Gendered Experiences of the Quarter-Life Crisis: A Sociological Inquiry

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Abstract

In the world created by God, there are both men and women to coordinate with each other, or we can say that they complement each other. However, unfortunately, the world is perhaps not the same for both categories of humans. From childhood to adulthood, the experiences are gender biased; similarly, even the transition called Quarter-Life Crisis is perhaps different for both men and women. Quarter-Life Crisis is a period of uncertainty about the future, lots of anxiety, and stress faced by people in the age group 18-30, and sometimes till 35. In this study, we will examine how the experiences of the quarter-life crisis differ between men and women. An interview was conducted with 10 males and 10 females, and a comparative study was done to find the causes and coping mechanisms of the phenomenon 'quarter-life crisis'.

Keywords: gender, quarter-life crisis, stress, anxiety, adulthood

Introduction

Erikson (1991) stated that people must face various crises at the stages of the life course (Hamvai et al., 2024). In the era of rapid social change and economic instability, the quarter-life crisis—a period of doubt, anxiety, and self-reflection often experienced in one's twenties or early thirties- has become a defining feature of early adulthood. While once largely unacknowledged, it is now widely recognized as a real and pressing psychological and emotional challenge. But what is less frequently explored is how gender shapes the experience and expression of this crisis. The quarter-life crisis is not one-size-fits-all; men, women, and non-binary individuals often face unique pressures that intersect with societal expectations of gender.

Gender- a social construction of 'sex' in society. According to the World Health Organization, 'Gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls, and boys that are

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socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviours, and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl, or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time.' This social construction thus makes a difference in how men and women take in stress and pressure, and also the variations of the problems are different. This study focuses on a comparative study among men and women of how and why they face a quarter-life crisis and the various coping mechanisms they adopt to overcome the chaotic transition in their lives.

Quarter-Life Crisis is a new term related to the stages of human socio-emotional development (Fikri et.al, 2023). The term "quarter life crisis" or the "twenty-something" phenomenon was originally used by Alexander Robbins and Wilner. People who experience a quarter-life crisis are more prone to have sadness, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder, according to research from the American Psychological Association (Hasyim et.al, 2024). A quarter-life crisis is caused by uncertainty related to the future, including career, love relationships, peer pressure, and the transition from a relaxed life in school to the real world of college and a job. In this study, we have focused on how gender plays a dynamic role in quarter-life crisis. It is indeed true that men and women are different, and so are their thought processes, ways of dealing with stress, thinking capacities, and problem-solving abilities. We have also tried to find the various coping mechanisms that each gender adopts to handle the crisis.

Methodology

Research Design and Data Collection

This study employed a qualitative method to understand the gendered quarter-life crisis among youth. To collect the data, the interview method was used, where open-ended questions were asked to the respondents. The respondents' eligibility was that the participants should be between the ages of 18-35, and they should be residents of the Darjeeling district. The total respondents were 20, carrying 10 males and 10 females. The participants were selected randomly on the basis of their availability after building a rapport and making them understand the purpose of the study. Only those participants were selected who showed some relatability with the research objective.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted through face-to-face interviews, and the informed consent of each and every participant was obtained before starting the interview. Data confidentiality was

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strictly maintained, and the research complied with all relevant guidelines for ethical conduct, and no conflicts of interest were reported.

Findings

Quarter-life crisis and gender intersect with one another. The research reveals that experiences of the quarter-life crisis are significantly shaped by gender norms and expectations. While all participants reported feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and identity confusion, the content and context of these crises varied by gender identity.

Table 1: Demographic Details of the Respondents

Male		N=10	Female		N=10
%			**%**		
Age			**Age**		
18-22		1	18-22		2
10%			20%		
23-27		4	23-27	4	40%
40%			28-31	3	30%
28-31		4	32-35	1	10%
40%			**Employment Status**		
32-35		1	Part-time employed		1
10%			10%		
Employment Status			Full-time Employed		2
Part-time employed		0	20%		
0%			Student		2
Full-time Employed		7	20%		
70%			Business	1	10%
Student		2	Unemployed		4
20%			40%		
Business		1	**Marital Status**		
10%			Single		7
Unemployed	0	0%	70%		
Marital Status			Married		3
Single		8	30%		
80%			Divorced		0
Married		1	0%		
10%			Widowed		0

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Divorced	1		0%		
10%			Other		0
Widowed	0		0%		
0%			**Educational Background**		
Other	0		Class 10		0
0%			0%		
Educational Background			Class 12		0
Class 10	0		0%		
0%			Graduation		3
Class 12	1		30%		
10%			Post-Graduation	5	50%
Graduation	3	30%	M.Phil.		1
Post-Graduation	4		10%		
40%			PhD		1
M.Phil.	0		10%		
0%					
PhD	2				
20%					

