

# Quarter Life Crisis in the Midst of a Global Health Crisis: A Phenomenological Study

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## ABSTRACT

Quarter life crisis has become a rising concept on modern research because of the growing emphasis on the struggles our youth is facing. This has been a more prominent topic for research with the current global health pandemic and our country's continuous lockdown. The researchers used a qualitative research design to uncover the meaning of quarter-life crisis from the respondents and to give their experiences and developmental processes in their lives. Participants were selected using purposive sampling. The sample size of this study was five and was young adults aged 25 to 26. Four main themes emerged from the data in relation to occurrences of a quarter-life crisis amidst the pandemic. The quarter life crisis is a stage in which individuals between the ages of mid 20s to early 30s experience a period of uncertainty and questioning and often feel trapped or uninspired especially during this global health crisis.

**Keywords:** Quarter life crisis, Life transition, Global health crisis, COVID-19

## INTRODUCTION

The quarter life crisis has become a rising concept in modern research because of the growing emphasis on the struggles our youth is facing. This has been a more prominent topic for research with the current global health pandemic and our country's continuous lockdown. Similar to the more widely recognized midlife crisis, the quarter- life crisis is a period of uncertainty and questioning that typically occurs when people feel trapped, uninspired and disillusioned during their mid-20s to early 30s. Individuals may feel that they are stuck in a dead-end job while all of their friends advance their careers or wonder why they cannot seem to make a romantic relationship last when other members of their social group are getting married and having children.

Quarter-life crisis (QLC) is a popular term for developmental crisis episodes that occur during early adulthood (18–30). These are periods of instability, transition, and heightened emotion, and are typically triggered when a person makes substantive and active efforts to settle down into a steady set of life roles but then experiences difficulties that lead to feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope (Robinson, 2016).

Research on crisis episodes during the first decade of adult life suggests two types of such “quarter-life” crisis exist: locked-in and locked-out. Both relate conceptually to the transition out of emerging adulthood. Locked out refers to adult commitments (being unable to find work or love), and the feeling of being locked in refers to life roles that are then experienced as a poor fit for one’s identity, or as generally stultifying (Robinson, 2016, 2019).

During an early adult crisis, there are reports of strong negative emotions but also of enhanced curiosity and opportunities for growth and change (Robinson et al., 2017). There is also an intensive focus on the question of personal and social identity, with people who are in crisis during this age group engaging in a process of questioning ‘who I am’ in the context of the roles and relationships and making active attempts to answer such questions through exploration and trial-and-error. There are several theoretical frameworks used to analyze, explore, and interpret QLC. The theory of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000, 2007) and the model of early adult crisis by Robinson and Smith (2010), Robinson et al. (2013), and Robinson (2019). The theory of emerging adulthood proposes five defining developmental features of the age range of 18–28. These are: (1) feeling ambiguous in terms of adult status – young people in this age range typically describe themselves as in some ways an adult, yet in some ways not, and as being caught in between; (2) a period of active exploration of self and world; (3) a time of instability in roles and relationships, stemming from a continued lack of long-term ties that permits changes in lifestyle, role and residence; (4) a time of adaptive self-focus as young people attempt to invest in their own future; and (5) a time of future-focus and optimism (Munsey, 2006; Arnett, 2007; Arnett and Mitra, 2018).

Based on a review of popular definitions of QLC and the model of early adult crisis, Robinson (2016) concluded that they can be considered essentially synonymous. Counselors and coaches frequently use the term QLC to frame transitional difficulties and concomitant emotional challenges that young adults experience (Stapleton, 2012; Hapke, 2017). It has also become a topic of discussion in popular self-help literature and the media (Jay, 2012; Rosen, 2019). Given this widespread general usage, it is unsurprising that the phrase has also become part of the vernacular of many young adults who attempt to make sense of their personal challenges through the lens of QLC.

