



Balance Between a Realm of Possibilities and a Void of Emptiness: A Study on the Effect of Quarter-Life Crisis on Self-Esteem & Academic Performance among College Students

Mridu Goel

University of Edinburgh, Scotland

Abstract

In today's time college students while entering adulthood experience a plethora of stressors. At the same time, they attempt to become comfortable with new things and adapt to the real world after the protective environment of school. Self-esteem and academic performance are very critical during this period as quarter-life crises tend to have an effect and shape students in different ways. A substantial body of studies shows results where self-esteem and academic performance are correlated to quarter-life crises among college students. The current research aims to study the effect of the quarter-life crisis on self-esteem & academic performance. The participants were informed about the study and the questionnaires were filled out using Google Forms. Each participant was thanked for their cooperation. Standardised Psychological Tests were used to measure the quarter-life crisis, self-esteem, and academic performance among 31 college students ranging from 18-25 years of age. The results found a significant negative relationship between self-esteem and quarter-life crisis. No significant relationship was found between other variables. It is recommended to college students that they spend time doing their favourite activities, spend time with their loved ones and adopt coping mechanisms along with mindfulness and meditation techniques so that they can power through the crisis in front of them. The students need to be able to feel confident and not doubt themselves or let any critical situation negatively affect their self-esteem.

Keywords: quarter-life crisis, Self-Esteem, Academic Performance, College Students

1. Introduction

Somewhere along the line, between the idealisms of youth and the realities of adulthood, we became pacified by our jobs; we tolerate how we hurt the world so that we can sustain our lives. At some point, blurred in the past, we traded the great good for ourselves."

~ Richard Beckham II

College students are usually caught between the potential for something significant or the absence of meaning altogether and tend to strike a balance between a realm of possibilities and a void of emptiness. This is where they hit a quarter-life crisis, affecting their self-esteem and academic performance in universities.

Students going abroad for their higher studies, leaving their families behind, students planning to pursue their studies in their hometown, or students who plan to start working after school and college, all feel fear and uncertainty about their future and careers. A sense of feeling lost, lonely, self-doubt, low self-esteem, low self-confidence, low motivation, anxiety, and depression tend to doom them. The idea of entering a new phase of life as well as the desire to become successful quickly affects the mental health of college students, which they are most of the time unaware of. Students do not find it important to take care of their mental health and tend to ignore it most of the time, leading to severe mental health problems. In today's time, this period of transition is being referred to as the quarter-life crisis as the students enter adulthood.

Self-esteem refers to how an individual feels about themselves, their judgement of themselves, and the value they attach to themselves. Self-esteem plays an important role in examining the value that every person perceives of themselves. Self-esteem plays an important role in the transitional period of the quarter-life crisis among college students and how they perform in their academics, that refers to their academic performance. If they lack self-esteem, it becomes tougher to deal with the immense pressure and stressors that contribute to the quarter-life crisis, including their academic performance. Students who are not doing well in their studies and academic careers tend to lose confidence and feel worthless, which hampers their self-esteem, contributing to a tougher period of transition. Tough situations during this period of transition also have an adverse effect on the academic performance of students as they lose their focus, which also hampers the value they hold for themselves as individuals.

The current study aims to explore the impact of the quarter-life crisis on self-esteem and academic performance among college students. Previous studies have highlighted the significance of self-esteem and academic performance during this transitional period.

Yorgason et al. (2008) aimed to examine the connection between students' mental health and their knowledge of mental health services. His study included 266 undergraduate university students. The results showed that mentally distressed students were more likely to know about and use the services. Females were predictive of higher service use as compared to males. The current study builds upon the literature by specifically examining the knowledge of mental health amongst college students to explore the relationship between quarter-life crisis, self-esteem and academic performance amongst college students. The current study also does not consider the mental health services used by college students, unlike the literature.

