
2-3-2023

Quarterlife Crisis in the UK and India: Perceived Standards and Unfulfilled Expectations

Raginie Duara

University of Leeds, Leeds, r.duara@leeds.ac.uk

Siobhan Hugh-Jones

University of Leeds, Leeds, S.Hugh-Jones@leeds.ac.uk

Anna Madill

University of Leeds, Leeds, a.l.madill@leeds.ac.uk

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Recommended APA Citation

Duara, R., Hugh-Jones, S., & Madill, A. (2023). Quarterlife Crisis in the UK and India: Perceived Standards and Unfulfilled Expectations. *The Qualitative Report*, 28(2), 392-416. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2023.5599>

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Abstract

The term “quarterlife crisis” is associated with difficulties transitioning to adulthood that are accompanied by feelings of panic, loss, and uncertainty. However, we argue that this experience could vary largely depending on the sociocultural context and requires delving into nuances to understand and appreciate the lived experiences of the young population transitioning in different contexts. The aim of this study is to explore young people’s experiences of quarterlife crises triggered from interactions with the social environment, taking into consideration both British and Indian contexts. Our participants are 22-30 years of age from the UK (n=16) and India (n=8) who self-define as having experienced difficulties “finding one’s place in the world.” Data were generated through photo-elicitation and timeline interviewing and analysed with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. We focus here on one of the themes derived from this project: “perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations,” which involves the sub-themes of playing catch up, feeling responsible, and living up to social expectations. We consider our findings in light of Robinson and Smith’s (2010) theory of early adult crisis. Our study adds detail and subtlety with respect to ways in which young people experience threats to their self-worth as a central feature of quarterlife crisis within individualist and collectivist cultures.

Keywords

life span, identity crisis, cross-cultural differences, young adulthood, visual methods, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Quarterlife Crisis in the UK and India: Perceived Standards and Unfulfilled Expectations

Raginie Duara, Siobhan Hugh-Jones, and Anna Madill
University of Leeds, United Kingdom

The term “quarterlife crisis” is associated with difficulties transitioning to adulthood that are accompanied by feelings of panic, loss, and uncertainty. However, we argue that this experience could vary largely depending on the sociocultural context and requires delving into nuances to understand and appreciate the lived experiences of the young population transitioning in different contexts. The aim of this study is to explore young people’s experiences of quarterlife crises triggered from interactions with the social environment, taking into consideration both British and Indian contexts. Our participants are 22-30 years of age from the UK (n=16) and India (n=8) who self-define as having experienced difficulties “finding one’s place in the world.” Data were generated through photo-elicitation and timeline interviewing and analysed with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. We focus here on one of the themes derived from this project: “perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations,” which involves the sub-themes of playing catch up, feeling responsible, and living up to social expectations. We consider our findings in light of Robinson and Smith’s (2010) theory of early adult crisis. Our study adds detail and subtlety with respect to ways in which young people experience threats to their self-worth as a central feature of quarterlife crisis within individualist and collectivist cultures.

Keywords: life span, identity crisis, cross-cultural differences, young adulthood, visual methods, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

The term “quarterlife crisis” was coined by two journalists, Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner (2001). The term implies a phase of life between adolescence and adulthood, usually around 18 to 30 years (Atwood & Scholtz, 2008) and, hence, similar to that conceptualised by Arnett (1997) as “emerging adulthood.” However, whereas the latter term is characterised by both challenges and opportunities - identity exploration, instability, self-focus, liminality, and possibilities – the former captures negative experiences in “response to overwhelming instability, constant change, too many choices, and a panicked sense of helplessness” (Robbins & Wilner, 2001, p. 3). The idea of quarterlife crisis was utilised quickly in popular books and magazines and in the last decade has become a topic of intensive academic research (e.g., Setterson & Ray, 2010).

Quarterlife as an identifiable period of life has gained traction with broadening of the gap between adolescence and adulthood (Atwood & Scholtz, 2008). Extended educational opportunities and decreasing respect for traditional authority in developed countries means that young people can delay life decisions regarding family and work and may be encouraged to critically analyse the norms and values of previous generations. In the process of becoming a responsible adult, some can feel confused and uncertain as there is no direct movement from “point A to point B, regardless of whether the points are related to a career, financial situation, home or social life” (Robbins & Wilner, 2001, p. 3). In particular, difficulties navigating a life

path may become acute on leaving one's family-of-origin and/or educational institution to find one's place in the world.

According to Hermann (1972), crisis involves a considerable threat to goals, time pressure to decide, and an element of surprise. That is, a situation becomes a crisis when an individual or organization is not able to achieve goals due to the threat posed and when the pressure of time makes it even more difficult to resolve the problem. Moreover, the idea of surprise draws attention to the unpleasant feeling of being unprepared and of lacking awareness. Billings et al. (1980) revised Hermann's model by stressing the importance of subjective understandings and meanings: "the triggering event must be perceived, attended to, and evaluated against some standard or measure of how things should be, in order for a problem to be sensed" (p. 302). This definition does not stop at identifying a gap between the perceived standard and the existing condition but rather includes evaluating the probable loss involved; that is, the degree of uncertainty experienced, prospect of resolution, and perception of time pressure. For example, a situation would likely be viewed more negatively if the time available to resolve issues is perceived to be short. As such, the element of surprise is a defining aspect of crisis relative to the problem and loss with which it is associated. Hence, according to Billings et al. (1980), their revised model of crisis "is useful [...] in identifying individual differences which might be antecedents of the extent of perceived crisis" (p. 313).

In understanding the experience of problematic transitions to adulthood, it is important to explore on an individual level how young people perceive the challenges that face them and the intensity of negative feeling these evoke. This is likely influenced by cultural context, so in order to elucidate relevant issues, we explore the experience of quarterlife crisis for young people in the UK (England) and in India (Assam). These regions present an interesting basis of analysis in terms of representing, respectively, a typically "individualistic" and a "collectivist" society (Hui & Triandis, 1986; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This is commensurate with the posited impact of reduced reliance on traditional life trajectories in developed countries and the possibility of a similar change emerging in developing countries. The Indian sample was restricted to Assam given that it has greater cultural cohesion compared to other Indian states in terms of gender equality where dowry and child marriage are not practised (Deka, 2013). It was also convenient due to the first author's familiarity with both cultures and ability to offer interviews in the local language. Hence, the aim of this study is to explore young people's experiences of quarterlife crises triggered from interactions with the social environment, taking also into consideration both British and Indian contexts.

Previous scholarship that we have undertaken identified the theme "forced adulthood" as one of the central features of quarterlife crisis (Duara et al., 2021). Forced adulthood involves assuming adult roles and responsibilities while feeling unprepared for the same. We found cultural and educational background to have an impact on the way in which "forced adulthood" was experienced. While most of our participants felt rushed to attain financial self-sufficiency, only non-university-educated British participants described having to "train themselves to be [adults]." Moreover, it was only Indian participants who felt pressured to be the "man of the house" – whether male or female – and to assume responsibilities for their families-of-origin.

