

Research Article

Exploring Existential Anxiety among Indian Youth: Prevalence and Gender Differences

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A B S T R A C T

Background: Existential anxiety (EA) refers to the feeling of uncertainty regarding life and its meaning. It is gaining increasing attention on social media in the form of existential humour. The present study aimed to explore the prevalence of EA among Indian youth and gender differences among those experiencing EA.

Method: The sample consisted of 30 males and 39 females (N = 69) falling in the age range of 17-29 years. The quantitative tool used was the Existential Concerns Questionnaire. For the qualitative aspect, three open-ended questions were given at the end of the scale.

Result: Upon analysing the quantitative data, it was found that there existed no significant differences ($p = 0.24$) between the EA levels of males (M = 52.53, SD = 16.73; moderate) and females (M = 56.97, SD = 14.20; moderate). Thematic network analysis of the qualitative data revealed common themes amongst the genders (uncertainty, negative emotions, competition/ success, meaning-making, social media, and life events). The only theme that was present among females was that of social pressures.

Conclusion: There is a medium-low EA prevalence rate among the participants. Furthermore, major gender differences don't seem to exist in the experience of such anxiety, barring the theme of social pressures which affects the females.

Keywords: Existential Anxiety (EA), Gender, Indian youth, Meaning Making, Negativity, Social Media, Social Pressures

Introduction

"Who am I?", "What is the purpose of my existence?" These are some questions that have plagued philosophers over the years. Both Sartre and Camus have emphasized upon how life being limited and essentially meaningless can result in feelings of extreme dread, which has been associated with the feeling of EA.^{1,2}

EA is a subset of existentialism and can be understood as an

excessive rumination on concerns like the meaning of life, death, and fundamental loneliness¹⁸. Tillich proposed three domains of EA, namely: a) Fate and Death (threat to one's being and personal self), b) Emptiness and Meaninglessness (fear of there being no "ultimate concern"), and c) Guilt and Condemnation (threat to moral and ethical identity), which have been at the core of most studies in the area of EA.³

Popovic differentiated between normal and EA by stating that the former may be triggered by specific events such

as losing a job, whereas the latter refers to uncertainties relating to the human condition and existence itself.⁴

EA is known to be a universal human experience and people experience the same at various turning points in life.^{3,5} A study found that EA concerns are common among adolescents, and are associated with psychological symptoms, as well as identity issues.⁶ Scarce, yet pertinent research has revealed that some young adults may be experiencing seemingly intense EA.⁵

In the current times, social media is flooded with posts having an existential theme, be it existential dread or existential humour.⁷ Though, research has indicated that humour acts as a buffer of EA,⁸ it remains to be seen if EA is just for the humour or a result of the feeling of existential angst and their active coping with it.

With the onset of globalization, EA has heightened. Existential angst has also been related to the incidences of mental disorders. For example, a study found that individuals displaying symptoms of anorexia nervosa appeared to experience lower existential well-being than their peers who did not suffer from the disorder.⁹ There is also evidence that exposure to traumatic stress may strengthen association with mental health issues and increase the salience of existential concerns.¹⁰

There doesn't exist much information on EA per se in the Indian context. However, a study conducted on an Indian population revealed that people with medium to high EA reflected elements of the same in their social media posts. Moreover, a major chunk of the analysed posts seemed to have a theme of death and fate, followed by emptiness and meaninglessness; fewer young adults were revealed to reflect guilt and condemnation, as observed from their social media profiles.¹¹

The Indian Context: Gender Inequality

India is beset with certain societal issues related to sociocultural hegemony and gender inequality that often result in inequalities of income and opportunity.¹² Patriarchy is one such norm in India that applies in particular to women as their lives and decisions for the same are often controlled and monitored by the men in the family.^{13,14}

Indian culture views a woman as a member of the family or a group, but not as an individual with her own identity, making their experience with the existential questions of meaning and existence, a point worth studying.¹⁵

In terms of the gender differences within the expression of EA on social media within the Indian population, a study revealed that relatively more male youth reflected on the theme of fate and death, and emptiness and meaninglessness, while, more females dwelled upon guilt and condemnation.¹¹

The rationale for this study stems from the observed upsurge in the frequency of existentialist humour in social media. Lately, dark humour, with often reflecting existential tones, is another way for young adults to unite against the pressures of society. Though this could raise questions of mental health awareness, dark humour could just be the younger generation's method of relating to one another and making light of the issues that they face. Since young adults are the major users of such media platforms,^{16,17} the present study wished to explore further into whether they actually do experience EA and if there exist any gender differences in the experiencing of such anxiety.