Murphy (2011) aimed to explore the experiences of young people 18-28 years of age in Ireland to establish the prevalence of quarter-life crises in emerging adulthood using a qualitative approach. The findings indicate that indeed, the emerging adulthood period is challenging, it's a crisis for some. The stressors are related mainly to personal relationships, living arrangements, financial issues, and identity developments. There were varied positive and negative emotional responses to these as participants reflected on their present and future lives. It was also found that the crisis experienced during that period served a purpose, as a stimulus of change and development. The current study only focuses on two variables, i.e self-esteem and academic performance, that impact quarter-life crisis, unlike the literature, which takes into consideration several positive and negative variables.

Arshad et al. (2015) aimed to assess the academic performance and self-esteem of 80 (40 males and 40 females) university students after several educational and behavioural problems arose. The Rosenberg self-esteem scale and Academic Performance Rating scale were used to administer the participants and compare the results. The study found a significant relationship

between self-esteem and academic performance. Male students showed higher self-esteem as compared to female students, and female students showed higher scores on academic performance. However, this study seeks to understand the specific effects of the quarter-life crisis, which is often overlooked in literature. By examining these variables, we aim to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by college students during this critical period.

2. Quarter-Life Crisis

According to Baum (2023) quarter-life crisis is defined as a “period of uncertainty, stress and deep soul-searching that many young people experience as they embark on a new chapter in life. Transitions can be overwhelming. It’s not uncommon for those in their 20s or 30s to encounter a quarter-life crisis.” Agarwal et al. (2020) defined it as a “popular term for developmental crisis episodes that occur during early adulthood (18-30).” According to Rossi and Mebert (2011), the quarter-life crisis is defined as “an identity crisis that leaves recent college graduates depressed, anxious, and full of doubt.”

Several studies have explored various aspects of the quarter-life crisis, contributing to our understanding of its impact on young adults.

Martin (2017) aimed to understand the quarter-life crisis by examining the group differences in anxiety, depression, coping, and flourishing levels for community college students. The top factors that students reported as impairing academic performance, according to a recent survey from the American College Health Association (ACHA), included anxiety, depression, stress, and alcohol and drug use. Anxiety, depression, and flourishing were examined using Kruskal-Wallis nonparametric tests. Manovo was used to examine group differences and their positive and negative coping strategies. The study found that students during this period reported high levels of anxiety and were more likely to use negative coping strategies compared to their older peers. In the context of our study, we build upon Martin's findings by specifically examining the relationship between the quarter-life crisis, self-esteem, and academic performance among college students. We will be exploring how these crises influence students' self-perception and their academic achievements.

Black (2010) aimed to study the life satisfaction and quarter-life crisis among graduate students. The common stressors identified during this life period were emotional responses to the quarter-life crisis, life satisfaction, programs and services perceived to prepare individuals for life after undergraduate education, and programs and services to support graduate students. According to the results, the factors contributing to the quarter-life crisis included changing relationships, work and finances, academic stressors, and identity development. Positive and negative emotional responses varied. Perceived programs and services to prepare undergraduates for life after graduation included positive relationships with faculty, academic preparation emphasising writing, research, and experiential learning, and life skills education. In the current study, we will explore in detail the relationship between the quarter-life crisis and the academic performance of college students which was explored in Black's findings. The literature would help us examine and enhance our understanding of the variables in detail with regard to perceived programs and services.

Yeler et al. (2021) aimed to study the challenges faced by 514 (370 females, 144 males) Turkish emerging adults in the transition to adulthood and their relationship with intolerance of uncertainty. Results showed that 82% of the participants experienced crises and difficulties on different levels in career-related areas. Significant factors of crisis included age, perceived level of happiness, perceived level of difficulty, and intolerance of uncertainty. There was a significant difference in intolerance of uncertainty and crisis levels among age groups. There is a gap noticed here, where the current study does not take into consideration the perceived

level of difficulty and intolerance of uncertainty specific to each individual to measure quarter-life crisis.