Pole (2014) explored quarterlife crisis among a sample of young postgraduates in the Tongan community in New Zealand and found that they did experience quarterlife crisis but in different severity and form compared to the mainstream idea of quarterlife crisis, given the collective nature of the society. Successful transition to adulthood for this population was defined by care for the family and fulfilling family responsibilities. Moreover, their navigation through crisis was more of a collective attempt than an individual journey. Another study carried out in Ireland found that stressors during quarterlife crisis include personal relationships, living arrangements, financial issues, and identity development (Murphy, 2011). A quantitative study on young Turkish adults found job-related negative experiences and

financial issues to have “remarkable” influence on the experience of crisis (Yeler et al., 2021), while a study on a sample of Indonesian early adults (Putri et al., 2022) found quarterlife crisis to be associated with work demands, marriage plans, and family issues. We concluded that whilst the concept “quarterlife crisis” has currency, we need a more nuanced understanding of this experience from the perspective of young people of different educational and cultural backgrounds. Our study on quarterlife crisis led to the development of four themes explicating this experience: smooth navigation and self-fulfilment, perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations, becoming and knowing oneself, and forced adulthood (Duara et al., 2021). The crux of the crisis experience involved feeling stagnant, unprepared, and overwhelmed, experienced differently based on cultural and educational backgrounds. In the present article, we focus on the inductively derived theme “perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations” as it highlights some interesting cultural differences in the ways in which young people experience threats to their self-worth as a central feature of quarterlife crisis.

Method

The Researchers

The first author (RD) is an Indian national from the state of Assam who was of the same age range as that of the participants and also going through a period of critical transition at the time of this study. Despite being an insider, she was sensitive to the possibility of variety in experiences within different subcultures and thus kept her assumptions aside while working on this project. However, it is essential to explicate this closeness to the topic which was made possible through the self-pilot as well as reflexive notes made throughout the conduct of this research. At the start of the study, she was interviewed by a fellow expert in qualitative research which helped bring out some important perceptions and values around transitioning to adulthood in both Indian and British contexts as she was born in India but went through some part of her transition in the UK. Following this self-pilot, she made some reflexive notes, discussed with the second and third authors before moving forward to conduct the participant interviews. RD noticed some differences in how social environment had impact on the choices and decisions made during transition to adulthood which she assumed in turn would have influence on an experience of crisis. Pre-study, there was a curiosity as to what exactly the drivers were that caused some young people to struggle in their transitional process to becoming responsible adults and whether some social and cultural contexts, such as educational and/or family environment, made this transition more challenging. When interviewing she noticed some differences in her experience as compared to many British participants, such as how her decisions were centred around family background (academics in the family) as well as her conversations with teachers and mentors in educational institutions. However, she values variety in experiences and was driven by curiosity to learn about the phenomenon of quarterlife crisis, with an interest in hearing lived experiences of other young people through both photos and verbal interactions.

Having proficiency in English, Hindi, and Assamese, the interviews in Assam were mostly conducted in Assamese as per preference of the participants. She carried out the initial analysis and discussed that analysis with the second and third authors, followed by multiple back-and-forth conversations between the authors for further refinement of the analysis. Reflexive notes were made after every interview and during the analysis of the data.

The second (SHJ) and third authors (AM) are middle-aged British nationals, both of whom reflected intensely on their own transition to adulthood in the context of British culture and, being experts in qualitative research, brought critical questions, both personally and professionally, into the study. They supported exploration of concepts and evidence and acted

as a sounding board for further analysis and revisions that were carried out iteratively with the data collection. For instance, the decision to recruit a small population having no university education was made later based on the identification of the distinct experience of one of the participants interviewed at an early stage of the study. In this way, as the study progressed, discussions between the authors, who cover both the British and Indian backgrounds, helped close gaps in the analysis.

SHJ assumed there would be differences between English and Assamese young people's experiences based on cultural norms and expectations (especially around expectations of what it means to be a “successful” young adult), although she held no implicit belief about the existence or extent of quarterlife crisis in either population, nor the drivers of that. She believed that both cultures exerted stress on young people around achievement and careers but assumed that most young people navigated these pressures successfully. AM, having visited India, anticipated that all participants' experiences would be heavily influenced by familial and educational systems, but that Indian norms around gender and relationships expectations would give rise to different experiences compared to English participants. She was agnostic about the existence or nature of quarterlife crisis.

Pre-study, both AM and SHJ valued lived-experience narratives and their potential to generate new knowledge about cultural influences that would be difficult to know a priori or via other methods. Both were also strong advocates of the importance of hearing directly from young people about their lives.

Methodology

We used semi-structured interviews, time-lining, and photo-elicitation to generate data for the study. First, while focusing on exploring topics deductively related to relevant theories, semi-structured interviews also provided scope for exploring potentially new participant-driven information (Madill, 2012). Second, asking participants to construct a timeline helped to determine important characters, events, and turning points which contributed to their meaning-making of crisis and transition (Duara et al., 2018; Rhodes & Fitzgerald, 2006). Third, photo-elicitation is a method where images brought by the participants are drawn on in the interview process – and, here, also the timelining – to facilitate their sharing of experiences and meaning-making (Hatten et al., 2013; Morrow, 2001). The participant's perspective is of central interest to our study and this constellation of data generation methods was an effective way of eliciting rich material (Adriansen, 2012; Bagnoli, 2009; Duara et al., 2018). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used for analysing the data given its attention to subjective experience and meaning-making as expressed in textual materials (McCann & Lubman, 2012; Smith et al., 2009).

Many research studies with young people have used IPA, exploring experiences such as suicide by adolescents and young adults (Orri et al., 2014), social relationships in early psychosis (MacDonald et al., 2005), young carers' wellbeing (Bolas et al., 2007), depression and access to care services (McCann & Lubman, 2012), young men's alcohol consumption and its association with masculinity (De Visser & Smith, 2007), and others. These studies focused on participants' experiences, not merely looking at what the experiences were, but understanding the process of meaning-making, which is also critical to the present study. IPA allows such an investigation (Smith et al., 2009) where both the researcher and the researched are engaged in meaning-making and interpretation (double hermeneutics). In addition, IPA's focus on individual experiences (idiography) allows us to explore each case study with richness and depth giving weightage to their subjective experience of crisis and meaning-making. The social and cultural context is of relevance for the current study and IPA provides access to examine the same (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith, 1996). This is deemed useful in understanding

both shared experiences of crisis among different participants while also investigating the similarities and differences of experiences across social, cultural and economic groups.

Photo-elicitation is compatible with IPA, as it aims to elicit lived experience with attention to the participants' perceptions and interpretations of their psychological and social worlds. Use of photo-elicitation is based on the understanding that it is not possible to simply walk into an environment and understand a person's lived experiences. It is only through people's lenses of the environment and their representations of the same that could provide rich information (Dennis et al., 2009). While photos and timeline provide rich data about participant perceptions, they could be communicated best through semi-structured interviews and specifically using IPA for analysis. This renders justification to what was perceived by the participants and what meanings were generated through such captured images fostering double hermeneutics, a concept used in IPA (Smith et al., 2009). Double hermeneutics is used in the analysis of the lived experiences wherein the participant makes an interpretation of their experiences which are then interpreted by the researchers in the light of the larger context relating to the research question.

