All humans must die. This human condition is ever present. Deathy-deathy-death-death.

Various existential philosophers and psychologists have proposed ways in which we deal with the awareness of death and the anxiety this awareness causes. Psychoanalyst Erik Erikson proposed that during mid-life one becomes acutely aware of their oncoming death and is motivated to care for things which will outlast themselves. He called this act of caring generativity. In *The Denial of Death* (1973), philosopher Ernest Becker posits that humans undertake immortality projects to curb their sense of vulnerability to death. Similarly, psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, a mentee of Erikson, described the awareness of death as being ever present and motivating us to create symbols thereby allowing ourselves to imagine us as symbolically immortalized. Existential psychiatrist, Irvin Yalom notes that many of his clients experiencing anxiety about their death take comfort in “rippling”, the idea that one’s lasting effects on the world will ripple out and influence the world after they have died. Although these thinkers use different terminology, there are common themes among their ideas: Our physical death is an inevitability, and we often find our awareness of its inevitability to be aversive (causing angst, death-anxiety, despair, being-towards-death, terror, etc.). However, we take comfort in the idea that other, non-physical parts of us continue to exist indefinitely after our biological death (heroic archetype, symbolic self), and we can act to promote these non-physical parts (search for meaning, immortality project, care, generativity, rippling).

Claims of how we suppress death-anxiety have been investigated experimentally, primarily through the paradigm of Terror Management Theory (TMT). Based on the theories of Ernest Becker, TMT posits that human awareness of death is always present to some degree. This awareness of our inevitable death coupled with a strong aversion to death causes terror and is pushed out of our consciousness by our creation of meaning systems. TMT refers to a person’s awareness of death as “Mortality Salience” (MS). The MS hypothesis of TMT posits that an increase in one’s awareness of death causes an increase compensatory behaviors to lower their death-anxiety either by distracting from the awareness of death or by the promotion of meaningful cultural worldviews. A meta-analysis of 277 experiments has found mortality salience to have moderate effects (*r* = 0.35; Burke, Martens & Faucher, 2010). TMT literature has found three consistent buffers of our awareness of death—self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, and cultural worldview.

TMT research is conducted in two paradigms. In the MS paradigm, a participant’s increased awareness of death causes an increase in compensatory buffers. In the death-thought accessibility paradigm, experimentally decreasing participants’ buffers, such as lowering self-esteem or challenging their worldview beliefs, causes an increase in their awareness of death. Together, these experiments provide convincing evidence of these of suppressing awareness of death and death anxiety. It is assumed that such changes in attitude and behavior suppress thoughts of death by giving a sense of existential immortality; however, to our knowledge no researchers have attempted to assess subjective feelings of immortality. This missing literature may in part be because of a lack of a viable measure of existential immortality. We view this dearth as a large gap in the literature and methodology.

To our knowledge, there has only been one attempt to develop such a measurement. Matthew’s and Kling (1988) developed the Sense of Symbolic Immortality Scale. This scale was based on Robert J. Lifton’s theory of symbolic immortality in which a sense of symbolic immortality can be achieved through five different modes: the biological mode in which one lives on through their genetic progeny, the creative mode in which one’s accomplishments outlast oneself, the natural mode in which one feels they are a part of the universe, the spiritual mode in which one transcends the biological and physical realm to a higher spiritual realm to transcend death, and the mode of experiential transcendence in which one experiences a phenomenological state of flow. The Sense of Symbolic Immortality Scale contains five subscales corresponding to each proposed mode.

We see multiple issues with using the Symbolic Immortality Scale. First, the study was underpowered, conducting exploratory factor analysis of 67 items using a sample of 136. Second, the study was conducted on a teenage population, and results may not generalize to the greater population. Third, the scale was developed in French, and we do not take for granted the psychometric properties of a translated version.

Most fundamentally, the scale has poor face validity and appears to measure the constructs theorized to symbolically immortalize rather than a sense of symbolic immortality directly. For example, the scale includes items such as “My sex life contributes greatly to my well-being”, “Intimate relationships scare me”, and “I am sure of who I am”, which, while related to the constructs which theoretically help cope with death, such as interpersonal relationships, or self-esteem, may be measurements of just those constructs rather than symbolic immortality itself. As with TMT, we understand theoretically how these constructs suppress awareness of death, but do not take for granted that they necessarily do.

The research at hand intends to develop a scale measuring one’s sense of existential immortality.