3. Self-Esteem

According to Rosenberg (1965), self-esteem is defined as “one’s positive or negative attitude toward oneself and one’s evaluation of one’s own thoughts and feelings overall in relation to oneself.” Alesi et al. (2012), defined self-esteem as “a personal psychological characteristic relating to self-judgement based on one’s values about humans.” Moreover, Self-esteem is defined as “an awareness of one’s value system and one’s emotional evaluation of one’s self-worth” (Schunk, 1985).

Ummet (2015) aimed to study 342 college students’ self-esteem according to the satisfaction of their basic psychological needs and some certain variances. He used the Coopersmith self-esteem inventory, the Basic Psychological Needs scale, and an informative form. The results indicated that the students’ satisfaction with autonomy and relatedness needs was significantly related to their self-esteem. Students’ self-esteem indicated significant differences depending on their mothers’ educational level, income level, and perceived parent attitudes, whereas fathers’ educational level and gender did not affect their self-esteem. In the context of the current study, we build upon Unmet’s findings by examining the students’ self-esteem and aim to explore how it affects their quarter-life crisis and academic performance in college.

Crocker and Luhtanen (2003) used 642 college students to study the unique effects of pre-college levels of self-esteem and self-worth on academic, social, and financial problems experienced during the freshman year. Low self-esteem predicts social problems. Beyond self-esteem and other personality variables, self-worth uniquely contributes to the academic and financial difficulties experienced by college freshmen.

Abouserie (1994) aimed to study the sources and levels of stress in relation to locus of control and self-esteem among 675 university students using the Multidimensional Multi-Attributional scale casualty (MMCS) and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Results indicated that 77.6% and 10.4% of students fall into the moderate and serious stress categories, respectively. Female students were more stressed than males in both academic and life stress. A positive correlation between locus of control and academic stress and a negative correlation between self-esteem and academic and life stress was seen. It suggested that students with external beliefs and low self-esteem are more stressed than those with internal beliefs and high self-esteem.

Similar to the above-mentioned literature, where Crocker and Luhtanen (2003) and Abouserie (1994) established a relationship between self-esteem and academic performance, the current study also aims to explore the relationship between the two variables amongst college students. Parallel findings were noticed in the current study with Abouserie’s findings, where there was a negative correlation between self-esteem and academic performance. The current study also notices the rejection of one of the hypotheses that there is a significant positive relationship between self-esteem and academic performance, as the findings of the current study establish no such significant positive relationship between the two.

4. Academic Performance

According to Narad and Abdullah (2016) academic performance is “the knowledge gained which is assessed by marks by a teacher and/or educational goals set by students and teachers to be achieved over a specific period of time.” Yusuf et al. (2016) defined academic performance as “a measurable and observable behaviour of a student within a specific period of time.” They added that “it consists of scores obtained by a student in an assessment such as class exercise, class test, mid semester, mock examination and end of semester examination.”

Bembenutty and White (2013) aimed to study college students' satisfaction with homework and academic performance. The study examined the relationship between one-third of 33 college students' homework practices, motivation, and self-regulation of learning, and final course grades who completed help-seeking, self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and homework logs. This implies that the relationship between students' beliefs and homework practices is related to their academic performance, help-seeking and motivational beliefs. The use of homework logs, consideration of students' self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and use of help-seeking strategies related to homework completion were found to be effective in explaining self-directed learners' development. While the literature focuses on other variables impacting academic performance, the current study examines the influence of self-esteem and quarter-life crisis on academic performance. The literature also emphasises help-seeking strategies, which are missing in the current study. The findings of the literature are used to examine various variables impacting academic performance and explore how students seek help during quarter-life crises that could offer valuable insights into coping mechanisms.

Barrett (1987) conducted a study on the explanatory style and academic performance among 87 university freshmen. During freshman year, students with bad academic events with internal, stable, and global causes received lower grades than students who used external, unstable, and specific causes. The results also showed that students with negative explanatory styles were less likely to have specific academic goals and less likely to use academic advising. Lower grades were related to non-specific goals and decreased use of advice. In the context of the literature, the research gap noticed here is that the current study does not explore how students' explanatory styles during quarter-life crisis affect their academic performance and self-esteem providing an understanding of the cognitive and motivational aspects amongst college students.