Ethical Consideration

Approval for this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the School of Psychology, University of Leeds, UK. Signed informed consent was secured from all participants.

Participants and Recruitment

Inclusion criteria were that participants (1) were between 22-30 years old, (2) self-defined as having experienced difficulties "finding one's place in the world," and (3) were British nationals (when recruited in the UK) or Indian nationals (when recruited in India). Target participants included both men and women and both university-educated and non-university-educated people to provide diversity. Participants were recruited via posters around local universities, the host university alumni website, and by word of mouth. In total, we included 16 British participants and eight Indian participants. The Indian sample catalysed analytical insights by sharing experiences in a different context that help gain traction on the complexities of the experience of quarterlife crisis. Our sampling strategy was also commensurate with IPA methodology which values the idiographic and focuses on depth of analysis (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Table 1 describes our participants in terms of culture, age, gender, and highest level of education.

Table 1

Participants' distribution based on cultural background, gender, age, and education

Cultural background (British/Indian)	Age (mean) (<i>SD</i>)	Gender		Education		
		Male	Female	Attended university	Not attended university	attended university
British	24.31 (<i>SD</i> =1.85)	8	8	12 (6 males, 6 females)	4 (2 females)	2 (2 males, 2 females)
Indian	27.25 (<i>SD</i> =2.31)	4	4	5 (2 males, 3 females)	3 (2 males, 1 female)	1 (1 male, 1 female)

Data Generation and Analytical Procedures

The lead researcher (first author) met with interested participants in two sessions. In the first meeting, details of the study were discussed, and essential guidelines were provided for collecting photos, and in the second meeting, the photo-elicitation interview was conducted. In the period between the two meetings, participants were invited to collect and send images related to their difficulties of “finding one’s place in the world.” They had the option to take new photos (with consent from people), bring old photos or download images from the internet (as long as they were from copyright-free sources). An instruction sheet was provided to the participants containing guidelines for taking and/or collecting photos/images. Photos that had identifiable people/objects (including the participant) were anonymised before storing and using for publications. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, conducted by the first author, and driven by the images brought. Participants used both verbal and visual means to share their experiences while placing the images on a timeline they had drawn (e.g., Figure 1).

Figure 1
Olivia’s timeline



The participants led the interview by selecting the photos they wanted to discuss and placing them on a self-drawn timeline of “when your story started.” The interviewer supported their narratives through prompts that helped keep the focus on the topic of research – quarterlife crisis. The prompts were developed based on previous studies on young people at transitional phases (e.g., Arnett, 2000; Robbins & Wilner, 2001; Setterson & Ray, 2010) that suggests crucial changes occurring over the course of transition from adolescence to adulthood, especially with regards to relationships and positions in society. The interview schedule aimed to understand changes in relationships and any tensions that might have stemmed from these changes and/or contributed to the experience of crisis. The interview included exploration of responsibility towards others, based on Oinonen’s (2003) argument that young adulthood is a position between “being taken care of” and “taking care of” whereby young adults are said to take increasing responsibility for themselves. Furthermore, questions about past regrets were also used as prompts in the interview schedule. Different decisions are made in the period of transition, often in the form of trial and error (Robbins & Wilner, 2001) and thus, may entail developing regrets that continued to impact their current state. Questions were also included on the topic of feeling stuck, argued as a point of crisis by Robbins and Wilner (2001). Towards the end of the interview, the focus was directed to coping and advice to others so as to understand how they responded to their experiences of crisis. The various examples explicated in the two books by Setterson and Ray (2010) and Robbins and Wilner (2001) suggest that young people go through varied experiences, details of which could be vital in capturing the essence and depth of their crisis experiences. Recognising this variability, the interview schedule was woven into the events presented by the participants during the interview process.

IPA was used to analyse the data based on transcriptions of the recorded interviews. Analysis progressed over seven stages, combining typical steps in IPA (McCann & Lubman, 2012; Smith et al., 2009) with consideration of timelined photos/images. Following Stage 1 (transcription and data preparation by RD), RD progressed to Stage 2 (descriptive coding). Following detailed reading of each transcript, RD progressed to line-by-line coding, assigning descriptive codes to chunks of texts which conveyed even basic meaning (e.g., “getting first job” or “relationship ending”). This helped the analyst to pay close attention to the context of experience (i.e., what was happening, who were key players, etc.). Codes at this stage could also capture experience, emotion, and meaning making at the micro level (e.g., “sees first job as an opportunity” or “feels duty towards father”). Following line-by-line coding, RD generated provisional themes for each participant. This required focusing on the key experiences reported by the participant, and why these mattered to them in the context of a quarterlife crisis. This was possible as the analyst had become deeply familiar with the minutiae of each story. Coding and provisional themes for each participant were shared with AM and SHJ as a way of sense-checking and refining terms and language within themes. This process was completed for each participant in turn, attempting as much as possible to treat each narrative as unique, without bias from the analysis of preceding transcripts. This was a mindset of not assuming there would be similarities and to avoid automatic use of themes identified in other transcripts. However, where there were clear similarities in experience, the same theme wording was used, for example, “comparison with others.” Stage 3 (tabulation of individual themes) was the end of individual level of analysis, with approximately 3-5 themes per participant, each with a short description, and key extracts to retain connection with the words of the participants.

