Quarterlife Crisis Among Emerging Adults: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

This study focused on the experience of Quarterlife Crisis among Filipino emerging adults. It aims to examine the quarterlife experiences of emerging adults as they transition from adolescence into adulthood. Several factors were taken into consideration in this investigation such as attainment of bachelor's degree, pursuing a higher degree of education, age, and single as a civil status. Qualitative method was used to capture the experiences of the participants. To analyze the life stories, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used. An interview via Zoom meeting platform was utilized. To start each interview, consent was asked from the participants via Google forms. A semi-structured interview guide helped in drawing out stories, later clustered into superordinate themes. The participants were purposively selected, consisting of 5 voluntary respondents. The interview guide was set to focus on the respondent's experience during the transition to adulthood. The findings of the study were obtained from creating superordinate themes, analyzing through the hours of interview. Themes are as follows: (1) Unpleasant experiences during first year at work, (2) financial difficulties, (3) pressure from internal and expectations, (4) lack of clear career direction, and (5) not being ready for work. From the sample population interviewed, it is concluded that these emerging adults were indeed under distress as they enter a new world of adulthood. They voluntarily shared their experience to have more open talks about the existence of Quarterlife Crisis. It is highly encouraged to have more open talks about major life transition inside homes, schools, and community.

Keywords: Quarterlife Crisis, Emerging Adults, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Filipino Quarterlife, Young Adulthood

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Introduction

In the Philippine setting, there are limited resources regarding the study of life crises and mental health issues in general. This can be attributed to the Filipino behavior in which they are not comfortable seeking professional help from government or private mental health institutions. There are several barriers attributed to this limitation, such as financial constraints, self-stigma associated with fear of negative judgment, and social stigma which puts the family reputation at stake. It is known that Filipino culture is family-oriented like most of its Asian neighbors.

Among the total population of Filipinos with depressive symptoms, young adults were reported to have high prevalence of depression and its consequences. A study published by Puyat et al. in 2021 found that these young adults belonged to the age group of 15-24. The most frequently reported depressive symptoms were related to loneliness and somatic problems. This is consistent with studies by Patel et al. which indicated that persons with depression in low resource countries like the Philippines experience somatic symptoms. Among the factors which can contribute to extreme mental health issue is the occurrence of a life crisis.

Despite the many issues faced by today's emerging adults, they still made a mark with their distinct working attitude. Cited by Pramod et al., emerging adults of today are known for being independent in the presence of clearly defined goals. They are ready to be mentored and seek managers who can enhance their professional careers. Emerging adults are confident while being highly ambitious – due to their trust and optimism in their own capabilities. They are on the lookout for a meaningful and purposeful life, which is why work-life balance is of top importance for them. Instead of "live-to-work" attitude, they are known to have the "work-to-live" perspective in life. As a result, they are looking for work with more flexible schedules to find equilibrium with their hobbies. The emerging adults of today are innovative and creative; a working environment that is traditionally too bureaucratic will not be attractive to them.

Young adults inside Filipino families are therefore likely to prioritize their education in school - leaving little room for exploration of other interests outside the academe. Filipinos acknowledge that education is the best tool to secure a better future for their families and themselves. A study by Puyat et al. stressed that given the importance of educational achievement in the Philippine culture, it is very likely that the socioeconomic gradient usually associated with moderate to severe depressive symptoms can more strongly be observed across different levels of educational achievement.

Among ASEAN countries, the Philippines was the last to adopt additional two years of education in the system. Most Filipino young adults in the workforce today lacked the two-year mastery offered by the K-12 education model. Their basic competencies had to be congested into a 10-year basic education curriculum. In the old curriculum, graduates of basic education are younger than 18 years old and are not legally ready to start a job or business. In 2013, the Enhanced Basic Education Act was slowly introduced through the K-12 curriculum. The additional two years in basic education was the implementation of Senior High School–in which students will have to choose among four tracks.

Before the reform in the basic education, a typical Filipino student will graduate from college by the age of 21. In the old curriculum, a young adult Filipino who graduated from college is

expected to quickly join the workforce. Not yet a full adult but certainly not a child anymore, they are yet to emerge as an adult. Emerging adulthood as proposed by Arnett designates ages 18-25 as neither adolescence nor young adulthood. These years are more typically a period of frequent change and exploration. Unfortunately, due to his roles and duties to the family, a Filipino emerging adult struggle to achieve spontaneity and examination of his life at this level. A child transitioning into an adult must be ready to drop his weakness and smallness to be adapt himself to become strong, large, all-powerful, omniscient, and godlike (Maslow, 1968). This is a cause of distress which could affect his mental and emotional health.

