

Relationship between Affective Experiences and Management of Quarter Life Crisis among Fourth Year Students in Public Universities in the Eastern Region of Kenya

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ABSTRACT

University students often experience quarter-life crisis, a transitional phase that requires momentous adaptation given the academic workloads, financial burden, relationship struggles and the uncertain future. Therefore, this study sought to examine the relationship between affective experiences and management of quarter life crisis among fourth year students in public universities in the Eastern region of Kenya. The correlational research design was adopted for the study with a population of 9,006 made up of fourth year university students and student counsellors. Purposive and stratified sampling techniques were used to select a sample of 368 respondents with 358 university students and 10 student counsellors. The instruments used for data collection were, self-mastery scale, students' questionnaire and an interview guide. Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was done, the necessary permits obtained and respondents assured of confidentiality as well as voluntary participation. The collected data was analyzed through correlational analysis, descriptive statistics and thematic analysis methods with the aid of SPSS version 21.0. The findings indicated that there was a weak positive relationship between affective experiences and management of quarter life crisis among fourth year students in public universities in the Eastern region of Kenya. It was recommended that policy makers in the ministry of education infuse emotional intelligence into university curriculum in order to intentionally enhance students' affective experiences in preparation for management of quarter life crisis. The psychologists to consider designing evidence-based interventions and programs to help students manage quarter life crisis through proactive affective experiences while the university students may need to be proactive in cultivating emotional maturity and investing appropriately for the inevitable quarter life crisis.

Key Words: Affective experiences, Emotional intelligence, Quarter life crisis, Self efficacy

INTRODUCTION

Quarter-life crisis reflects an emotional crisis that individuals experience as they transition from adolescence to early adulthood (Setian & Milati, 2022). This period is characterized by uncertainty, dissatisfaction and indecision that many young adults experience usually exacerbated by a declining economy, raising unemployment rate and escalating youthful population. Any significant life change, regardless of one's age, can trigger existential questions about purpose, role and direction of an university student's life. Hasyim, *et al.*, (2024) noted that, the quarter life crisis is experienced by emerging adults between the ages of nineteen and twenty-five years who are transitioning from a comfortable existence to one grounded in reality, which commonly causes worry and concern about the future. Ballesteros, *et al.*, (2024) further explain that quarter life crisis occurs when the emerging adult experiences difficulties and problems coping with the transition. It is often experienced by young adults who are confronted by a whirlwind of new responsibilities, new freedoms and options yet feel trapped in making life choices. Within the framework of social cognitive theory, self-efficacy and affective experiences are central to the regulation of student motivation, behavior and psychological functioning. Research by Garrido (2023) shows that how someone feels about their abilities in a given situation can affect their emotional, physical and mental health. People who are depressed or have anxiety would find it harder to maintain a healthy level of well-being. Positive emotions not only boost immediate feelings of enjoyment but also cultivate enduring psychological assets that individuals can rely on during periods of stress

and uncertainty. University students are often caught between the potential for something significant and the absence of meaning altogether, and tend to strike a balance between a realm of possibilities and a void of emptiness (Goel, 2024). This is where students experience quarter-life crisis, which affects their affective experiences and overall well-being.

Having social support networks is essential for reducing symptoms associated with quarter-life crisis because receiving emotional support from friends, family, and partners creates a feeling of safety and inclusion, which can help protect against the pressures of quarter-life crisis (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Social support has the potential to enhance self-esteem and provide tangible assistance during periods of change. Social support covers more than just emotional solace to include practical assistance in form of professional advice, financial aid, and help with decision-making (Taylor, 2011). Similarly, the presence of compassionate and perceptive peers can help mitigate the negative effects of quarter life crises, alleviate feelings of isolation and foster a sense of unity (Demir & Orthel, 2011). A study conducted by Holt-Lunstad *et al.*, (2010) highlights the importance of social connections in maintaining mental well-being, emphasizing that social integration and support are crucial components of overall health. According to Waweru and Njoroge (2023), a comprehensive strategy is necessary to effectively address the quarter life crisis faced by students in public universities in Kenya. It is essential to take key measures such as improving mental health support, offering career and financial guidance, establishing peer support networks, and developing life skills and mindfulness practices. University students require guidance in making professional decisions and should strive to develop effective coping strategies when faced with challenging situations during quarter-life crisis.