Source: Author

Women's Experience of Quarter-Life Crisis: The Double Bind

According to one of the studies, it was observed that women experienced a greater intensity of quarter-life crisis, which was linked to trait anxiety, showed no significant variation across different age groups, and was negatively associated with proactive coping strategies. (Hamvai et al., 2023). For women, the quarter-life crisis often revolves around conflicting timelines. Societal pressures to achieve career success now coincide with persistent messages about settling down and starting a family. The "biological clock" is a concept rarely applied to men, yet it often looms over women in their twenties and thirties, influencing how they make decisions about relationships, jobs, and lifestyle. Women also contend with the "perfection paradox", a societal ideal that encourages them to be successful, attractive, nurturing, and confident all at once. This often results in burnout, imposter syndrome, and an overwhelming sense of inadequacy. Even in progressive societies, women are more likely to face workplace discrimination, pay gaps, and a lack of mentorship, which can compound feelings of stagnation and confusion during the quarter-life crisis. Similar results were seen in this study as well.

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Female respondents frequently described crises triggered by societal expectations around fertility, relationships, and the balance between personal and professional life. Many reported a tension between pursuing career advancement and feeling pressured to conform to traditional timelines for marriage and motherhood. One of the respondents, a 28-year-old female says, *"I am sometimes so fed up of being a girl, I mean I am pursuing my PhD and I am happy with my career as I am about to finish it too but everyone around me, including my mother keeps on reminding how my age is passing and should get married or else I will have problem to bear a child. I have time and again asked to give me some time until I finish my PhD, but she keeps on saying that I can continue with my thesis even after getting married."* In today's world, where men and women are equally working to achieve their career goals and aspirations, society expects women to slow down and always follow the societal norms of getting married and bearing children at a typical age.

Female respondents reported higher levels of emotional labour not only in the workplace but also in managing interpersonal relationships, often leading to burnout and self-doubt. A 31-year-old female respondent, says, *"My boyfriend tells me how it is so important for me to crack a government exam, as it will help me to get married to him if I am financially stable, but he also keeps saying about how a wife should be you know like cook food, be calm, not to talk loudly. So, here I am grinding myself to be a good future wife and also to get a government job, so many expectations make me more demotivated, I feel so anxious at times. I am not sure whether I will get the job or not, I am not even sure about my relationship because if no job, no marriage."* Another 30-year-old female respondent says, *"I have completed my PhD from a reputed university, but here I am unemployed. I am also a single child of my parents, so you can imagine how frustrated I am, no job, no financial stability, and uncertain about my future. I am also diabetic now, and it all makes me feel so burdened about my own life."* A 30-year-old married female respondent mentioned, *"I am married, I had a love marriage, and I own a business which is very time-demanding. I started this business with the help of my husband, but now we both are sometimes not happy, as when his office is off, I need to open my shop on time, which makes him feel lonely and I feel guilty, and because of this, we often fight but I cannot even shut this business and my husband's salary is relatively low and will not build the future of ours and also family planning is needed as well but I often think that when I will be pregnant and I cannot run my shop that time what will happen…this thought is scary."* While another 31-year-old married respondent says, *"I have done BBA, I feel what's the point of spending money on that course and staying*

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home idle. I feel frustrated staying all alone the whole day as my husband heads to work. Unemployment makes me sick and anxious. I cannot even move to another city because of my husband, and here I am not getting that opportunity." We can thus say that unemployment, financial instability, and isolation are also the root causes of the quarter-life crisis.

Men's Experience of Quarter-life Crisis: The Silent Struggle

To achieve financial success and independence, men often internalize societal pressure. Crises were commonly linked to career stagnation, feelings of inadequacy, and the stigma surrounding emotional vulnerability. They, too, face their gendered pressures, though they may be less openly discussed. Traditional masculinity often emphasizes strength, emotional stoicism, and financial dominance. As a result, many men may feel pressure to "have it all together" by their mid-twenties: a solid career, romantic success, and emotional composure. However, when reality does not meet these expectations, when a man feels uncertain, underemployed, or emotionally adrift, he may struggle to express vulnerability or seek support. Mental health stigma among men remains a major barrier, often leading to isolation or unhealthy coping mechanisms. The quarter-life crisis for men can therefore be intensely internalized, masked by silence or withdrawal.

A 21-year-old male respondent mentions, *"I'm so frustrated with my life, I run a business which my father started but now I need to look after everything, I have 0 support from my family members now. I need to do everything, from building a house to running a business well. All the expectations are on me. I have a younger brother, but I get no help from him. The most frustrating part is that I had to leave my passion for earning. My passion was Beatboxing, I was pretty good, and won many inter-college competitions. Went to the well-known reality show "India's Got Talent" and was selected for the Mumbai round, but I don't have a sad story, so they did not promote me.* Leaving a passion for financial stability is also one of the causes of the Quarter-life crisis phenomenon. Another 26-year-old divorced male respondent says, *"It's just that everything feels out of control. I thought by 26 I'd have it all figured out, a settled marriage, career growth, some peace. But here I am… divorced, unsure of my job, and honestly, I don't even know what I want anymore. Maybe both. I think the divorce just made it louder. Like before, I could distract myself by planning a future with someone or focusing on work. But now, everything just… paused. Everyone around me is moving on, getting married, buying flats… and I can't even decide what to eat most days. I'm tired of pretending everything is fine. If I can at least understand why, I feel so blank all the*

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time, maybe I can find some direction." This case reflects how masculinity, urban loneliness, and societal timelines contribute to the quarter-life crisis.