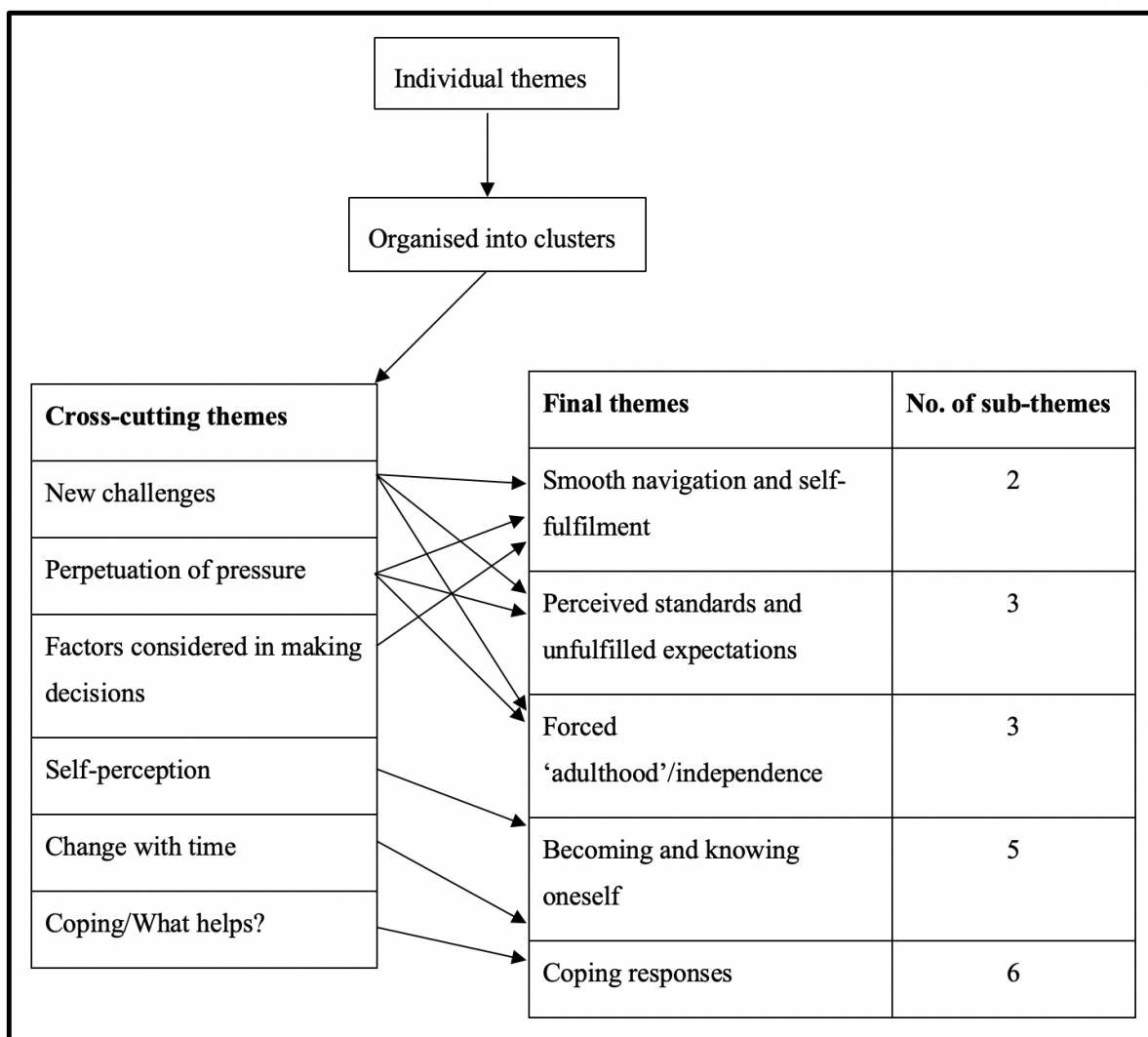
Stage 4 (developing cross-cutting themes) progressed the analysis to the group level. RD first identified where themes were similar or clustered together and merged these under a new theme. For example, “need for someone” and “comparison with others” were clustered together into “perpetuation of pressure.” Sense-checking with AM and SHJ was repeated here; we discussed what was conceptually similar around the clustering and whether the indicative

extracts of each participant were well-captured under the new, more abstract theme. We also identified where sub-themes were necessary to adequately capture the variations in experiences around a theme. This process led to the generation of a final set of themes and sub-themes, with indicative extracts from individuals.

In Stage 5, the summaries developed from the transcripts were used to make pictorial representations of their transitions through different milestones in the form of graphs. These graphs were not to scale by any means but served as a helpful guide in understanding transitional routes, especially in relation to work. Stage 6 commenced with analysis of photos coded first individually (see Table 2 for example) and later clustered together into broad themes. It was at this point that the photos/images really assisted the analysis. RD “lingered” with each photo/image along the narrative to enrich their perspective-taking, aiming to grasp even more how the world appeared to, and was experienced by, the participant. The final stage of theme generation involved combining notes from Stages 4, 5 and 6. An example of theme refinement from cross-cutting themes to final themes can be found in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Flow chart from individual and cross-cutting themes to final themes



Our analysis satisfies a key quality marker of IPA; that is, constructing a compelling, unfolding narrative (see Nizza et al., 2021) as our three sub-themes (playing catch up, feeling responsible,



and living up to social expectations) reflect overall coherence around the main theme whilst presenting differentiating aspects of the experience from individuals in two cultural settings (British and Indian).

Findings

One theme – “perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations” – is selected for presentation here because it highlights interesting ways in which young people experience threats to their self-worth as a central feature of quarterlife crisis where the meaning of one’s worth is perceived in relation to the social and cultural environment, thus providing nuance to the concept of “quarterlife crisis.” We cover only this theme in detail in this paper to allow in-depth reporting and consideration that would be compromised if we were to cover all themes in one paper. We start by explicating this theme and then present its three sub-themes: playing catch up, feeling responsible, and living up to social expectations. Table 2 shows the distribution of the three sub-themes across participants. In participant quotes, [...] indicates omitted text mid-turn.

Table 2

Demonstrating a part of the photo analysis process

Photo/Image	Summary/Quote	Interpretation
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -self-portrayal of being socially unacceptable - “I was a bit rebellious in quotation marks” - “always been annoyed by people” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Photo portraying everything socially undesirable: gun, smoking and an angry look Metaphorical image Conscious moulding
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -self-portrayal of being in a vicious circle of undesirable circumstances - feeling stuck - externalising cause of problems - “it’s all black and white” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Metaphorical image Helplessness Representing his environment Indication of problems set outside himself

Participants strove to meet milestones to prove their capabilities in relation to peers, family expectations, and social indices of success. However, they often felt they lagged behind their contemporaries, internally and externally imposed pressures could be overwhelming, and that the imminent threat of failure was a continual threat to self-worth.

Sub-theme 1, British participants: Playing catch up

Most participants saw their peers progressing in terms of career, marriage, and/or living arrangements. This was a source of worry and frustration because they felt their own relative lack of progress in these regards was potentially indicative of inadequacy. For many, this built into a feeling of crisis. For example, Bill described how his friends were pursuing further education while he was yet to find a passion that he could build into a career:

[...] it's just seeing people do the thing that they absolutely love and it almost seems effortless. I'm not saying that it is but it almost seems like they just do it because it was what they were [...] intending to do as it were. Not living in some sort of [...] fairy world. I'm just saying that [...] friends that I had that are interested in politics. Are so interested in it that [...] oh it's all there is. It's all they think about. And I could never be like that although I recognised that I'd seen people have that passion. And it's not just passion because it's like they had a flair for it [...] they absolutely were masters of what they were doing. Like my friends now are doing PhD programmes and stuff like that because they're [...] really focussed [...] (Bill, male, British, attended university).

Bill equated a successful career transition with moving from education to work based on intense interests and felt that he was lacking the focus and motivation he saw in others. At university, Bill was disinterested in his subject area, while he perceived his friends as immersed and confident in their fields. He was aware of the effort required but did not anticipate this would bring the satisfaction to him that it gave his friends. However, when he changed direction and tried to start over again by re-taking his A-levels, he saw others moving ahead in their educational achievements and felt he was the only one who was struggling to progress towards a satisfying career. He added, "I think that I have become more self-conscious but you know it's because I can't sort of [laughs] I feel like I've not done things the normal way." Bill's sense of what normal seems to emerge from the smooth, satisfying progression he perceived his peers to be enjoying and he experienced himself as lagging behind, which he believed was one cause of his social anxiety: "because I've had all of that, it just meant that [...] I couldn't really open myself up as a person."

