

# Color Identification on Death Perception of Teenagers

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**Abstract**—The rate of suicide is increasing tremendously in Malaysia, especially among teenagers. There is a need to pay serious attention to this social issue. There are plenty of researches have been done to investigate the cause factors of teen's suicide. In this paper, we explore on the perception of death among teenagers, particularly on colour identification. As Malaysia is a multi-racial nation with various culture and ethnics, we analyzed the color identification which represents distinct death perception among three major ethnics, namely Malays, Indians and Chinese. This study employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative approach. A total of 269 students which comprises of 127 male and 142 female from different urban parts of west Malaysia, such as northern, central and southern areas were recruited in this study. The sampling frame comprises of teenagers and young adult aged 15-24 from secondary, university campus and hospital setting. In this particular paper, one of the survey questions of this study will be presented. The unique colour identified by various ethnic groups was found, and a discussion about the cultural difference on the perception of death is given. With this sensitivity shown in cultural difference, it is hoped that this is just another step forward in curbing the risk factors of teenage suicide.

**Index term**—Color identification, suicide, perception of death, culture and ethics.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The risk of suicide increases dramatically both in western and oriental country. However most of the cases belonged to attempted suicide. The reason behind a teen's attempted suicide could be very complex. It could due to family issues, unhappiness in school, friendship, boy-girl relationship and other factors. The alarming case occurred on 8 February 2011, awakened most of the Chinese who were still happily celebrating the Lunar Festival. A seventeen- year- old student jumped to her death at school. According to New Strait Times (dated 9 Feb 2011), she did not show any signs of emotional breakdown or stress prior to jumping. A student who was so bright and with no disciplinary difficulty made up her guts to do such a final decision raised up a big question mark in us. Of course all sorts of possibilities could be the leading factors; however her death concept and perspective could be the determinative factor of all.

Hence this paper will focus mainly on the concept and perspective of teens towards death which may contribute to the suicidal thought and at the same time to discover the perspective of meaning in life so that we could draw out inner strength for teens to triumph over the suicidal thoughts that enter into their minds.

Attempted suicide could be quite rare under twelve years of age. The rarity of attempted suicide of this age may be because the concept of death develops late in childhood, with full awareness of the implications of death not being gained until early adolescence [1] Furthermore according to cognitive development, the capacity of abstract thinking, including the concept of death begins in adolescence [2]. If it is true, teenagers have the inclination to fall into attempting suicide, compared to children, is because the concept of death has been established in this stage of development. However, does it mean that development of the death concept lead to suicidal thought? Well, it could be true not until delve into better understanding about the concept of death in teens.

Besides intellectual capacities, emotion of a teenager can be an important factor in curbing suicidal attempt. Undeniably, emotion is part of our daily life and it varies from individual to individual. Teenagers who are imbued with lots of emotions can use them as a compass in decision-making process. It would be no surprise if somebody comes up and deny the above statement and asserts that emotion of teenager cannot be a tool to prevent the occurrence of undesirable events, because emotion of teenager is so intractable and so often seen as the culprit in suicide attempting/ committing. Nussbaum aptly reminded us that emotions are suffused with intelligence and discernment, and hence it has the evaluative capability in ethical decision-making [3].

In Europe and America there appears to be an assumption that color has some degree of emotional value [4]. Therefore, the understanding of the death perspective of teenager should be put under the light of emotion. Using colors to construe or illustrate human emotion and perception is an integral unit to understand different society culture. Human with different cultural and religion background could have different perspective on death. From a research done by Bordere [5] revealed that Black teenage males perceived death as a cause for celebration, remembrance and unity related to their experiences with the second-line ritual (music possession). The result could be different from Malays, Chinese and Indians in Malaysia because of different cultural background,

There are cultural differences in the perception of death in terms of the color perception. Most literatures associate black color to death as it is the color for funeral and mourning, for instance during funerals of traditional Chinese, Buddhist and Japanese, the clothing worn are black. However, white is also associated with death by some authors [6] includes the Turkish tradition (Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism). Besides, in Chinese funerals, yellow and white chrysanthemums are the flower of choice for those occasions associated with death.

