religious cultures, religious identity and belief systems tend to be equally internalized across genders (Saroglou & Muñoz-García, 2018); (Ghuloum et al., 2024). However, a significant gender difference emerged in death anxiety, with females reporting higher death anxiety than males. This pattern is supported by prior findings showing that women often report greater emotional sensitivity to existential concerns, possibly due to higher levels of generalized anxiety or sociocultural expectations around emotional expressiveness (Sarhadi & Mazloom, 2025). The current findings therefore complement earlier literature by confirming gender-based emotional differences even when religious belief systems are comparable. The fourth hypothesis tested differences in afterlife beliefs and death anxiety across age, prayer frequency, and private religious practices. MANOVA results showed no significant group differences across age or private religious practices, suggesting that these factors do not meaningfully differentiate belief structures or death anxiety levels within the narrow developmental window of emerging adulthood. This supports earlier observations that young adults across different ages share similar existential orientations and religious developmental tendencies (Arnett, 2019). However, frequency of prayer demonstrated a significant multivariate effect, influencing afterlife beliefs but not death anxiety. The finding that daily or frequent prayer is linked to stronger afterlife beliefs aligns with literature suggesting that religious rituals strengthen cognitive accessibility of spiritual concepts (Richert & Corriveau, 2022) and reinforce internalized moral and metaphysical frameworks (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2015). Yet, the absence of differences in death anxiety suggests that prayer frequency may enhance belief structure without

necessarily altering immediate emotional responses to mortality. These findings align with research indicating that death anxiety is influenced by a complex interaction of beliefs, coping processes, personality, and life experiences rather than religious rituals alone (Dezutter et al., 2008).

Taken together, the results offer a cohesive understanding of how Islamic afterlife beliefs intersect with existential concerns in young adulthood. Stronger afterlife beliefs, whether centred on reward or punishment, appear to reduce death anxiety, reinforcing the idea that structured metaphysical worldviews help individuals navigate mortality with greater psychological resilience. The absence of gender differences in belief structures underscores the shared cultural foundation of young adults, while the higher death anxiety among females highlights important gender-related psychological patterns. The role of prayer frequency further suggests that religious rituals contribute to belief reinforcement, although emotional outcomes may require deeper spiritual or cognitive internalization.

Implications of these findings extend to counselling, mental health services, and educational settings. Understanding the protective value of afterlife beliefs may help practitioners integrate culturally sensitive spiritual discussions into therapy, particularly for clients experiencing existential anxiety. Educators and campus counsellors may also benefit from recognizing the centrality of spiritual identity among Muslim youth and how it shapes emotional well-being.

Future research should consider longitudinal designs to track how afterlife beliefs evolve over time and how life events influence the connection between belief systems and death anxiety. Studies incorporating psychological variables such as resilience, attachment, cognitive flexibility, and moral identity could deepen understanding of the mechanisms involved. Cross-cultural comparisons may also reveal how Islamic afterlife beliefs differ in their psychological effects from beliefs in other religious traditions.

CONCLUSION

The present study explored how Islamic afterlife beliefs specifically reward and punishment beliefs relate to death anxiety among educated young adults in Pakistan. The findings consistently showed that stronger afterlife beliefs were associated with lower levels of death anxiety. Both the correlational and regression results demonstrated that afterlife beliefs function as a meaningful psychological resource that helps young adults manage thoughts and fears related to mortality. These results support theoretical perspectives that describe religious worldviews as providing existential comfort, a sense of order, and moral direction in response to the uncertainty surrounding death.

Gender differences emerged only in death anxiety, with females reporting higher fear of death than males, while beliefs about the afterlife remained similar across genders. This pattern suggests that although spiritual beliefs may be shared across the population, emotional responses to existential concerns may vary. Additionally, the finding that prayer frequency predicted afterlife beliefs but not death anxiety indicates that religious practices help reinforce belief structures even when emotional outcomes remain unchanged.