Quarter-Life Crisis and Coping Mechanisms

The quarter-life crisis is a phase of emotional and psychological turbulence that many young adults experience, typically in their 20s and early 30s. This crisis often comes along with feelings of confusion, when one feels that he or she is stuck, with no improvement in life, struggling with self-doubt, low self-esteem, and endless questions, battling with expectations and reality. Questions like, "Am I choosing the right path?", "Will I be successful?", "Why it seems everyone is ahead?", or "Why life is so unfulfilled?" become everyday companions. In a fast-paced world where only perfection is praised, it is no surprise that youths feel overwhelmed at this stage of life. Hence, dealing with the quarter-life crisis does not mean being a master of it and figuring out everything overnight. But rather, it begins with the acceptance of the fact of growth that uncertainty is a part of it. Self-analysis is very important simply by taking time to ask yourself what truly matters. With self-analysis, self-reflection is also crucial to cope with QLC- through journaling, yoga, meditation, and adapting hobbies like traveling or listening to music. Many individuals find it helpful to go offline from the noise of social media because of the constant comparison that triggers insecurity. Focusing on your journey, taking own time allows space for genuine progress. This can be achieved by setting small and realistic goals and celebrating even the smallest achievements, which in turn can help to restore a sense of purpose in life.

Therapy, a powerful tool, can be involved to cope with the deeper struggles. Therapy helps to create a safe space to find emotions and adapt various healthier coping strategies. Women often find strength in seeking validation and expressing their emotions with their close ones. So, for women, the commonly used outlets are either talking to friends, joining a peer group, or adapting therapies. The most common pressure faced by women is to settle down, therefore get married by a certain age, and balance both career and family. Coping involves setting boundaries, resisting gendered timelines, and asserting personal goals over external expectations. Many women struggle with the guilt of prioritizing career over relationships or vice versa. Reframing personal success and creating a life path that integrates both, rather than choosing between them, is empowering. In the research, it was found that only a few had adopted coping mechanisms like talking to friends and family, indulging in cooking, sports, and decluttering of their space. While most of them adopted a method of isolation

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from everyone. Isolation is causing a more intense quarter-life crisis, which can further lead to severe depression.

 Men are often discouraged from showing vulnerability. Healthy coping involves challenging toxic masculinity by engaging in open conversations, therapy, or journaling. Many men equate their worth with financial success, stability, or "being settled." Reframing success, accepting non-linear career paths, and embracing flexibility in identity help reduce pressure. Men are more prone to emotional isolation due to a lack of deep male friendships. Developing emotional intimacy in friendships and seeking support outside traditional gender norms is crucial. Men's coping mechanisms are often through action, physical activities like sports, exercise, riding bikes, or driving cars etc. With physical activity and structure, a balance should be maintained with emotional processing for a healthy outcome. Liberating moves can be taken by redefining masculinity, like including vulnerability, emotional honesty, caregiving, and creativity. To bring stability during uncertain times, practical steps can also be adapted, which help to make a difference, like developing a new skill set, maintaining physical health through proper sleep, intake of proper nutrition, and exercise. In this study, it was found that men often engage in travelling, indoor-outdoor sports, or online games when they feel overwhelmed and uncertain about their lives.

Gender does influence how individuals experience and respond to the quarter-life crisis, but no approach to coping mechanisms is solely for 'men' or 'women'. Strategies to cope with QLC should be fluid and based on individuals' needs. However, more empathetic and inclusive spaces can be created for healing and support by recognizing these gendered patterns.

Conclusion

For creating an effective support system, recognition of the gendered nature of the quarter-life crisis is crucial. The understanding of how gender expectations influence the struggles of young adults can benefit mental health professionals, employers, and educators. For women. That might involve taking part in mentoring programs that tackle the double standard in the workplace or anywhere else. And for men, that may mean fostering spaces in which emotional expression is normalized and encouraged. At the end of the day, the quarter-life crisis is not an indication of weakness or lack of success; it's a sign that society needs to grow at the same rate as individuals in it. By seeing how gender plays into these experiences, we can help people ride out the storm and emerge from the crisis stronger, more resilient, and

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more themselves.

The quarter-life crisis is not a sex- and orientation-neutral phenomenon. It is refracted through very different cultural expectations, economic conditions, and social norms by gender. Recognizing and accommodating these differences can help young adults navigate this tumultuous period with more compassion, confidence, and clarity. As our understanding of gender and identity in today's world evolves, we must also verify that our responses towards mental health and personal growth are diverse and that they meet the realities of the people we want to help.

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