Just as Bill judged his own lack of progress through comparing himself to his friends, Avril observed the life changes experienced by her peers and took these as milestones that people her age should be achieving. She described feeling "panicky" when she considered her position in relation to that of her friends:

[...] I went from job-to-job again deciding what I want to do with myself and this is like still kind of where I am at the minute. It does feel like a bit more panicky though 'cos everyone [...] all my friends are getting married [points to fifth photo, Figure 3] buying houses [points sixth photo, Figure 3] having babies [points to far end of her timeline, Figure 3] and I'm just like kind of where I am. I am [points between fourth and fifth photos, Figure 3] now where I am just back then as well (Avril, female, British, attended university).

Avril brought photos of different friends and positioned them as representing ideal milestones in her own timeline (Figure 3). She felt that her current situation was similar to how it was when she first started her job six years ago when she was unable to decide what she wanted to do. On the other hand, she perceived her friends as making significant positive life changes and encountering exciting new experiences. This raised serious questions in terms of a sense of unexpectedly being lost, delayed, or confused in her life path since leaving school. Avril also talked about ageing and the added stress this gave her in terms of progressing her life:

[...] I feel stuck at the minute is just 'cos I feel like time's running out 'cos I'm getting older now and I feel like if I need to change my life around and make a decision I need to do it now and like especially like with everybody having

babies [pointing to seventh photo, Figure 3] it's just like I feel like it's me realising how old I'm getting, and that's [...] yeah I need to make a decision about what to do next (Avril, female, British, attended university).

At 28, Avril felt she was behind age-related expectations, yet that it was not too late for her to catch up. However, she was unable to make crucial decisions in the midst of perceived time pressures and this created a feeling of being stuck and in crisis.

Figure 3

Avril's timeline



Sub-theme 1, Indian participants: Playing catch up

There were no substantial differences in the Indian sample with regard to “playing catch up.” However, it is worth noting that the British sample emphasised more comparisons with others in terms of career achievements while relationship status/marriage seemed to be an important point of comparison for the Indian sample.

Although Vikram compared himself with others in relation to career achievements, he laid his shortcomings solely on financial constraints. He saw others progressing to do what he actually wanted for himself, but this did not raise doubts about his own capabilities. However, it did create a feeling of being left behind in his journey towards fulfilling work:

I want to in CA [Chartered Accountancy]. I did for two years but I couldn't complete [...] because of financial background. I think my friends completed it now [...] so even I want to [...] even if later in age [...] some people get early success some later [...] even if I get success later I have no issues [...] but I want the success [...] (Vikram, male, Indian, not completed university).

Vikram articulates a clear path that he wants to pursue. However, observing others reach the goal to which he aspired did concern him and he had strong motivation to catch up. His desire to “get success” was significant but he felt hampered by financial challenges, and this caused him to experience a sense of crisis:

I was very interested in education [...] did CA and left [...] means my teachers used to say I will do really well [...] but situation was such that I couldn't complete [...] I want to do it later [...] but God knows what will happen [...] (Vikram, male, Indian, not completed university).

Despite strong determination to achieve his dream job, he expresses a sense of helplessness and diminishing hope and has to rely heavily on faith to see him through.

Just like Avril, Isha shared how she felt the need to have her own family because she saw her peers taking this path:

It has to happen and somewhere in my mind I also felt that OK everyone every friend of mine is having a family of her own. I also have to have a family of my own. Nothing more than that (Isha, female, Indian, attended university).

Isha is very clear that her desire was strongly influenced by the choices her friends were making and that she used them to assess what she, herself, should be pursuing. And, just like Avril, Isha felt pressure to catch up.

Sub-theme 2, British participants: Feeling responsible

“Feeling responsible” captures the pressure participants experienced to fulfil the expectations placed on them by family and how this affects their own self-evaluation. Many felt accountable to their parents: they wanted to repay what had been provided or sacrificed for them, and to make their parents proud by fulfilling their wishes. When participants failed to meet parental expectations, they reported feeling helpless and, often, in crisis. However, it was notable that British participants tended to discuss the pressure to fulfil family expectations only when prompted by the interviewer. For example, Alex responded as follows when he was asked if he felt responsible towards anyone during his transition to adulthood:

Yeah a little bit. I'd say like my parents probably like they've put so much time and effort into me and my brother [...] bringing us up and giving us this like stable upbringing. I certainly feel responsible to them in trying to be as successful as possible and working as hard as I can [...] I want to give them something maybe to boast about something like that. I want to [...] I suppose reward them for [...] giving me some great support and everything. And so perhaps it's [...] one of the things I don't want to go home and do nothing because then that will disappoint them [...] they wouldn't like that if I just went home and did nothing so I need to [...] figure out what I want to do. Yeah a lot for them as much as myself (Alex, male, British, attended university).

Alex did not know what he wanted to pursue as a career and felt a time pressure to decide in order to avoid disappointing his parents. The combination of wanting to make his parents proud and perceived lack of progress towards this end contributed to the experience of crisis experience for some participants.

Similarly, Erica was upset when she failed to achieve the qualifications required to do medicine at university and, in the following extract, mentions the disappointment she felt this must have caused her family:

I ended up with an A and two Bs in my A levels but I needed two As and a B to go to the course that I wanted to do which was medicine. By that point I'd already kind of convinced myself I didn't want to do it anyway and I'm kind of glad now that I didn't do it but that was just so hard like such a blow. I felt like my whole family was disappointed in me and I didn't really know what to do [...] (Erica, female, British, attended university).

Notably, it was not her own, but her family's disappointment that was "hard" to deal with that caused a "blow." She explained how this was so because of all the hopes they had pinned on her and their perception that she did not take seriously the opportunities available to her:

[...] they were disappointed. My parents they didn't go to university themselves. They always wanted me they recognized that I had the potential to do things and they just saw it as throwing it away. (Erica, female, British, attended university).

It is unclear whose ambitions have been quashed and Erica's failure to meet the entry criteria to study medicine is conflated with failing to meet her parents' expectations. Erica expanded on the sense that she saw herself failing in the eyes of her family:

[...] my brother was going off to uni and I found that really really tough like when he left I felt even more that I was like the black sheep that I'd done something wrong because my parents were so proud of him and so happy that he was going away and like following a dream [...] but like I was always like "It should have been me" [...] and I just felt that they were just way prouder of him than they were of me and I was just like leeching off them at home and I just felt awful (Erica, female, British, attended university).

Erica felt inadequate in comparison to her brother and desperate to regain her parents' esteem. Unable to follow the path anticipated for her, her own self-esteem was severely diminished,

and she experienced a crisis as she struggled but failed to bring changes that would allow her to meet the standards of success set by her parents.