These discrepancies of perception of color also exhibited

in the multiple associations even within one color. For instance, although black color has been frequently associated with death and mourning, it has the association with sorrow, melancholy, dismal and gloomy and sad in 1965 [7]. So, black color can be associated with death, and also sorrow. Likewise, white can be associated with death and peace. It depends on the various perspective of interpretation from psychological property or cultural difference (Psychological property of color) as different individuals express using the same language (in our case would be expression of affective dimension using choice of color) to interpret the world in a similar way as they share similar conceptual maps in a more or less similar culture [8]. There will be no consensus as to which colors would be the best fit to represent death. This involved what Margaret Mead [9] mentioned culture serves as a constitutive medium of individual experiences. Therefore cultural sensitivity is important [10].

Malaysia comprises of multi races with different religion and cultural background. Thus it is noteworthy to explore the perspective of teens on death from different cultural aspects. Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism and traditional Chinese medicine have influenced Chinese people for thousands of years, particularly in relation to death and dying [11]. These cultures and traditions play an important role in forming Chinese belief and philosophy on death.

Muslims believe death is an event between two lives, not an absolute cessation of life. Thus religiosity may influence Muslims differently about death. To explore the impact of religiosity on death perception, a cross-sectional, descriptive, analytic and correlational study was conducted by a two researchers [12] on 150 Muslims. This research hypothesized that religiosity may help Muslims adjust to death since religiosity as a criterion of Muslims influenced the quality of adjustment with death positively.

Hindus believe in concept of many incarnations, with the ultimate goal reuniting with the Supreme Being, Brahman. Therefore the most important event of a Hindu is his/her death. This concept of death illustrates a life on earth as temporary. All the possessions, ego, power, and learning will all end. Once this truth is discovered then one can turn their mind towards God.

Death is inexplicable through words yet full of emotions. If what Nussbaum [3] says is correct, emotions has its own intelligence, the perception on death is aptly to be expressed in colours identification.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This paper report is only one of the survey questions of our study, which relates to “colour identification to death perception”. The findings for other survey questions of this study were published in the same journal [13, 14].

A total of 269 students comprise of 127 male and 142 female from different urban parts of west Malaysia, such as northern, central and southern areas were recruited in this study. The sampling frame comprised of teenagers and young adult aged 15-24 from secondary schools, university campuses and hospital settings.

Permission of study was obtained through the Ministry of Education. The participants were informed of their rights,

and the information will be kept in confidential, only group data would be used for publication.

A survey form was distributed face-to-face to the participants except for residential and online group whereby drop-off administration was carried out. A token of appreciation was given to the participants.

The survey form aimed to find out the perspectives of teens on the topic of death and the color they use to represent those emotions. SPSS was used to tabulate statistic figures and the sorting out of the choice of color the students chose.

While acknowledging the subjectivity of the color perception and identification, we also take note the interpretation process of individuals from various cultural background in symbolizing their affection. The transferring of meanings from a symbolic color chosen is not that straight forward as the process relates to human existence, human self, thoughts and life experiences, especially experiences from the culture in which the individuals embedded. Due to the above mentioned complexity in expressing or interpretation of color, descriptions of the three choices of colour to represent death were given to avoid confusion. Therefore the participants agreed to the interpretation of the color description when they chose a certain color to represent death. The descriptions given were:

Black: evil, fearful, beyond understanding

Red: anger, hatred and revenge

Blue: peaceful, heaven and freedom.

Participants thus chose the color together with the descriptions to represent their perception on death.

## III. FINDINGS

### Question 4: Choose a colour to represent death

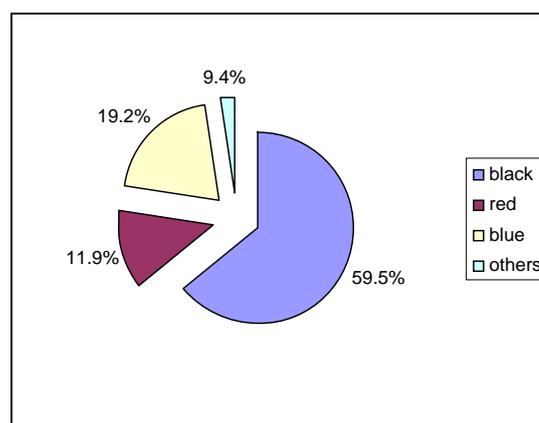


Fig. 1.