In relation to this, many Filipino emerging adults tend to marry later in life. As reported by Philippine Statistics Authority, there was a decrease in marriages in a span of 10 years from 14.4 percent for 2007 to 2016 to 10.6 percent for 2008 to 2017. Unlike their parents, younger generations of Filipinos purposely put aside the need for starting a family early to focus on careers and pursue higher education (Lobregat, 2015). Still, the root for this rationale is to give financial support to their parents and siblings. In the absence of a partner, Filipino emerging adults lack the experience of intimacy which can lead to feelings of isolation based on Erikson's psychosocial stages (Feist, et. al. 2018).

The process of antagonization and self-doubt in the emerging adulthood stage defines quarterlife crisis. This is experienced upon graduation from college where the once clear-cut path becomes blurred and many twentysomethings begin to feel lost in a sea of a million possibilities (Thorspecken, 2005). Robbins & Wilner (2001) added that quarterlife crisis is, in effect, a response to overwhelming instability, constant change, countless choices, and a panicked sense of vulnerability. Those experiencing quarterlife crisis begin to question themselves incessantly, lose their sense of identity, or question their career choice. Some may respond to these issues by quitting jobs or stalling career decisions, or encounter distress in daily life and anxiety-related problems.

The aim of this study is to examine the phenomenon of quarterlife crisis among Filipinos belonging to the emerging adulthood.

Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:
1. What are the quarterlife experiences of emerging adults?
2. What can be understood from the quarterlife experiences of these emerging adults?

Experimental Method/s

In terms of research design, phenomenological research design was utilized to better discuss quarterlife crisis. Through phenomenology, this research focused on the individual respondent's meaning-making as the quintessential element of the human experience (Patton, 2002). Moustakas (1994) transcendental or psychological phenomenology – in which "everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time" – focus less on the interpretations of the researcher and highlights the description of the experiences of participants.

Tradition of Inquiry and Data Generation Method

The data gathering procedure was conducted via interview method. The researcher prepared forms of consent which were read and accepted by the participants. Interviews were conducted via online call/video meetings. The interviews lasted for sixty to ninety minutes

and recorded with consent from the participant. A follow-up interview was not necessary. Usually, a qualitative interview makes use of few unstructured and generally open-ended questions with the intention of eliciting views and opinions from the research participants (Creswell, 2003). In this study, the interview used a protocol or guide which aided the smooth flow of conversation.

Sources of Data

This research was conducted via purposive sampling. Purposive sampling refers to a type of non-probability sampling where participants are selected or judged by the researcher to best fit in the study (Sharma, 2017). Creswell (2013) elaborated that a purposeful sample intentionally samples a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the research problem under examination.

In this study, respondents were purposefully selected according to their age, employment status and civil status. The targeted sample of this study are Filipinos in the age of 22-26 years old and currently employed with no spouses and children yet. Participants who are pursuing a master's degree were selected to participate in this study.

Instrumentation

Data analysis was done using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) specifically. IPA is an approach that interprets and amplifies the 'lived experience' stories of research participants; however, for those stories to make-sense interpretively, the researcher of the stories must have a true and deeper understanding of the participants' 'lived experiences.' This approach puts emphasis for the researcher to put themselves in the shoes of the participants (Alase, 2017).

In using IPA, one must set aside one's belief, feelings, and perceptions to be more open or faithful to the phenomenon (also called bracketing) as cited in a sample study by Creswell (Colaizzi, 1978). In starting an IPA interview, the researcher uses funneling as a technique wherein it attempts to elicit both the respondents' general views and their response to more specific concerns (Smith, 2009). Funneling allows the researcher to narrow questions down into more specific data.

Interview Protocol. The participants were asked with general open-ended questions. This helped lay down the foundation for the research topic. Follow-up questions examined how participants viewed themselves as a Filipino adult. Some follow-up questions differed from their responses to further probe out their concept of a quarterlife crisis among Filipinos. A semi-structured interview guide was prepared to assist in the interview flow. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were given the chance to share how they felt about the study.

These are presented as follows:

Getting to know the respondents. The respondents were asked information about age, current occupation – whether this is the same occupation since college graduation and highest educational attainment. This helped establish rapport and provide demographic information about the respondents.

Life after college. These are open-ended questions to establish background of the participants. Questions were asked such as *"Maari mo bang isalarawan ang iyong karanasan matapos ang kolehiyo? Ano ang iyong saloobin at isipan noong panahong ito?"* Respondents shared their experiences after college graduation and their personal struggles during this big life transition.

Reflections about life after college. Respondents were asked about the positive and negative experiences they had after graduation from college. In relation, the researcher probed out if there were people or persons who helped influence them either in a positive or negative way.