Overall, the study adds culturally grounded evidence to the existing literature by emphasizing how Islamic belief systems shape emotional responses to death in young adulthood. The results highlight that afterlife beliefs, when internalized as part of one's worldview, may serve as a stabilizing and protective framework for navigating existential issues. This study contributes a nuanced understanding of how spiritual beliefs operate within Muslim-majority contexts and underscores the importance of examining culturally specific constructs in psychological research.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings carry several important implications for psychological practice, education, and future research involving Muslim youth:

Mental health professionals working with Muslim young adults may incorporate discussions about spiritual beliefs and afterlife concepts as part of culturally informed interventions. Since afterlife

beliefs were shown to reduce death anxiety, therapists can explore how clients' spiritual frameworks contribute to emotional

Campus counsellors and student support centres may benefit from recognizing the strong role spirituality plays in identity formation during emerging adulthood. Integrating seminars or workshops that address existential concerns through culturally familiar concepts may help students develop healthier coping mechanisms.

Programs focusing on religious education or spiritual development may incorporate psychological perspectives to help young adults relate their beliefs to emotional well-being. Strengthening reward-oriented interpretations of the afterlife may also promote resilience. Since prayer frequency strengthened belief systems, community leaders and educators might consider how structured religious practices support identity stability and reduce existential uncertainty.

Given the limited attention to existential well-being in public mental health initiatives, policy makers could incorporate culturally rooted spiritual variables into national mental health awareness campaigns and youth well-being programs.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While the study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged to guide future research:

The study used a cross-sectional design, which limits conclusions about the direction of the relationship between afterlife beliefs and death anxiety. Longitudinal research could clarify whether stronger beliefs reduce anxiety over time or whether individuals with lower anxiety are more inclined toward spiritual certainty.

Participants were recruited using convenience sampling from universities, which may limit generalizability. Future research should include more diverse samples such as non-students, rural populations, and individuals across broader age ranges to strengthen external validity.

The reliance on self-report questionnaires may introduce social desirability bias, especially in religious contexts where participants may feel pressure to endorse stronger spiritual beliefs.

Incorporating qualitative interviews or mixed methodologies would provide deeper insight into how young adults interpret afterlife concepts.

The study focused primarily on afterlife beliefs and demographic characteristics. Future research could benefit from adding variables such as coping styles, resilience, attachment patterns, personality traits, or exposure to death-related experiences to understand the mechanisms underlying death anxiety more fully. While studying Islamic afterlife beliefs is a strength, it also limits the applicability of findings to non-Muslim contexts. Comparative cross-cultural studies would help identify universal versus culturally specific aspects of the relationship between spiritual beliefs and death anxiety.