Anderson and Good (2017) aimed to evaluate whether academic performance among university students is correlated with BMI. The number of right answers to problem-solving questions (PSQs) and overall class grade were compared to calculate BMI using linear regression with Pearson's R correlation and unpaired t-tests. Findings showed that the BMI was significantly negatively correlated with students' final grades, while PSQs were positively correlated with final grades. A correlation between healthy body weight and good academic performance was also seen. Similar to the prior literature, another research gap noticed is that the current study does not take into consideration the physical health of students, which, according to Anderson and Good's findings, influences academic performance and self-esteem during the quarter-life crisis.

4.1. Purpose

The purpose is to study the effect of the quarter-life crisis on self-esteem & academic performance among college students.

4.2. Hypothesis

1. There will be a significant negative relationship between self-esteem and quarter-life crisis.
2. There will be no significant relationship between academic performance and quarter-life crisis.
3. There will be a significant positive relationship between self-esteem and academic performance.

5. Method

5.1. Sample

A total of 31 college students participated across Delhi in the study. The ages of the subjects ranged from 18 to 25 years.

5.2. Measure

- **Quarter-Life Crisis Diagnosis Quiz (Hassler, 2009):** It consists of 25 questions which are to be answered quickly with a simple 'yes' or 'no.' Used as an instrument to assess whether the participant is experiencing a quarter-life crisis.
- **Rosenberg Self- Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965):** A 10-item unidimensional scale that assesses global self-worth by measuring both positive and negative feelings about the self. All items are answered using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree.'
- **Academic Performance Scale (Birchmeier et al., 2015):** The 8-item scale measures what the participant does or has done as a student. All items are answered using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree.'

5.3. Procedure

The participants were informed about the research, and the questionnaires were filled out using Google Forms. Each participant was thanked for their cooperation, and standardised psychological tests were administered to the participants.

5.4. Analysis of Data

All the given tests were scored according to the instructions given in the manuals. The raw scores were tabulated and subjected to various statistical analyses. Keeping in view the aim of the study, statistical analysis was performed using mean, standard deviation, and correlation analysis. A Correlation analysis was carried out to determine the relationship between the variables. Before performing statistical tests, the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were verified.

6. Result

Table 1

Mean and standard Deviation scores of 31 young adults with variables quarter-life crisis, Academic Performance and Self-Esteem

	quarter-life crisis	Academic performance	self-esteem
N	31	31	31
Mean	15.3	26.2	27.1
Standard deviation	5.65	6.57	5.56

Table 2

Correlation Matrix of quarter-life crisis, Academic Performance and Self-Esteem

	quarter-life crisis	Academic Performance	Self-Esteem
quarter-life crisis	—		
Academic performance	-0.101	—	
self-esteem	-0.695 ***	0.137	—
<i>Note.</i> * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$			

7. Discussion of Results

The research aimed to study the effect of the quarter-life crisis on self-esteem and academic performance among college students. The results indicated that there is a negatively significant relationship between quarter-life crisis and self-esteem ($r = 0.695$, $p < .001$). As a result, our first hypothesis is accepted that there will be a significant negative relationship between self-esteem and quarter-life crisis. Thus, high self-esteem can reduce the intense effects of the quarter-life crisis.

The results of the present study also support the second hypothesis that there will be no significant relationship between academic performance and quarter-life crisis. In addition to this, no significant positive relationship was found between self-esteem and academic performance, as a result our third hypothesis is rejected. Thus, self-esteem and academic performance are positively correlated without any high significance.