Reflections about quarterlife crisis. Questions were asked relative to the respondents' reflection about their experiences as emerging adults. Sample question *was "Kung bibigyan ka ng pagkakataong baguhin ang nakaraan, sa paanong paraan mo ito babaguhin?"*

Goals in the future. Lastly, the respondents were asked about their hopes and dreams in the future *"Ano ang iyong mga pangarap at mithiin para sa iyong sarili limang taon mula sa ngayon?"* This question aimed to gauge each participant's hopefulness for the future.

Ethical Considerations

This study complies with the ethical guidelines set out by the Polytechnic University of the Philippines. As cited by Creswell, a researcher gains the participants' trust by conveying to the participants that they are participating in a study, explaining the purpose of the study and does not engage in deception about the nature of the study. By securing the ethical considerations, both participant and researcher are protected with each information shared during the interview. Thus, this research is subject to the approval of University Research Ethics Board to ensure date collected will be handled with confidentiality.

At the beginning of the interview, participants were given an online consent form with option to receive a copy via their personal e-mail. The consent form shall contain information such as: introduction to briefly introduce the research proponent, purpose of the research, confidentiality, sharing of results, and right to refuse or withdraw. Through the consent form, respondents had knowledge of what they were "letting themselves in for before they make the decision to cooperate" (Gomm, 2004). Participants were given a chance to ask questions and to discuss proper handling of personal information for data privacy. Data collected throughout the interview will be treated with utmost confidentiality. Personal information will not be used outside of research purposes. Names of person, institution were altered and hidden upon request of interviewee for additional data protection. Information shared during interview can be withdrawn upon request after the interview has been completed. Participation to this study was voluntary. Researcher consulted with the interviewees after themes of the results were obtained as part of the validation process.

Data Validation

Upon completion of the data analysis, the results were compiled and sent to the participants via email. They are asked to review the results for accuracy, data privacy and completeness. The participants were requested to provide feedback or suggestions based on the results.

Results and Discussion

Participant demographics

All participants obtained their bachelor's degree from different universities in Metro Manila. They belong to the age group of 22 to 26 years old (M=21), working for at least 2 years. The participants are pursuing a master's degree while working full time jobs.

Participant	Age	Gender	Education I	Year of graduation	Education II	Year of graduation	Age started working	Years working
Chi	25	Female	Bachelor in Business Teacher Education	2016	Masters in Business Education	On going	20	5
Julia	25	Female	Bachelor of Secondary Education Major in English	2016	Master of Arts in Reading Education	On going	20	5
Ana	22	Female	AB Behavioral Science	2019	Master of Arts in Clinical Psychology	On going	21	2
Macoy	26	Male	BS Medical Technology	2015	Master in Science in Medical Technology	Stopped	20	5
Tin	26	Female	BS Clinical Psychology	2016	Master in Psychology	Stopped	21	5

Table 1: Participant demographics.

Themes

The participants were interviewed about their experience upon their graduation form college and how they faced the Quarterlife Crisis. The respondents' accounts were clustered around the following themes: pressure brought by internal and external factors, financial difficulties, lack of clear career direction, not being work ready, and unpleasant experiences during first year at work.

Master theme	C	J	A	M	T
Unpleasant experiences during first year at work	X	X	X	X	
Financial difficulties			X	X	X
Pressure by internal expectations	X	X		X	X
Lack of clear career direction	X		X	X	
Not being ready for work	X	X			X

Table 2: Summary of Themes per respondent.

From the interviews gathered, statements were examined carefully to identify themes. A summary table is used to visualize the emerging master theme along with the subordinating themes.

Master theme	Subordinate theme
1) Pressure from internal and external expectations	1.1 High expectations due to past achievements 1.2 Societal pressures
2) Financial difficulties	2.1 Supporting the family financially 2.2 Struggle to financially support own self 2.3 Development of unhealthy spending habits
3) Lack of clear career direction	3.1 Overwhelming career paths 3.2 Change in career goals 3.3 Lack of career plan
4) Not being ready for work	4.1 Lack of confidence 4.2 Insufficient training in college
5) Unpleasant experiences during first year at work	5.1 Conflict with colleagues 5.2 Difficulty in transition from being a student to employee 5.3 Moral conflicts at the workplace 5.4 Lacking sense of purpose

Table 3: Summary of Master and Subordinate Themes

Discussion

The study focused on the lived experiences of emerging adults as they experience Quarterlife Crisis during their transition from school to workplace.

The participants' responses were clustered into themes. Interview method was the main tradition of inquiry used in the study. This encapsulates both the respondents' lived experiences and the factors which contributed to Quarterlife Crisis among the emerging adults. The following are the main themes found from data gathered:

1. Unpleasant experiences during first year at work. The results showed that the participants had a rough start on the onset of their career. For the first time in their lives, the participants felt unfair treatment form superiors and colleagues. They expected support from these people as they have received in the past, but that was not the case. The respondents also felt that there were moral conflicts in their workplace. This led them to lose interest in the job they were currently at.