## **Life Transition**

Journeying in life involves continuous adjustments, some may be due to societal and environmental factors and others may occur internally. Bardi et al., (2014) asserts that individuals are more likely to select a life transition based in part on their beliefs and values. On the other hand, research such as Hörschelmann (2011) aims to emphasize on the specific philosophical, analytical, and political aspects of life transformations that may enrich and, most certainly, complicate the ways in which we interpret the relationships between personal and social time-spaces. Moreover, life transition can mask stressors that is evident in decision-making and the consequences of an individual’s choices. As life transitions can be a catalyst of important events, such as changing places, beginning education, or being diagnosed with a serious illness. At the same time, it can be perceived as stressors. These stressors, in sense, are thought to raise the likelihood of depression, particularly when a person’s social support is minimal (Praherso et al., 2017). In a wider perspective, investigation on the successful life transition is of interest. Howard et al., (2010) explored the path to success in young adulthood by having school-based sample ( $N=920$ ) to see how depressive symptoms and articulated frustration trajectories from 18 to 25, as well as major life transitions, expected life and job satisfaction at age 32. The study shows that transitions in marriage and work have various effects on men’s and women’s life and job fulfillment. Young adults’ path to success can take a variety of forms and is gendered.

## **Quarter Life Crisis**

In the 1930s, when he was dealing with his own life conflicts, Carl Jung introduced the concept of midlife

crisis (Steven, 1990). Another breakthrough is Erikson's (1968) psychosocial developments wherein he identified eight distinct psychosocial crises that people face during their lives, one of which is a midlife issue of being productive or stagnant. Midlife crises pave the way to further understand quarter life crisis (QLC). Robbins and Wilner (2001) discuss quarter life crisis as difficulties people face when they make decisions about their jobs, budgets, living conditions, and relationships. The time after college graduation, according to Robbins and Wilner, is unsettled, overwhelming, and anxiety-provoking, and can contribute to feelings of indecisiveness, helplessness, and fear. When a person's personality and sense of self fluctuate dramatically in response to the relentless struggles that life poses, depression is all too easy to develop. QLC is not deterministic, and the crisis experienced may differ from age to age, for an instance working high school graduates, have a higher anxiety than undergraduate students (Rossi et al., 2011). In a recent study of Agarwal et al., (2020) Quarter-life crisis (QLC) is defined as a common concept for developmental crises that arise between the ages of 18 and 30. They constructed a study which aims to find out what linguistic themes are related with QLC as it has been debated on social media. Controlling for demographics, logistic regression was used to find meaningful correlations between user terms, subjects, and sentiments and crisis. In their investigation they found out that social media users who are dealing with QLC are more likely to talk about mixed feelings, loss, needing improvement, work, sickness, education, and family. The way they communicate proved to be forward-looking (Agarwal et al., 2020).

## **Corona Virus 2019**

The global health crisis or known as novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) caused not only physical but also psychological stress in the infected communities, resulting in tension, distress, terror, and despair (Song, 2020). In addition, instability, complexity, lack of control, social alienation, and concerns about one's own and loved ones' wellbeing, may cause, or exacerbate stress and stress-related mental health issues, such as internalizing symptoms and rage in the context of the pandemic (Reger et al., 2020). Some of the major concerns of adults along with the pandemic are job security, finances, isolation, and relationships. Emphasizing on job loss among adults, the lack of employment is linked to the concept of existential fear, which captures both the emotional need to live and the desire to handle the psychological implications of challenges to one's life (Blustein & Guarino, 2020). Moreover, in order to cope with the escalating stress, there is a possibility that young adults are engaging in unhealthy dietary habits (Mason et al., 2021) and increased alcohol consumption (Calina et al., 2021) to deal with the pandemic.

## **METHOD**

### **Study Design and Sample**

This research aims to understand the quarter-life crisis in the midst of the global health crisis. The researchers used a phenomenological research design to uncover the meaning of quarter-life crisis from the respondents and to have deeper understanding about the COVID-19 phenomenon and its effect on young adults. Participants were selected using purposive sampling which allowed the researchers to recruit qualified individuals. The sample size of this study was five and was young adults aged 25 to 26 who are working in different private sectors. From the young adults who participated, 4 were females and 1 male.

### **Data Collection**

The interview method was used to collect data. Depending on the availability and preference of participants, the researchers set a date for a one-on-one, 15-20-minute interview either in-person or via video conference. Informed written consent was obtained from all participants and asked the individual for permission to record the interview. The researchers also reminded participants that they could request to stop the interview at any time. Each interview lasted approximately 15–20 mins. The interview questions in this study were semi-structured. The interview was transcribed by the researchers and the transcription process was

completed within five days.

## Data Analysis

The analyzed data was primarily from the transcriptions of the interviews. In examining the extracted information, a coding process further allowed the research team to piece together concepts from the data following a thematic approach. The researchers looked for themes from the content that could be directly observed in the transcribed scripts.