From the total of 269 teens who were asked to choose a colour to represent death, there were 59.5% (n=160) teens that chose black as the representative colour for death. The participants who chose black to represent death seemed to agree with the descriptions that Black brings the meaning of evil, fearful and beyond understanding. Around 30% of them chose blue and red to represent death (n=80) .

Apart from these three colors, white is another favorite color to be chosen to illustrate death. Participants who chose “others” as their choice for death color are given a space to write down what does that color mean to them.

Participants who chose white as the color that represent death wrote that white brings meaning of emptiness, no hope, returning to the creator, to mourn; while some use white to represent angel, heaven, peaceful and no regrets. Green, yellow and purple also fall into the category of the others. Some of the participants chose green to indicate no future, freedom, peaceful (for muslims). Yellow was chosen to represent a brand new world and experiences while purple carries the meaning of despair and sorrow.

From the collective results for questions 4, three categories of teens' perspective on death can be drawn out: one group perceives death as something very dreadful, evil, anger; second group may think death as unfathomable, inexplicable and the third group looks at death with utopian ideology, which is something very nice, peaceful and free from worries and unhappiness.

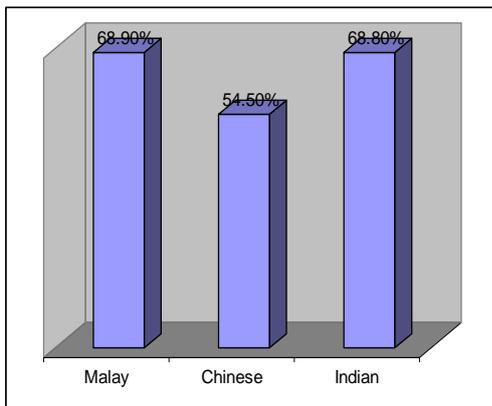


Fig. 2.

Chart B shows the percentage of participants who chose black as the representative of death. From the total of participants (n=269), there are 61 Malay participants and 42 of them chose black colour as the representative of death, which is 68.9%. There are 187 Chinese participants and 102 of them chose black color to represent death, which is 54.5%. Out of 16 Indians participants, there are 11 of them chose black to represent death (68.8%).

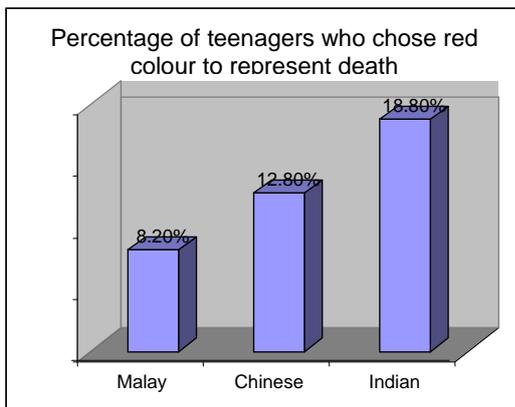


Fig. 3.

Chart C shows the percentage of participants who chose red as their representative colour of death. Only 5 participants out of 61 Malay participants chose red to represent death (8.2%) There are 24 Chinese from the total of 188 chose red as color representative of death, which is

12.8%. While there is 18.8% (3 out of 16) of Indians chose red to represent death.

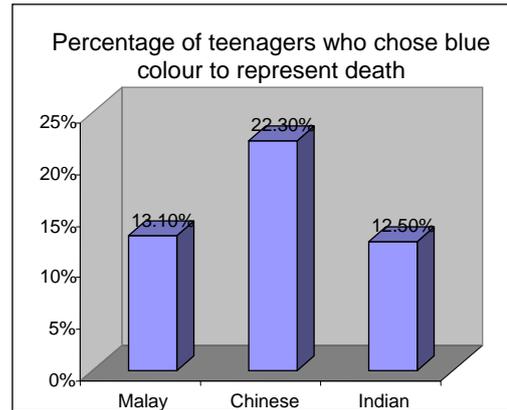


Fig. 4.

Chart D shows the percentage of participants who chose blue colour as representation to death. There are 8 Malay participants out of 61 chose blue to represent death, which is 13.1%, while 22.3% of Chinese (41 out of 184) chose blue as color of death representative. There are only 2 Indians from the total of 16 chose blue to represent death.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

A total of 59.5% (n=160) of teenagers chose black to represent death may imply that most of the teenagers perceive death as evil and fearful. Teenagers will perceive death as fearful and beyond understanding could be also due to their ignorance about death. In short, teenagers do not really understand what death means to them. In some cases, teenagers see death as a place with no problems and able to have complete peacefulness, thus they believe that putting themselves to death is the only way to solve their problems. In other words, death even though could be a mystery to teenagers, yet is primarily escapism.