The present results are consistent with Walshe's (2018) work which aimed to look into the correlation between emotional intelligence, self-esteem, maximisation, and the criterion variable coping self-efficacy, as well as investigate the self-reported experiences of a perceived crisis in early adulthood and coping mechanisms used and advised. According to the findings, a multiple regression analysis revealed that self-esteem and emotional intelligence significantly predict coping self-efficacy, whereas Pearson r correlation and linear regression revealed that high levels of maximisation is negatively correlated with coping self-efficacy. The current study's findings, where the first hypothesis is that there is a significant negative relationship between self-esteem and quarter-life crisis, support Walshe's findings on how high self-esteem can enhance coping self-efficacy and abilities, reducing the perceived intensity of crisis or quarter-life crisis.

The results also represent the first direct demonstration of Zarqan et al. (2021), who aimed to examine the impact of self-concept on the duration of living QLC in millennials. Mixed method research and data collection techniques applied by interview, literature study, and questionnaire revealed that self-concept has a significant contribution to reducing the QLC of an individual. This research aimed to examine the impact of self-concept on the quarter-life crisis, which aligns with the current study's hypothesis that has been accepted that self-esteem and quarter-life crisis are negatively correlated. Thus, both studies suggest that a positive self-concept can reduce the effects of a quarter-life crisis.

Thus, in my view, the most compelling explanation for the present set of findings is that if an individual has a high level of self-esteem, then they are most likely to have a lower level of quarter-life crisis, as their high level of self-worth and confidence in themselves will reduce the insights of stress, uncertainty, overthinking, self-doubt, and anxiety.

8. Conclusion

The association between quarter-life crisis, self-esteem, and academic performance is very well established among college students in this study. The self-esteem of students tends to have a significant effect, whereas academic performance does not seem to significantly affect the quarter-life crisis among college students. The current research aims to study the effect of the quarter-life crisis on self-esteem and academic performance among 31 college students ranging in age from 18 to 25 years old. The results revealed a significant negative relationship between self-esteem and quarter-life crisis. There is no significant relationship between other variables.

A substantial body of studies shows results where self-esteem and academic performance are correlated to quarter-life crises among college students. Keeping in view all the findings, it is suggested that students should focus on boosting their self-esteem. They should have a positive attitude towards everything, especially themselves, and not let anything lead to self-doubt and negative judgement about themselves. College students go through a realm of possibilities and void of emptiness which can very easily throw them into a space of vulnerability, uncertainty, anxiety, and depression which can directly affect their self-esteem negatively. That's when students must realise and adopt various problem-focused and emotionally-focused coping mechanisms along with mindfulness and meditation techniques so that they can power through the crisis in front of them. This is extremely important for college students who go away from their homes for higher studies as they are alone, making it challenging for them to settle in and adapt to the new academic curriculum. The participants were informed about the research and the questionnaires were filled out using Google Forms. Each participant was thanked for their cooperation and Standardised Psychological Tests were administered to the participants.

The present study warrants some limitations. The first limitation concerns that the present study did not take into consideration the family background and socio-economic status of college students. The second limitation includes that only self-esteem and academic performance were assessed to interpret the quarter-life crisis of students discounting many other reasons to understand the quarter-life crisis of students. The third limitation is that the study relied on self-reported questionnaires to calculate the results which can be subject to bias and any not accurately reflect the actual self-esteem, academic performance, and quarter-life crisis of students.

Thus, it is recommended that future studies consider these to study the effect of the quarter-life crisis on self-esteem & Academic Performance.

Despite these limitations, the current study has improved our understanding of the correlation between quarter-life crisis, self-esteem, and academic performance and contributes to their growing body. We hope that the current research will stimulate additional investigation of this vital area.

References

- Abouserie, R. (1994). Sources and levels of stress in relation to locus of control and self-esteem in university students. *Educational Psychology, 14*(3), 323–330.
- Agarwal, S., Guntuku, S. C., Robinson, O. C., Dunn, A., & Ungar, L. H. (2020). Examining the phenomenon of the quarter-life crisis through artificial intelligence and the language of Twitter. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*, 341.
- Alesi, M., Rappo, G., & Pepi, A. (2012). Self-esteem at school and self-handicapping in childhood: Comparison of groups with learning disabilities. *Psychological reports, 111*(3), 952-962.