2. Financial difficulties. Most of the participants had financial difficulties when they started out in their careers. Given that they were newbies in the field, majority received low salary. Since majority are supporting their families aside from their own needs, this caused a friction on their financial priorities. Some of the participants reported that they had to postpone a passion or goal to deliver their financial duty towards their families. Meanwhile, other participants shared that they had difficulties in establishing financial discipline. This resulted to unhealthy spending habits that had negative impact to the way they handled money during the start of their career.

3. Pressure from internal and external expectations. From the responses received, it was observed that the respondents brought pressure to themselves by setting high expectations for self as an achiever in the past. Unfortunately, they felt disappointed when they did not meet a certain achievement at a given age. They were disappointed when they were not able to perform exceedingly at work as compared to when they were still students.

4. Lack of clear career direction. Consequently, they felt loss amidst the vast career opportunities in relation to their degree they obtained in college. The lack of a guaranteed path led some of the respondents to pursue alternative careers. At the same

time, there were limited job opportunities presented which restricted the chances to land their dream job. This should have helped them avoid quitting jobs in multiple occasions before realizing the right work environment for them.

5. Not being ready for work. This theme explained that the emerging adults were not immediately ready when they started out in the workplace. The respondents reported that they do not have the confidence needed for their job which made it difficult to perform certain tasks at first. Results also revealed that they hoped for more hands-on training and immersion activities during college. Respondents were also mostly working on industries which were different from the usual career path that they were expecting upon graduation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of the study agreed with the previous literature on the emergence of Quarterlife Crisis. The respondents were truly under a sense of overwhelming instability, constant change, countless choices, and a panicked sense of vulnerability as they transitioned from school to workplace. Prior studies were consistent with the results of this research that the crisis can be a product of current issues entailing financial and societal pressures. The results also reflect that most of the Filipino emerging adults are still on the trend of delayed marriage and family building consistent with the studies among Asian countries.

It is cited from Erikson that a crisis forms when the "wholeness" of a person is compromised. Therefore, this study hopes to stress the importance of attending to early life crisis to help mitigate serious mental health problems. Although it is considered that research about the Quarterlife Crisis had roots on western concepts, the data shows it exists among participants belonging to the emerging adulthood. It has also shown that participants are open to conversations concerning this issue. They are happy to contribute to the improvement of this area of life.

Form the data gathering process, it is commendable as to how the participants were able to survive their transition from adolescence to young adults. They were able to muster the strength to face various challenges in the different areas of their life. Quoting Maslow's description of adulthood *"A child must be ready to drop his weakness and smallness to be able to adapt himself to the strong, large, all-powerful, omniscient and godlike adult"* Indeed, the participants handled the challenges headstrong.

On the other hand, this research is limited by the small number of respondents. It does not generalize the experience of Quarterlife Crisis in the Philippines. However, the small population can prove the existence of the crisis. Also, the study is limited by the demographic factors such as having a bachelor's degree, age group of 20-30 years old, single as a civil status and pursuing a higher degree after college. It should also be noted that the life experiences will be unique to every individual.

Recommendations

The study hopes that through data gathered, talks about major life transition will open among families, school, and communities. Unfortunately, seeking help for such issues are still creating stigma. Thus, it is unappealing for young professionals and emerging adults to reach out and talk about similar problems.

It would be beneficial for the emerging adults to have access to counselling services with guaranteed anonymity, so they can have the freedom to unpack their emotional burdens. This study can help open doors for clinicians to develop psychotherapeutic intervention tailored to Filipino emerging adults.

Counselling for career guidance in school settings may also use the data presented in this study to create programs for students to help decide their future vocations. With the implementation of K-12, students are given ample time to decide on the career path they would take. Extensive immersion, additional technical skills and exposure to technology can help equip students in choosing the right career path.

This study provides an opportunity to private companies and local government to provide affordable coaching/mentoring sessions to young adults. These can help them identify the early signs of life crisis and take necessary steps to process and improve their well-being.

Last is the recommendation for encouraging the formation of support groups among emerging adults to provide emotional support to those with similar struggles.

This study also opens prospects to investigate the future of data gathering via online platforms. Due to the pandemic, data gathering procedure using Zoom and other meeting applications became convenient for researchers. Future researchers may take advantage of this method, however, be wary of losing human connection. Interviews via the web may not feel personal and sincere for the participants. It would be helpful if researchers will develop emphatic listening and attentive interview structure to draw out quality in results.

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