Chinese has the lowest percentage compared to Malays and Indians in choosing black as the death color (Re: chart B) could be due to the influence of Taoism. In Taoism death is not to be avoided; on the other hand, it is worth pursuing, because in their belief, death is a cyclical change that regenerates the life process also as an opportunity to transition a family member from biological propagator to a spiritual benefactor [15]. Death is therefore being looking forward. So teenagers with Taoism background may perceive death as eternal peace, but not evil nor fearful. Therefore some of them will choose white colour which brings the meaning of heaven and peace.

Apart from Taoism, Chinese with Buddhism also possess a different set of belief system in contributing to the lowest percentage of choosing black as the death colour. According to Buddhism, life does not only begin at the moment of birth and death does not imply the end of life: it is the beginning of another life. By doing good deeds in this life, a better future life can follow [16]. Hence this is the basic concept of death from Buddhism, in which death is not the final event. In other words Buddhists do not perceive death as evil or fearful.

The result analysis also shows that a number of Chinese (n= 24 out of 188) chose red as the cooler of death, in which red implies hatred and anger (Re: Chat C) In Chinese metaphysics the positive, immaterial, and celestial aspect of the human soul is termed “sin”{[lǐ] (gods or deities); the negative, material and terrestrial side of the soul is called “kui” 鬼 (general name for ghosts). Philosopher associate sin with growth, production and life; kui is identified as decline, destruction and death [17]. The deceased will turn into “kui” if he/she died with unfinished hatred and anger. The implicit influence of the traditional Chinese metaphysical belief to the Chinese community thus carried down from generation to generation with the concept of death is closely related to hatred and anger.

There are quite a number of Malay participants (n=42 out of 61) chose black as the color of death (Re: chart B). The decision to wear black color in a funeral context was taken by rulers of the Iraq-based Abbasiq Muslim dynasty (CE 750-1258) and later as Islam spread to Indonesia, it fixed there and black became a color of mourning for Muslims. [18] However the tradition of using black for funerals does not happen among Muslims in Pakistan and Bangladesh, white is their color of mourning. Apparently Muslims use of black never took hold, perhaps the Hindu Custom were so firmly entrenched. [18] Malays in Malaysia are influenced by the Indonesia Muslims as Parameswara who was the founder for Melaka came from Sumatra, Indonesia. However in current Malay funeral rituals, white are a commonly seen and a representative of mourning. This can be explained by historical reason. Dating from 1303 CE, a stone monument with Arabic inscriptions was found in Terengganu, east-coast of Malaysia indicating the first arrival of Islam in Malaysia. [19] The Advent of Islam on the Peninsula has been attributed to the influence of the Indian Muslims traders. [20]

Overall the number of Indian Participants in this research is small and therefore the results may not be able to generalize. However from the three color representatives, namely black, blue and red, most of them chose black color (n=11 of 16; Re: Chat B). Even though Indians that chose red as color to represent death (18.8%) is relatively higher than Chinese (12.8%) (Re: Chart C), but its result carries less significance to be discussed due to the smaller size of sample n=16 compared to Chinese’s sample n=188.

## V. CONCLUSION

Undeniably, Chinese tradition belief, Islam or Hinduism portray a positive perspective on death. Even though Indian has the highest percentage in choosing red to represent anger and hatred, it does not elucidate that most of the Indians perceive death as anger or hatred. The Indian teens in our sample may not have any religion belief (including Hinduism) or their religion faith is not strong and firm. Thus, small sample size and sample without firm religion faith can affect the result of colour identification. Therefore we can only observe that there is disparity of death

perspective among the three races without making a definite conclusion that which cultural group is having the most tendencies to attempt/commit suicide.

Knowing the disparity of death perspective on these three main races is exclusively important for the counselors and voluntary helpers to place different weighty attention on different group of ethnics when comes to life educational programme or counseling sessions.

On top of that, planting a seed of religion faith in the heart of teens is essential to make sure they are guided in the right pathway about life and death. This could help students in having a positive life and death perspective and ultimately preventing suicidal cases.

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