- Anderson, A. S., & Good, D. J. (2017). Increased body weight affects academic performance in university students. *Preventive medicine reports*, 5, 220-223.
- Arshad, M., Zaidi, S. M. I. H., & Mahmood, K. (2015). Self-Esteem & Academic Performance among University Students. *Journal of education and practice*, 6(1), 156-162.
- Barrett, L. C. (1987). Explanatory style and academic performance among university freshmen. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 53(3), 603-607.
- Baum, E. (2023, November 2). What is a Quarter-Life Crisis? | Addiction Treatment | Tampa, FL. *SummitPathways*. <https://7summitpathways.com/blog/what-is-a-quarter-life-crisis/#:~:text=A%20quarter%2Dlife%20crisis%20is,Transitions%20can%20be%20overwhelming>
- Bembenutty, H., & White, M. C. (2013). Academic performance and satisfaction with homework completion among college students. *Learning and Individual differences*, 24, 83-88.
- Black, A. S. (2010). "Halfway between somewhere and nothing": An exploration of the quarter-life crisis and life satisfaction among graduate students. *University of Arkansas*.
- Crocker, J., & Luhtanen, R. K. (2003). Level of self-esteem and contingencies of self-worth: Unique effects on academic, social, and financial problems in college students. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 29(6), 701-712.
- Hassler, C. (2011, November 17). Are you having a quarterlife crisis? *HuffPost*. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/are-you-having-a-quarterl_b_326612
- Martin, L. (2017). *Understanding the quarter-life crisis in community college students* (Doctoral dissertation, Regent University).
- Murphy, M. (n.d.). *Emerging Adulthood in Ireland: Is the Quarter-Life crisis a common experience?* ARROW@TU Dublin. <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/aaschssldis/35/>
- Narad, A., & Abdullah, B. (2016). Academic performance of senior secondary school students: Influence of parental encouragement and school environment. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 8(2), 12-19.
- Rosenberg, M. (1965). Self Report Measures for Love and Compassion Research: Self-Esteem. In *Society and the Adolescent Self-image*. https://fetzer.org/sites/default/files/images/stories/pdf/selfmeasures/Self_Measures_for_Self-Esteem_ROSENBERG_SELF-ESTEEM.pdf
- Rossi, N. E., & Mebert, C. J. (2011). Does a quarter-life crisis exist? *Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 172(2), 141–161. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221325.2010.521784>
- Schunk, D. H. (1985). Self-efficacy and classroom learning. *Psychology in the Schools*, 22(2), 208-223.
- Ümmet, D. (2015). self-esteem among college students: a study of satisfaction of basic psychological needs and some variables. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 174, 1623-1629.
- Walshe, Ó. (2018). The Quarter-Life Crisis: Investigating emotional intelligence, self-esteem and maximisation as predictors of coping self-efficacy. In *Higher Diploma in Arts in Psychology* [Thesis]. Dublin Business School.

- Yeler, Z., Berber, K., Özdoğan, H. K., & Figen, Ç. O. K. (2021). quarter-life crisis among emerging adults in Turkey and its relationship with intolerance of uncertainty. *Turkish psychological counselling and guidance journal*, 11(61), 245-262.
- Yorgason, J. B., Linville, D., & Zitzman, B. (2008b). Mental health among college students: Do those who need services know about and use them? *Journal of American College Health*, 57(2), 173–182. <https://doi.org/10.3200/jach.57.2.173-182>
- Yusuf, T. A., Onifade, C. A., & Bello, O. S. (2016). Impact of class size on learning, behavioural and general attitudes of students in secondary schools in Abeokuta, Ogun State Nigeria. *Journal of Research Initiatives*, 2(1), 12.
- Zarqan, A. I., Pamungkas, P. D., Syakarofath, N. A., & Hendriyani, C. (2021). BUILDING SELF-CONCEPT IN MILLENNIALS GENERATION BY REDUCING QUARTER-LIFE CRISIS. *International Journal of Business and Management Sciences*, 1(3), 1-15.