## RESULTS

This study exploring the quarterlife crisis involved 4 female participants and 1 male participant aged between 25 to 26 years. After the interview, interview recordings were secured and were transcribed for the coding proper. Transcripts were read and re-read, essential words and phrases were highlighted, and initial codes were generated. Ideas were considered for the first and second cycle coding. Codes were compared to generate the final themes. Four major themes emerged from their responses explaining the phenomena of quarterlife crisis and how it affected their lives especially in the middle of a COVID-19 pandemic health crisis.

### Theme 1: Life on Hold

All the participants experience somewhat a constant stress on how they are handling pandemic while dealing with their own internal crisis whether in their careers. They are always finding their ways to cope with the situation especially since these are the times where they search and find meaningful wins in their lives but due to the pandemic, it has always been limited. Some resort to being productive by reading books, learning new skills, and even shifting their careers. They have the tendency to take care of their essentials for survival through online jobs and saving their finances. There are few who regret not taking any chances pre pandemic on how they want to achieve their dream jobs and if they do, it is halted by the said global health crisis. There are also instances where they compare what they have in life.

*“With the pandemic I realized that you can’t really plan out anything. All the plans I had laid out after graduation did not come to fruition because of this lockdown. I realized that the future is uncertain, and we can only make due of our present situation.”* (ALE)

*“There are a lot of plans that were set aside because of this pandemic.”* (ANZ)

*“But of course there are times in which I think what could have been my future without the pandemic. What job I could have right now, where would I be right this moment, and how different will my life be without the constant lockdowns.”* (CV)

### Theme 2: Inner Struggles

With the current global health crisis ongoing, most participants are experiencing some mental health struggles like anxiety, self-doubt, regrets, and depression. The constant pressure they received from their families and the pressure they add to themselves contributed highly to the crisis they are currently experiencing.

*“Uhhh, that is when my parents want me to continue learning for me to achieve higher dream.”* (ALE)

*“When you are at 25, the pressure is real to have investments and insurances because society expects us to have the money to rent a house or a car when we get to 29 or 30 years of age.” (SB)*

*“I think the expectations are not coming from my family but myself. I am super blessed that I grew up in a very healthy family environment and that whatever I achieve in life they are always supportive. I can say that the toxic expectation and pressure din siguro nanggagaling sa relatives who don’t really know me” (SB)*

*“Last year I had several mental breakdowns and episodes. Problems regarding self and at home worsen it. I overthink, slept a little, ate too much and I came to a point where there is a self-harm. That is why I decided to seek professional help and my therapist helped me organize my stuff, slowly start, and finish things. She encourages me to push through and handle my emotions well.” (ANZ)*

*“I’m afraid that I cannot do enough things na baka sa pagtanda ko hindi ko na talaga magawa. The possibility of missing a chance? Ayun that’s my crisis right now.” (CI)*

### **Theme 3: Keeping it Together**

There is a huge struggle adjusting and coping with a new lifestyle this pandemic. Almost all the participants handled multiple avenues of coping through productivity and keeping their loved ones accountable.

*“So, I’ve been reading a lot to keep my sanity intact in the midst of this worldwide crisis. In these trying times, we need to be as productive as we can get.” (ALE)*

*“Doing my hobbies, finding a way to survive, find better opportunities in life and contemplating my poor life choice. I am working from home so I spend quality time with my parents which is really good kasi taong pamilya talaga ako.” (CI)*

*“Whenever I have free time, I do exercise yoga, meditation and biking.” (ANZ)*

### **Theme 4: Hoping for Better Days**

Even Though they feel like the pandemic is far from over, all the participants expressed their feelings of hope not only for their own future but for the future of their families and friends. Their current crisis may have challenged the participants, but they still hope for the best, especially for their own futures. They see these challenges as a turning point where they may feel lost at the moment, but they are still pushing forward for their dreams.