Method

Sample

The participants were 39 females and 30 males (N = 69) in the age group of 17-29 years. All the participants were of Indian origin, and the data were collected online.

Tool

The Existential Concerns Questionnaire (ECQ)¹⁸ was administered followed by three open-ended questions (questionnaire) which assessed the participants' understanding of EA, whether they had ever faced an existential crisis and details about the same if they had, and if they felt that their age group experiences more of such anxiety.

Procedure

The study was conducted from August 2018 to September 2018. Upon obtaining informed consent, the participants were given Google Form links wherein the scale, as well as the questionnaire, were given. Inclusion criteria consisted of Indians in the age group of 18-30 years. Individuals not belonging to this age group and nationality were excluded. Once participants had submitted their responses, the results were collated following which, quantitative analysis was done via t-test. The qualitative analysis followed the thematic network method.¹⁹

Ethical Approval

Since it was an independent study, not funded by any organization, ethical approval was not required. Instead, informed consent forms were provided digitally to the participants and they provided their consent through the same.

Result

The t-test was carried out to observe whether any significant differences existed among the existential concerns (EC) levels of males and females. The categories of low, medium, high, and extremely high EC were formulated after seeking permission from the author of the scale.

Table 1. Result of Test of Significance between EC Scores of Males and Females

Gender	n	M	SD	t-value	df	p-value
Female	39	56.97	14.20	1.19	67	0.24
Male	30	52.53	16.73			

Table 2. Distribution of Scores of all Participants (n = 69) on Categories of EC: Low, Medium, High, Extremely high

Gender	n	Low % (n)	Medium % (n)	High % (n)	Extremely High % (n)
Female	39	20.51 (8)	53.85 (21)	25.64 (10)	0 (0)
Male	30	36.67 (11)	40 (12)	23.33 (7)	0 (0)

As observed from Table 2, for the females, majority of the sample had a medium level of EC, followed by high EC, and the smallest category was that of low EC. For males, on the other hand, the majority fit into the medium EC category followed by the low category, and lastly the high EC category. None of the groups had any participants obtaining a score indicating extremely high EC.

both genders. The qualitative analysis also found that out of the total sample, 57.97% claimed to have experienced an existential crisis at some point in their lives. Moreover, 84.05% of the participants reported feeling that their age group experiences more of such anxiety. The themes and their sub-themes have been discussed as follows.

Theme 1: Meaning Making

Attempts at understanding life, trying to find its meaning, questioning whether it has any meaning to begin with, and curiosity about the purpose of life, were some of the responses that were recorded. Since the sample was young adults, the fact that they were at an earlier life stage could lead to the probability of higher levels of searching for meaning, and identity exploration.^{20,21,22,23}

Theme 2: Negativity

A prominent theme was that of negativity. This theme is made up of the basic themes of uncertainty, life events, and emotions. In reference to emotions, almost all of the participants had a very negative view of EA. They found it to be something that induced emotions of fear, discomfort, frustration, anxiety, and sadness. In terms of life events, experiencing the death of a loved one, illness and injury of family members, ageing of parents, and being stuck in the wrong job were some proceedings that led the participants to rethink the meaning of life and existence as a concept. It is a possibility that events such as these led participants to question the purpose of life, its meaning, and their own existence. The traditional Indian thought focuses greatly on desires in the causation of suffering, misery, and pain.²⁴ In the present study, we observe that a lot of the aforementioned life events have at their crux desires that were not fulfilled or eliminated, be it a desire to have a deceased parent back in their life, a desire to work at a different, more fulfilling job, a desire to have some sense of clarity. For the feeling of uncertainty, there were many participants who claimed to battle with the feelings of being lost and hopeless, confusion regarding who they were going to be, doubts about the future, attempting to understand self-worth, and more.