Uncertainty about one's career is a significant aspect of the quarter life crisis. Participating in the process of investigating different job options and establishing specific career objectives helps reduce feelings of unease and enhances overall life satisfaction (Savickas, 2013). Vocational counseling and career development programs help individuals identify their strengths and align their career paths with their values and interests. Engaging in career development activities, such as internships, networking and continuous skill building enables young individuals to actively pursue professional objectives actively, thereby diminishing the ambiguity and hesitancy associated with the quarter life crisis. Discovering a purposeful profession that aligns with an individual's passions and ideals can significantly enhance their sense of purpose and overall life satisfaction (Rudolph *et al.*, 2017). University students in Kenya experience a myriad of negative emotions owing to the high rate of unemployment against the existing inflation and difficult business environment. This makes it difficult to navigate the quarter life crisis thus risking not only the financial instability but also emotional disequilibrium in form of anxiety and depression. Therefore, this study sought to examine the relationship between affective experiences and management of quarter life crisis among fourth year students in public universities in the Eastern region of Kenya.

Objective of the study

The main objective of the study was to determine the relationship between affective experiences and management of quarter-life crisis among students in public universities in the Eastern region of Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

Location

The study was conducted among fourth year students in the University of Embu, Chuka University, Tharaka University and Meru University of Science and Technology (MUST) in the Eastern region of Kenya.

Research Design

The study adopted a correlational research design to examine the relationship between affective experiences and the management of quarter-life crisis among fourth year students in the public universities in the Eastern region of Kenya. This design was suitable because it enabled the researcher to determine the direction and strength of the association between the two variables without manipulating them (Bhandari 2022).

Target Population

The target population was fourth year university students in public universities who are in the emerging adulthood developmental stage and in their fourth-year of study as they prepare to transit from school to the world of work. The population was 9006 fourth years students and student counsellors in public universities in upper Eastern region of Kenya.

Sample Size and Sampling Procedure

In the Eastern region of Kenya, four public universities were chosen for the study with a total of 9006 fourth year students and students' counsellors. The sample size of the study is 368 respondents comprising of 358 fourth year university students and 10 student counselors in universities in Eastern region of Kenya. Proportionate sampling method was employed for the larger fourth student population from the respective universities so as to inform the study. Then the fourth years were divided into the different faculties to form strata, then the simple random sampling method was employed to pick fourth year students from each stratum in proportion to its size in the student population. The census sampling method was used to pick all the student counsellors from each of the universities. This eventually provided a sample size of 358 fourth year students and 10 student counsellors a total of 368 respondents.

Research Instruments

The study engaged psychological tests which include quarter-life crisis scale, affective experiences scale, and the interview schedule obtained detailed information from the student counselors in the respective universities. The interview schedule solicited information on the affective experiences and quarter -life crisis among fourth year students in public universities in the Eastern region of Kenya.

Data Analysis Procedure

A letter of introduction was obtained from Chuka University. A research permit to carry out the study was sought from the National Council for Science, Technology and Innovations (NACOSTI). Authorization to carry out the research was sought from the Vice Chancellor's office of each respective university. With the permission to collect data the dean of students assisted in getting the student counsellors and the fourth years student class leaders of each faculty in the University. In the University of Embu there are six faculties, in Chuka university there are nine faculties, Tharaka University there are five faculties and MUST there are seven faculties. The class leaders were trained as the research assistants, on how to complete the questionnaires, how to distribute and how complete the questionnaires. The research assistants were recruited and trained in order to ensure uniformity of data collection. Thereafter, the sampled respondents were given instructions, assured of confidentiality and also were requested to give honest responses. The serialized questionnaires and the interview schedules were collected for data analysis.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data cleaning was done to remove outliers or even any missing responses. After data analysis, the findings were interpreted so as to draw conclusions. Data was categorized into qualitative and quantitative data. Thematic analysis was used for the qualitative data that was collected from the open-ended questions and the interview schedule. A correlation analysis was used to test the research hypotheses. The Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) was used to do the correlational analysis which revealed the strength of the association between the variables. Data was coded then entered into the computer via Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) 21.0.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical requirements will be fulfilled by acquiring a research permit from NACOSTI after clearance from Chuka University Research and Ethics committee. Permission to conduct research in Embu, Tharaka Nithi and Meru counties was obtained from the respective Universities. Confidentiality was maintained at all stages of the

research including data collection, data analysis, report writing, and the dissemination of the information. Assurance that deliberates attempts were taken to guard against plagiarism by ensuring that authorities of various publications, information and ideas are appropriately acknowledged. The language used throughout the research study was be sensitive to the feelings of the respondents as well as free from prejudice and discrimination.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following are the results of the study and the discussions.

Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

An item in the questionnaire requires students to indicate their age. Majority of the students (69%) were aged between 22 to 23 years, 30% were between 24 and 27 years and 1% were above 28 years. The male student participants constituted 60% while the females were 40%. Majority of the students (89%) affiliated to the Christian faith, 8% were Muslims while 3% were not affiliated to any religion. The students also indicated their relationship status. Students who were single comprised 47%, those dating were 44%, the married students constituted 8% while single parents made up 1% of the respondents.