Sub-theme 2, Indian participants: Feeling responsible

Family expectations played a substantial role in the lives of the Indian participants indicated by the intensity and spontaneity with which they spoke about the accountability they felt towards their families, while the British sample mainly discussed responsibility towards parents only when prompted which suggested that other aspects took centrality in their experience of crisis. Not only did the Indian participants reveal having to live up to their parents' expectations but, because of the influence family had over them, they showed a *fear* of the disappointment that their decisions and actions could potentially cause. For example, making her family proud and avoiding disappointing them was taken very seriously by Amrita and the following extract from her interview demonstrates the implicit and explicit family pressures that had a considerable implication in Amrita's life:

[...] that's why first year I didn't do so well [...] so well in the sense that you know I had 58 percent. 2 percent less of first class [...] 60 percent [...] and I was a little scared what would my dad say [...] because dad had a very high expectations of me [...] and I was scared that he would be pissed [...] kind of maybe yell at me or whatever [...] and then when I came home and I told Abba "Abba I got a 58 percent. Didn't get the first class" he just told me [...] he didn't tell me anything [...] I think 2 or 3 days later we were going somewhere [...] like all the members of my family were there and he tells in the car [...] he said (in Assamese) "Is [uses pet name] a kind of girl who would get a second class?" [...] you know he just said that [...] it just reflected the amount of confidence he has in me [...] so in my grad I just had first class second position [...] and in my masters I topped with a first class first position [...] I was a gold medallist [...] (Amrita, female, Indian, attended university).

In the first few lines, Amrita expresses worry that her father would be angry with her academic performance. However, as she continues, this is expressed, rather, as a fear of failing to meet her father's expectations of her. As well as feeling direct pressure from her father to do well academically, she conveys determination to win his approval by meeting his standards. Amrita assumed that the interviewer, as another Assamese woman, would understand the impact of parental expectations through revealing that, ultimately, she was a "gold medalist," in this way indexing the effort she had made for them.

Similarly, Aman discussed feeling responsible to his parents, saying, "I will do everything that is in the book for a son, [...] rules of being an ideal son. I'll do everything. Even the last bit [...] you know the barcode. I will do that too." His parents' expectations were "rules" to him that set the standard of his success. He felt pressured to meet these expectations which, at times, required him to inhabit roles for which he felt unprepared:

I didn't know if I was a [...] I was a son. I didn't know whether I was a proprietor of R (names the family company). I didn't know whether I was a good boyfriend (with a confused tone) or where was I. I was nowhere. Seriously I was nowhere. I was not being able to be a good son. Not be a good brother elder brother. Not be a good fiancé. Not be a good friend to her (says the whole sentence in a loud, almost frustrated tone) (Aman, male, Indian, attended university).

Aman conveys a sense of being lost, unable to perform satisfactorily in a variety of responsible roles, while at the same time anxious to meet expectations and to do his very best. His crisis stemmed from the cumulative implicit and explicit pressures on him with which he found difficult to cope and led to a feeling of paralysis.

Sub-theme 3, British participants: Living up to social expectations

Participants made references to social expectations that shaped their need to prove their capabilities. These involved values and norms that indicate what is expected of an adult and milestones that should be achieved. For example, Hannah discussed the pressure she felt in terms of romantic relationships given the association perceived between marriage and success:

[...] we understand you are forty and still not married so that's a cat (points to photo 27, Figure 4). You know a lot of people measure success on whether you have a partner or not and I don't agree with that (Hannah, female, British, attended university).

Figure 4

Photo 27 brought by Hannah



Hannah used an analogy to depict the pressure she felt from “people” who she portrays as measuring success in ways she resists, bringing a humorous depiction of the social pressure she experienced. However, although she expressed disagreement with the social value placed

on women marrying, moreover marrying before mid-life, in other parts of the interview she revealed concern about failing in this regard. For example, while discussing Figure 4, she also mentioned how she was affected by the fact that she did not have a partner:

[...] you compare yourself to them and they were in relationships and getting married and stuff and doing really well in their jobs and my friend [mentioned name] was still doing that and it was like well I don't have any of that and family especially "oh are you seeing anyone" (hovering over photo 27, Figure 4) and it's like why is my success being measured from whether I have a partner or not? So yeah that one (points to photo 27 again, Figure 4) (Hannah, female, British, attended university).

Hannah shares her disappointment at not being able to live up to the standards of success as demonstrated by her friends' marriages but continues to question the validity of measuring success by relationship status. However, her frequent pointing to photo 27 (Figure 4) and examination of the issue underscores her dilemma that, whether she accepts it or not, it is very difficult to escape basic social expectations of successful adulthood.

Andrew, on the other hand, reflects on the social expectations associated with having a degree and discusses having to take a job that he felt was unsuitable for a graduate:

[...] although it was a job it was like what graduate wants to get a job at [names grocery store] because his mum works there? [...] It felt like a massive step backwards for me because [...] I felt like that was a job I easily could have done at sixteen before I'd done my A level, before I'd done my GCSEs and I hated it [...] (Andrew, male, British, attended university).

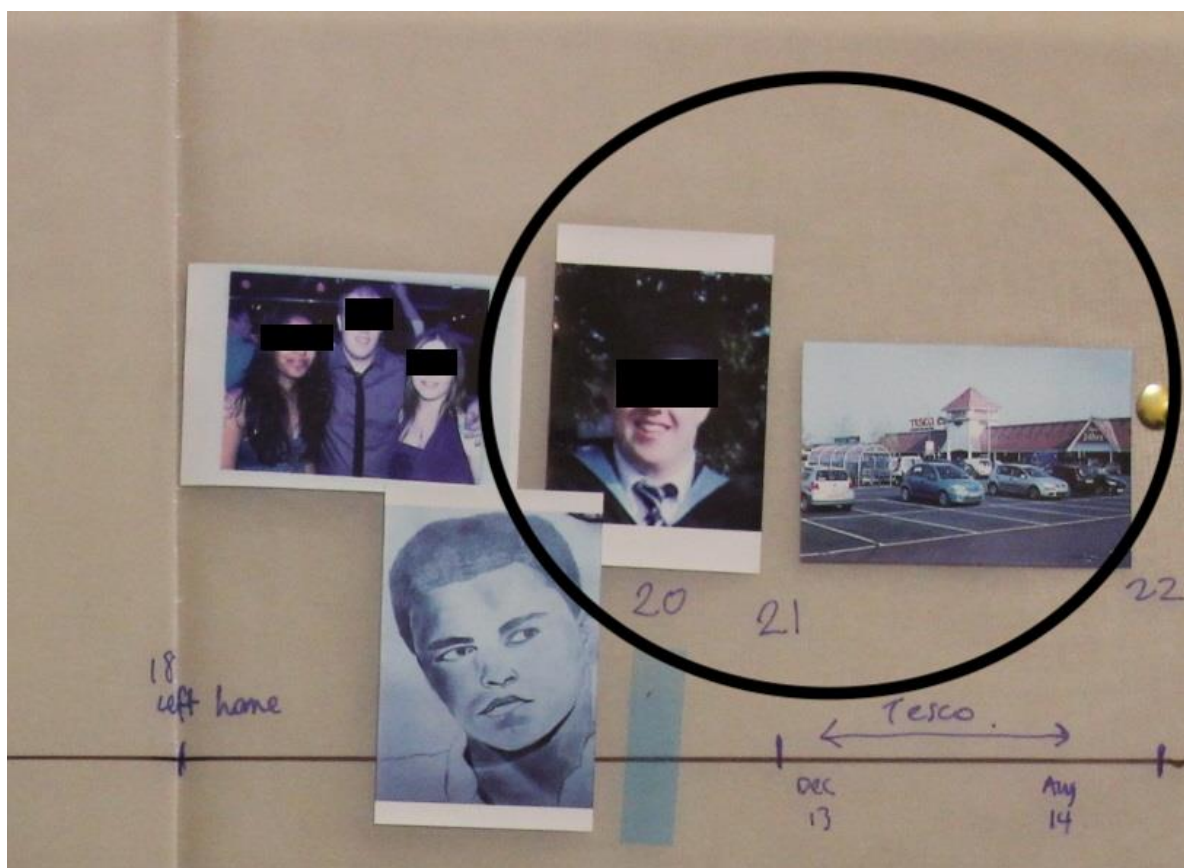
As a graduate, Andrew felt that he had failed on the career trajectory that should have opened up to him and, hence, that he was actually regressing. Moreover, the fact that he implies he only got the job he did because his mother was already an employee, makes him appear more like a child than an adult in his apparent dependency on her. And Andrew's self-esteem was severely undermined:

I'm not moving forward with my life, I'm going backwards and working at [names a grocery store] was just awful, [...] I had no self-esteem while I was there [...] I think I was very much tying up my own sense of self-worth with the job and where I was, I wasn't thinking "Look I've gone to uni. I've got a good degree. I've got a first. I'm clearly capable of doing more". I was thinking "I'm not doing more. I'm here. This is what I'm doing" and I was tying that up with my ability which is obviously not true [...] (Andrew, male, British, attended university).

Andrew had proved his capability in the educational system but, sadly, at this point in his life, did not transfer into a job commensurate with this success. He experienced many steps backwards and forward in early adulthood as part of his crisis and assumed that a normal trajectory should be linear progression towards a settled life. He brought two photos to convey this experience, one of his graduation and the other of the grocery store, placed next to each other on his timeline as if to showcase their incongruence (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Part of Andrew's timeline, circled two photos one of graduation and the other of job at the grocery store

**Sub-theme 3, Indian participants: Living up to social expectations**

For the Indian participants, living up to social expectations was expressed as a direct pressure from other people. For example, Isha described how people persuaded her to conform:

But then I felt that ‘Okay no maybe I need someone to rely on’. Okay. That desire was not felt so far. But suddenly when people began to talk people began to say things [...] and even my mom said that ‘Okay I’m here, but after a few years I won’t be there. Your sister will have her own life. What will you do then? For whom will you live? Okay. You will need someone to live for’. Then I felt that okay. Is it that? Then I have to think [...] (Isha, female, Indian, attended university).

In the initial part of the interview, Isha portrayed herself as a person who had very little interest in settling down with a partner. However, she describes a process of social pressure instilling doubt and pushing the idea that one should be connected deeply with another person outside the family which, usually, means marriage. Isha’s statement, “Is it that?” suggests confrontation with this social truth and she begins to question her own desires and ability to find a place in the world: “maybe I need someone to rely on.” This was a foundational dilemma with which Isha grappled, resulting in a confused sense of self and life direction.

Ravi also struggled with his sense of self and life direction with regard to direct pressure from other people. Because of his former irresponsible behaviour, Ravi felt he had created a bad impression of himself in his community:

I think like [...] whatever happens it again gets back to the society. And [...] and right now I'm not that kind of guy who can talk and like who can be [...] for example like who can explain things to someone. Right now I will just give it up [...] like 'okay, if [...] if you're accusing me or something, I'm sorry for it. I can't do anything [...] really sorry about the past. I can't change the past right now like yeah [...] right now I want to do something that [...] because if I work somewhere if I get a job my family will be happy [...] and there will be a reflection to the society right [...] I'm responsible for my own actions (Ravi, male, Indian, attended university).

For Ravi, significance is attached not just to the impression one's action has on one's family but on "society" at large. He experiences pressure to get a job to bring contentment to his family and, at the same time, meet standards of success posed by "society." Just like Erica, there is ambiguity as to whose expectations he is attempting to meet. Nevertheless, Ravi struggled to establish a career which he felt was crucial to rectifying the impression of being a failure in his own eyes but also in those of his parents and community.

Discussion

The aim of this study is to explore young people's experiences of quarterlife crises triggered from interactions with the social environment, taking also into consideration both British and Indian contexts. We evidence how young people experience threats to their self-worth as a central feature of quarterlife crisis through perceiving there to be standards and expectations which they may fail, or be in the process of failing, to meet. We unpacked three ways in which this threat to self-worth played itself out in their lives: playing catch up, feeling responsible, and living up to social expectations. In the following, we discuss each of these sub-themes in turn and then conclude the section that follows by considering our findings in light of Robinson and Smith's (2010) theory of early adult crisis.

In relation to "playing catch up," our participants experienced anxiety when they compared themselves to peers who they saw as doing better in terms of milestones such as marriage, parenthood, and career achievement. Billings et al. (1980) point out that crises are often built on perceptions rather than objective assessments and, interestingly, our participants tended to make upwards comparisons with peers viewed as doing well rather than downwards comparisons with those who might be understood to be lagging behind. There is plenty of evidence that upwards comparisons are associated with dissatisfaction; for example in relation to career (e.g., Brown et al., 2007). Moreover, it appears that pre-comparison state influences the direction of comparison such that low subjective well-being is associated with greater upward comparisons, potentially leading to a negative cycle (Wheeler & Miyake, 1992). Hence, young people might be more vulnerable to experiencing a quarterlife crisis if they have high aspirations but unpractised in putting things in perspective. This situation may be exacerbated in circumstances where young people are also confused about, or uncomfortable with, the standards by which they should determine their personal value, opinions, and capabilities (Festinger, 1954).

This brings us to the second sub-theme, "feeling responsible." Here we found the most substantial cultural differences. Although some of the British participants also expressed concerns over fulfilling family expectations as an addition to the pressure felt from comparison

with peers, unlike the Indian participants, they did not raise this spontaneously. This finding perhaps reflects the ideologies of “individualism” and “collectivism” associated with the UK and India, respectively. In comparison to individualistic cultures, collectivist society family expectations play a crucial role (Chadda & Deb, 2013; Pole, 2014) and most young people feel at least obligated to fulfil family responsibilities (Killen & Wainryb, 2000).

And this brings us to the third sub-theme, “living up to social expectations,” which captures the pressure participants experienced to fulfil the expectations placed on them by the society and how this affected their own self-evaluation. According to Arnett (2000), “emerging adulthood” is characterised by “age of identity exploration” when young people have considerable scope to explore their personal interests in order to carve out their future. However, those experiencing quarterlife crises did not emphasize personal choice and the exploration of options but rather were largely concerned with proving their worth. Thus, our findings resonate more with Keniston’s (1970) proposal of youth as a period of tension between self and society.