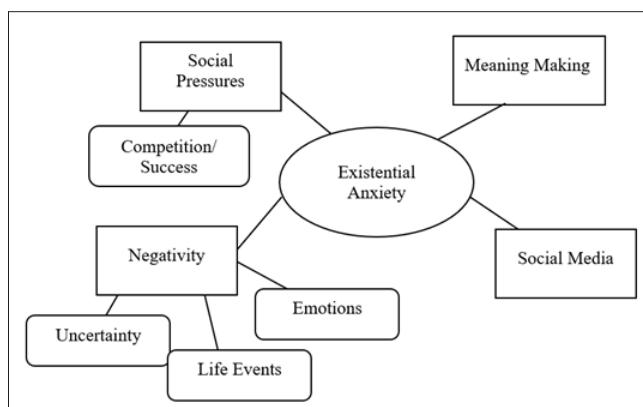


Figure 1. Thematic Network

Discussion

The quantitative result revealed a medium-low prevalence rate among the EA levels of the participants and no significant differences (p = 0.24) between males and females. Despite the same, it was found that the mean score for the females (M = 56.97, SD = 14.20) was higher than the mean score of the males (M = 52.53, SD = 16.73). This indicates that despite the lack of a statistically significant difference, females in the current sample seem to have a higher level of EA.

Qualitative analysis found commonalities in the themes amongst both genders. As visible in Figure 1, the global theme is that of EA. It is made up of the four organizing themes of meaning-making, social media, social pressures, and negativity. The latter two are further created by other basic themes. It should however be noted that the theme of social pressure was present only among the females. The basic theme of competition/ success was present with

Theme 3: Social Media

Social media was the major rationale for this study and was also evident as one of the themes. Participants felt that social media has led to a lot of comparisons which leads us to question our own existence, forget the reality, and get entrapped in the fake glamour portrayed online. Excessive use can result in social media fatigue which can lead to anxiety, frustration or depression.²⁵ This can further lead to us beginning to question our self-worth and whether our experience was even worthwhile.^{26,27} This is often worsened by the constant comparisons we make of other people's experiences on social media. Loneliness is also a major consequence of social media addiction.^{28,29,30} This can lead to EA.³¹

Theme 4: Social Pressures

This theme was prevalent amongst the females only. There could be various reasons for this, the primary one being the culture of patriarchy which is still prominent in a country like India. The pressure to prove themselves in a society that has always put them in an inferior position can be challenging and burdensome to many, thus possibly resulting in feelings of existential angst.^{32,33}

Certain aspects of the Indian culture could be a reason for this theme, such as 1) family structures, as in many parts of the country, patriarchal and patrilineal joint families are common and women within these family settings usually join the husband's family after marriage.^{34,35} Furthermore, the reproductive agency of Indian women in regard to family size, planning, and sex selection is usually believed to be under patriarchal control^{36,37,38,39} 2) there is a strong preference for a male child due to various reasons such as perceived economic utility, continuation of family name by sons, daughters seen as liabilities because of the dowry tradition^{40,41} and 3) the social construction of unequal power within a relationship, leads to gender inequality. It creates a distinct convention wherein males dominate and females are subservient. This is in most spheres of life, including the workplace.⁴²

Conclusion

In conclusion, we observe that the experience of EA is not as common an occurrence in the phase of emerging adulthood, as social media depicts it to be. It is something that individuals if not experiencing it themselves, have the notion that their age group faces a lot of. This could be due to the surge of existential humour and facts on social media, which is a common platform for the youth. In terms of gender differences, there were no significant differences in terms of the quantitative results ($p = 0.24$). However, the qualitative analysis revealed that for females, the theme of social pressure comes into play in the experience of EA. The sample being an Indian one, can be attributed to various factors, the main one being a patriarchal culture. Suggestions

for future research would be to segregate groups of young adults in terms of social media usage and the experience of such anxiety. Additionally, the role of social pressures with females as a contributor in their experience(s) of EA can be explored in further detail.

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