Affective Experiences and Management of Quarter-Life Crisis

The study sought to determine whether there was a relationship between affective experiences and the management of quarter-life crisis among fourth year students in public universities in the Eastern region in Kenya. The affective experiences scale and quarter life crisis scale were used to measure the students' affective experiences and quarter life crisis respectively. To assess the relationship between the affective experiences and management of quarter-life crisis, correlation analysis was conducted to test the following null hypothesis at a significance level of 0.05.

H₀₁: There is no statistically significant relationship between the affective experiences and management of quarter-life crisis among students in universities in the Easter region of Kenya.

The data analysis results are presented in table 1.

Table 1: Correlation Analysis Results Between Affective Experiences and Quarter-life Crisis

		Quarter-Life Scales
Affective Experience Scale	Pearson Correlation	0.286
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001
	N	314

Information in table 1 shows a p-value of 0.001 and r of 0.286. Since the $p < 0.05$, it means that there is a statistically significant relationship between the affective experiences and management of quarter-life crisis among students in universities in the Eastern region of Kenya. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient of 0.286 indicates that the relationship between the affective experiences and management of quarter-life crisis was positive but weak. This means that the null hypothesis was rejected. Therefore, higher values of affective experiences were weakly associated with higher values of quarter life crisis. This demonstrates that an increase in affective experiences reduces the impact of the quarter-life crisis among students in universities in the Eastern region of Kenya. This finding aligns with Kuo, *et.al* (2024) who reported that university students should be provided with practical learning experiences that facilitate their self-discovery, goal-setting, self-efficacy, self-esteem enhancement, positive behavioral attitudes and development of resilience to confront life's challenges.

An item in the questionnaire required students to rate the extent to which they agreed with each statement linking affective experiences to quarter life crisis using a five-point scale for which SD (Strongly Disagree), D (Disagree), N (Neutral), A (Agree) and SA (Strongly Agree).

The data analysis results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Perceptions of Affective Experiences and Quarter-Life

		SA	A	U	D	SD
I'm emotionally reserved and self-regulated that assists me in managing quarter-life crisis.	N	161	111	28	7	7
	%	51	35	9	2	2
Being able to reframe, suppress and allow emotional expression aids in managing quarter-life crisis.	N	111	151	35	9	8
	%	35	48	11	3	3
Being emotionally resilient and discreet has assisted in managing quarter-life crisis.	N	137	136	28	8	5
	%	44	43	9	3	2
My ability to have emotional control, acceptance and resilience has supported in navigating quarter life crisis.	N	159	114	32	7	2
	%	51	36	10	2	1
My ability to tolerate being upset concealing it and being able to know how to improve my mood has helped in navigating quarter-life crisis.	N	136	122	35	9	12
	%	43	39	11	3	4
My ability to have emotional flexibility, mood control and anger management have been my strengths in navigating quarter-life crisis.	N	152	118	25	8	11
	%	48	38	8	3	4

Data analysis results in Table 2 indicates the perceptions of fourth year students about the relationship between affective experiences and management of quarter-life crisis. Majority of the students (86%) agreed and strongly agreed that being emotionally reserved and self-regulated assisted in management of quarter-life crisis. Ability to self-sooth is an essential skill that promotes emotional stability, reduces stress and helps emerging adults navigate difficult emotional states especially those related to quarter life crisis. Research reveals that receiving emotional support from friends, family, and partners creates a feeling of safety and inclusion, which can help protect against the pressures of quarter-life crisis (Cohen & Wills, 1985). The respondents who affirmed that being able to reframe, suppress and allow emotional expression aided in managing quarter-life crisis were 83%. Kampt, *et.al*, (2023) note that maladaptive emotion regulation can lead to problems with emotional intensity, such as hypo-activity or hyperactivity and problematic emotional duration, including being overwhelmed by anger, fear, or being unhappy for an extended period, as well as challenges in regulating emotions. This indicates the fundamental role of stable affective experiences in helping young adults navigate quarter life crisis.