Finally, we consider our findings in light of Robinson and Smith’s (2010) theory of early adult crisis (TEAC). We select this theory because it is close conceptually to “quarterlife crisis,” is one of the most contemporaneous theories to cover this topic, and has been built on detailed qualitative methods investigation as has our research reported here. In essence, TEAC posits that, when young adults (25-40 years) experience difficulties with their life trajectory, this can be conceptualised as consisting of four phases: locked in, separation, exploration, and resolution.

For Robinson and Smith (2010), the first phase – “locked in” – is characterized by extrinsic motivation and conformity in which young adults adopt a foreclosed self which offers little personal satisfaction. Our study confirms that many young people equated success with conformity to perceived social standards and when they experienced themselves as unable to meet these, questioned their self-worth, and found themselves in crisis. Interestingly, Robinson (2015) proposes an alternative first phase called “locked out,” characterised by the inability to enter into adult roles or to form a life structure. For instance, they may be unable to attain financial stability due to being “locked out” of opportunities or they may be incapable or unable to acquire essential skills and therefore “locked out” of “adult” positions (Duara, 2017). The experience of our participants could be conceived with the additional nuance that they were often confused as to with whose description of “adult roles” they were struggling to conform.

Robinson and Smith (2010) propose the second stage – “separation” – to be one in which young people recognise the need to move towards a satisfying life structure with a “sense of desperation” (p. 182). The present study adds detail in terms of how difficult it can be for young people to make this decision for change because doing so might mean “falling behind” others who appear to be progressing through social sanctioned milestones.

In the third stage – “exploration” – the young person starts to investigate different life options. We reveal how this may not always be experienced as a positive situation. Our participants considered variable life trajectories but often faced external constraints. These included social expectations and economic conditions that placed boundaries on the extent to which they could pursue a more satisfying course. The fourth stage – “resolution” – occurs when a young adult adapts to a new life structure, and this too may or may not always mean a self-satisfactory one. Social expectations and economic conditions may lay boundaries to what can be achieved and what needs to be adapted or settled with.

Conclusion

The theme “perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations” adds detail to our understanding of “quarterlife crisis” that takes into consideration two distinct contexts,

individualistic and collectivist, delving into the impact of external factors of motivation and goals that could have profound influence on how young people view and experience their transitional process to adulthood and perceive threats to their self-worth. The perceived responsibility to meet family and social expectations appeared to catalyse the emergence of crisis for most participants, and was consolidated, for some, through upward comparisons with peers who seemed to be managing all of this better than them (e.g., attaining high educational qualifications, getting a stable job, having a romantic partner, getting married, and having children).

A limitation of our study is the relatively small sample size, particularly of the Indian group. However, as we have shown, our findings resonate with current theory and add nuance and detail particularly with regard to commonalities and differences with how quarterlife crisis may be experienced in more individualistic and collectivist cultures (see Table 3). Moreover, our analytical method – IPA – is interested in providing in-depth analysis of small samples selected for relevance to the topic of research (Horsburgh, 2003; Smith, 2018). A strength is that our use of photo elicitation and time-lining helped generate rich, carefully considered data. Further research could investigate how to support young people’s resilience to the perception that they have to play catch up, feel responsible, and live up to social expectations, while finding a life course that is personally satisfying and sensitive to cultural norms.

Table 3

Participant demographic, interview length, number of photographs brought, and contribution to analytic sub-themes

Pseudonym*	Sex	Age (yrs)	Ethnicity	Highest qualification #	Source of recruitment	Interview (mins)	Photos	Sub-theme		
								1	2	3
Mary	F	25	White-British	Currently PhD	Word of mouth	46	7	ü	ü	ü
Hannah	F	27	White-British	BSc	University of Leeds Alumni website	80	33	ü	ü	ü
Olivia	F	23	White-British	BA	University of Leeds Alumni website	54	10		ü	
Avril	F	28	White-British	BA (Hons)	Word of mouth	48	9	ü		ü
Erica	F	24	White-British	Currently BSc	University of Leeds Alumni website	74	13	ü	ü	
Silvia	F	25	White-British	Currently PhD	Word of mouth	37	7			
Sarah	F	23	White-British	Diploma	Through acquaintance	39	9			ü
Amy	F	26	British-Asian	GCSE	Through acquaintance	140	14			

Bill	M	23	White-British	BA (Hons)	University of Leeds Alumni website	73	5	ü	
Andrew	M	22	White-British	MA	Through acquaintance	128	6	ü	ü
Max	M	25	White-British	MA	Through acquaintance	70	5	ü	ü
Denver	M	22	White-British	Currently BA	Through acquaintance	49	5		
Alex	M	23	White-British	Currently Masters	Through acquaintance	36	8	ü	ü ü
Harry	M	26	White-British	BA	University of Leeds Alumni website	59	11	ü	ü
Aran	M	25	White-British	GCSE	Poster	54	5		
Jack	M	22	White-British	GCSE	Through acquaintance	52	18		
Aman	M	29	Assamese	MA	Through acquaintance	88	10	ü	ü
Ravi	M	25	Assamese	Currently BA	Through acquaintance	111	28	ü	ü
Raj	M	24	Assamese	A-levels	Word of mouth	41	8	ü	
Vikram	M	30	Assamese	A-levels	Word of mouth	39	12	ü	ü
Ishita	F	26	Assamese	MSc	Through acquaintance	28	10	ü	ü
Amrita	F	30	Assamese	MA	Through acquaintance	103	6	ü	
Isha	F	26	Assamese	MA	Word of mouth	79	6	ü	ü ü
Niti	F	28	Assamese	A-levels	Word of mouth	48	5	ü	ü

*Note 1: Participants listed in order of cultural group, gender and education

#Note 2: Abbreviations, PhD (Doctorate), BA (Bachelor of Arts), BSc (Bachelor of Science), GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education), MA (Master of Arts), MSc (Master of Science)

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Author Note

Dr. Raginie Duara shares an interest in understanding the youth culture and the various issues faced by this group of people and how such issues and coping mechanisms sit within the broader historical and cultural context whilst dealing with challenges of establishing an identity and a “place in this world.” With her expertise in qualitative research methods, she worked as a research fellow at the University of Leeds in an international research study funded by ESRC and GCRF on youth substance addiction in Assam (India) and developed impactful visual materials such as posters and short films along with participants who have successfully resisted or recovered from alcohol and/or drug addiction. Some of her works can be found at <https://projectresilience.co.uk/>

Dr. Siobhan Hugh-Jones is an Associate Professor in Mental Health Psychology, School of Psychology, University of Leeds. She is the Principal Investigator of the project SAMA, Safeguarding Adolescent Emotional Wellbeing in India.

Professor Anna Madill is Chair of Qualitative Inquiry in the School of Psychology, University of Leeds, UK. She is a fellow of the British Psychological Society and of the Academy of Social Sciences. She co-founded and chaired (2008-11) the BPS Qualitative Methods in Psychology Section. Many of her research project can be found at <https://projectresilience.co.uk/>

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Article Citation

Duara, R., Hugh-Jones, S., & Madill, A. (2023). Quarterlife crisis in the UK and India: Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations. *The Qualitative Report*, 28(2), 392-416. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2023.5599>