REFERENCES

- Abdel-Khalek, A. M. (2017). Death anxiety in clinical and non-clinical groups. *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*, 74(1), 73-89.
- Pandya, A. K., & Kathuria, T. (2021). Death anxiety, religiosity and culture: Implications for therapeutic process and future research. *Religions*, 12(1), 61.
- Jong, J. (2021). Death anxiety and religion. *Current opinion in psychology*, 40, 40-44.
- Menzies RE, McMullen K, Riotto GD, Iliescu S, Petrovic B, Remfrey M. From dread to disorder: A meta-analysis of the impact of death anxiety on mental illness symptoms. *Clin Psychol Rev*.
- Jong, J., Ross, R., Philip, T., Chang, S. H., Simons, N., & Halberstadt, J. (2018). The religious correlates of death anxiety: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Religion, Brain & Behaviour*, 8(1), 4-20.
- Vail, K. E., Soenke, M., Waggoner, B., & Arndt, J. (2019). Terror management theory and religious belief. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 28(5), 488-493.
- Weber, S. R., & Pargament, K. I. (2017). The role of religion and spirituality in mental health. *Current Opinion in Psychiatry*, 30(5), 358-363.
- Al-Issa, R., Krauss, S. E., Roslan, S., Abdullah, H., & Al-Issa, R. S. (2021). The relationship between afterlife beliefs and mental wellbeing among Jordanian Muslim youth. *Journal of Muslim Mental Health*, 15(1).
- Henrie, J., & Patrick, J. H. (2014). Religiousness, religious doubt, and death anxiety. *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 78(3), 203-227.
- Al-Sabwah, M. N., & Abdel-Khalek, A. M. (2006). Religiosity and death distress in Arabic college students. *Death studies*, 30(4), 365-375.
- Arnett, J. J. (2019). *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Chan, L. C., & Yap, C. C. (2009). Age, gender, and religiosity as related to death anxiety. *Sunway academic journal*, 6, 1-16.
- Bassett, J. F., & Bussard, M. L. (2018). Examining the Complex Relation Among Religion, Morality, and Death Anxiety: Religion Can Be a Source of Comfort and Concern Regarding Fears of Death. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, 82(3), 467-487.
- Dadfar, M., & Lester, D. (2017). Religiously, spirituality and death anxiety. *Austin J Psychiatry Behav Sci*, 4(1), 1061.
- Saroglou, V., & Muñoz-García, A. (2018). Psychology of religion in a globalizing world. *Archive for the Psychology of Religion*, 40(1), 1-24.
- Thorson, J. A., & Powell, F. C. (2015). A revised death anxiety scale. In *Death anxiety handbook: Research, instrumentation, and application* (pp. 31-43). Taylor & Francis.
- Sarhadi, M., & Mazloom, S. (2025). Death Anxiety in Nursing Students. *Health Education and Health Promotion*, 12(3), 423-430.
- Chang, B., Cheng, J., Fang, J., & Dang, J. (2021). The indirect effect of death anxiety on experienced meaning in life via search for meaning and prosocial behavior. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 673460.
- Neimeyer, R. A., Wittkowski, J., & Moser, R. P. (2004). Psychological research on death attitudes: An overview and evaluation. *Death studies*, 28(4), 309-340.

- Abdel-Khalek, A. M., & Thorson, J. A. (2006). Religiosity and Death Anxiety in American and Egyptian College Students.
- Yalom, I. D. (2008). Staring at the sun: Overcoming the terror of death. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 36(3-4), 283-297.
- Schnell, T. (2025). *The Psychology of Meaning in Life: Insights and Applications*. Taylor & Francis.
- Routledge, C., & Juhl, J. (2010). When death thoughts lead to death fears: Mortality salience increases death anxiety for individuals who lack meaning in life. *Cognition and Emotion*, 24(5), 848-854.
- Vergani, M., O'Brien, K. S., Lentini, P., & Barton, G. (2019). Does the awareness of mortality shape people's openness to violence and conflict? An examination of terror management theory. *Political Psychology*, 40(1), 111-124.
- Dezutter, J., Soenens, B., Luyckx, K., Bruyneel, S., Vansteenkiste, M., Duriez, B., & Hutsebaut, D. (2008). The Role Of Religion in Death Attitudes: Distinguishing Between Religious Belief and Style of Processing Religious Contents. *Death Studies*, 33(1), 73-92.
- Abu-Raiya, H., & Pargament, K. I. (2015). Religious coping among diverse religions: Commonalities and divergences. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 7(1), 24.
- Abu-Raiya, H., Pargament, K. I., & Krause, N. (2016). Religion as problem, religion as solution: Religious buffers of the links between religious/spiritual struggles and well-being/mental health. *Quality of Life Research*, 25(5), 1265-1274.
- Richert, R. A., & Corriveau, K. H. (2022). Development of religious cognition. *Annual Review of Developmental Psychology*, 4(1), 185-206.
- Ghuloum, S., Al-Thani, H. A., & Al-Amin, H. (2024). Religion and mental health: an Eastern Mediterranean region perspective. *Frontiers in psychology*, 15, 1441560.
- Pyszczynski, T., Solomon, S., & Greenberg, J. (2015). Thirty years of terror management theory. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 52, 1-70.
- Spitzenstätter, Daniel & Schnell, Tatjana. (2020). Effects of mortality awareness on attitudes toward dying and death and meaning in life—a randomized controlled trial. *Death Studies*. 46. 1-15.