Information in Table 2 shows that 87% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed that being emotionally resilient and discreet assisted in managing quarter-life crisis. Students who have high self-regulation tend to face challenges with a positive attitude because they know they can get through them and succeed. Jones & McConnel (2022) reveals that adopting a growth mindset, combined with grit, helps emerging adults develop agency and succeed in various aspects of life outside the university. When university students possess soft skills, problem-solving abilities, social competencies, and adopt a growth mindset combined with grit, they will be confident in handling complex challenges and setbacks. Most respondents (87%) suggested that the ability to have emotional control, acceptance and resilience supported in navigating quarter life crisis. Emotional regulation is considered

a central tenet of emotional competence, which entails the use of contextually appropriate emotional knowledge and coping strategies, especially in response to stressful situations and negative emotions. To increase self-confidence, the emerging adult needs to demonstrate their skills against real life situations by validating themselves through the experience. The more a young adult successfully faces and walks through life experiences, the more they realize that they have tools needed to face new challenge like the quarter life crisis.

As indicated in Table 2, 82% of the fourth-year students stated that the ability to tolerate being upset concealing it and being able to know how to improve one's mood helped in management of quarter-life crisis. Fred (2025) notes that self-talk, an internal dialogue, represents the ongoing stream of thoughts, evaluations, and reflections that emerging adults engage in with themselves throughout their daily lives influences emotional regulation, specifically in self-soothing mechanisms. The distress related to quarter life crisis can be managed by well-regulated affective experiences. Majority of the respondents (86%) purported that the ability to have emotional flexibility, mood control and anger management had been instrumental in navigating quarter-life crisis. This reflects a positive relationship between affective experiences and management of quarter life crisis. Research findings have shown self-regulation as being significantly related to motivation, goal setting, self-efficacy, persistence, and academic performance (Rodriguez, et.al., 2022). Diener and Oishi (2021) highlighted that cultivating a positive mindset can enhance individuals' ability to develop resilience and effectively manage the uncertainties associated with the quarter-life crisis. These findings support the growing body of research that emphasizes the importance of pleasant emotions in management of quarter life crisis.

Interviews were conducted with the student counsellor to triangulate the results from the main respondents. The student counsellors were asked whether there was a relationship between affective experiences and management of quarter life crisis. In response, most student counsellors affirmed that optimistic affective experiences had a direct positive relationship with management of quarter life crisis among university students. This means that the more optimistic the affective experiences are the easier it is for the students to manage the quarter life crisis. Student counsellor 4 resounded, "*Students who are not self-regulated make very irrational decisions that impacts on their performance and affects their psychological well-being. Self-regulation helps them to look at things at a different perspective and not a place of emotional instability.*" Cutuli (2024) confirms that emerging adults can regulate their emotions through cognitive reappraisal, which alters their perspective on potentially emotion-eliciting events, and expressive suppression, which influences their behavior in response to such events. This means that interventions such as psychoeducation and mindfulness can be employed to assist students gain optimistic affective experiences. In retrospect, Counsellor 7 supported that "*Students who are emotionally reserved and self-regulated can handle both positive and negative emotions, which makes them reasonable.*" This response supports findings by Orchids (2025) that resilience is what allows students to overcome setbacks, and it becomes essential in accomplishing the student's goal in future. When a student understands what resilience is, they can appreciate its importance and, by putting it into practice, meet adversities with strength and confidence.

Counsellor 3 suggested "*Irrational thoughts can occur in life events and can make a student to make decisions based on perception. Reframing the mindset helps to confront any past unhealthy beliefs or choices. Moving from a fixed mindset to that of growth can be used as an opportunity to learn from different experiences.*" As stated by Srivastava *et al* (2022), emotions begin with an evaluation of internal or external cues that have particular relevance to an individual. When a student is self-regulated, they can control their impulses, manage stressful situations and stay focused. They can make the right decisions, set achievable goals and have noble behavior towards meeting the set targets. This is confirmed by Counsellor 10 who said, "*Students with emotional resilience can bounce back from a challenging situation. They believe that they can do well and conquer any situation.*" and Counsellor 7 riposted, "*Students who are resilient believe they can conquer any difficult situation with ease. The students can make wise judgements go through the crisis. Those who do not have the capacity to make wise judgements get caught off guard.*" This is when emotional maturity becomes an asset to management of quarter life crisis. Suprayogi & Santosso (2023) explain that emotional maturity involves emotional control where emerging adults regulate their emotions and expressions effectively. The individuals also manage their emotions and determine when and how to express them, even in situations of unstable emotions. To be acceptable to oneself and others, an emotionally mature student is capable of accepting their own and others' emotions based on reality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were made based on the findings of the study.

- i. Policy makers in the ministry of education need to infuse emotional intelligence into university curriculum in order to intentionally enhance students' affective experiences in preparation for management of quarter life crisis.
- ii. Psychologists may consider designing evidence-based interventions and programs to help students manage quarter life crisis through proactive affective experiences.
- iii. University students need to be proactive in cultivating emotional maturity and investing appropriately for quarter life crisis.

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