*“It’s natural that people struggle but what’s important is how we deal with it. Face the problem and come up with a solution.” (ALE)*

*“Everyone has their own pace and you should be proud of your achievement, no matter how small they are.” (CV)*

*“Always look back on how far you have travelled. Again, the speed does not always equate to success, it is always the experiences along that way that will be bring so much success in all of us.” (ANZ)*

*“This is the period wherein we experience painful events so be ready with your heart and I hope you find forgiveness in yourself and the peace of mind, you deserve that. Do not ever lower your standard, because people should try their best to meet them.” (CI)*

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## DISCUSSION

Four main themes emerged from the data in relation to occurrences of a quarter-life crisis amidst the pandemic. One of the themes is “life on hold”. The findings indicate that pandemic has an adverse impact on their perception about life. It also affects their dreams and careers. The participants barely cope with the struggles brought upon by the pandemic while they are suffering from a quarter-life crisis. This finding corresponds with the locked-out form of a quarter-life crisis. In the locked-out form of a quarter-life crisis, the individual feels unable to access the ideal adult roles. They may believe they seem unable to find employment, maintain a secure relationship, nor achieve financial freedom. They aim to push away from emerging adulthood and its uncertain status, but they can’t seem to find a way out of the void they’ve found themselves in— there seems to be an unbridgeable wall between them and adult life (Robinson, 2015).

The second theme that emerged from the data is “inner struggles”. The results show that participants are experiencing mental health problems because of the quarter-life crisis and the pandemic exacerbates their situations. According to Robinson (2016) quarter-life crisis are times of uncertainty, adjustment, and heightened emotion that are mainly caused when an individual makes significant and aggressive attempts to settle into a consistent array of life roles but then encounters challenges that make them feel depressed and unable to cope.

The third theme is “keeping it together”. The participants reported that they are struggling to adjust to this pandemic while also experiencing a quarter-life crisis. For the reason that they have been quarantined for almost two years now, they find a means to cope that will amend the feeling of being lost. The COVID-19 pandemic has posed serious risks to people’s life and physical health all over the world and in addition, it also contributes to various psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, and panic disorder. (Qiu et al., 2020) The next theme is “hoping for better days”. The participants reported that even though they feel lost now and the pandemic is far from over they are still hopeful that it will soon end, and they will fulfill the future that they yearn for themselves and their loved ones. Hope for the future makes it easy to successfully deal with developmental challenges. It elucidates solutions for people and accompanies them in exploring personal strengths by looking to the future rather than focusing solely on the past (Sharabi et al., 2012).

## CONCLUSION

The quarter life crisis is a stage in which individuals between the ages of mid 20s to early 30s experience a period of uncertainty and questioning and often feel trapped or uninspired especially during this global pandemic and continuous lockdown. Individuals who experience such phenomena have faced many challenges throughout the pandemic for many reasons. Some are overwhelmed by the process of actively exploring who they are but are hindered by the global pandemic. The global health crisis had also made it difficult for these individuals to get excited about the future or the plans that they had made; be it big or small. While some cannot help but compare themselves to others who are of the same age. This pandemic had made them experience feelings of envy, disappointment, self-criticism and sadness; although some had a positive way of seeing such experience and took this lockdown as an opportunity to reflect, to continue or start new hobbies and to work on to overall work on themselves for self-improvement which eventually led them to getting to know themselves in a more authentic way and recognizing the things that genuinely made them feel happy and fulfilled. Although most cases did reflect on what ifs and should haves, especially during mid-20s, it can’t be helped but to ponder about what they would have been if it wasn’t for the pandemic, where will they be at the moment-career wise.

The combination of the confusion of what we’re supposed to be doing if it wasn’t for the pandemic and how

they compare themselves to others, along with the frustration of not doing what they used to do results in an overwhelming, stressful situation during lockdown. With that being said, if stress gets in the way of usual activities, it is recommended to call a healthcare provider or to share such experience with friends or family. It is also wise to take care of your overall mental health during this pandemic and employ coping strategies, such as taking breaks from social media or news; pick up a new interest or hobby; also looking for activities that can distract an individual from current events can be helpful. This research is significant in the way that it contributes to the body of existing literature that tackles the crisis that is experienced by young adults and adds more insight to what is already known.

Additionally, it is also significant to explore the crisis that is also being experienced by the different age groups during the pandemic particularly in the state of continuous lockdown in which much of the population experience stress, anxiety, uncertainty, and dread. However, this research is still insufficient in its own. The research lacks precision as it cannot show that a quarter life crisis is experienced by all young adults. The research also cannot provide a complete definition of the quarter life crisis because young adults who are experiencing it vary from one another. With that in mind, it is recommended for future researchers to address the quarter life crisis young adults are experiencing in a quantitative method to give further proof of this concept and generalize results. Future researchers should also include young adults who are in their early 30's to provide a perception if the quarter life crisis is still applicable to these individuals even at their age.

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