

Language, Identity, and Quarter-Life Crisis: A Systemic Functional Linguistics Perspective on Indonesian Emerging Adults in Educational Contexts

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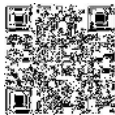
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ABSTRACT

Studi ini menganalisis bagaimana orang dewasa muda Indonesia mengungkapkan pengalaman krisis seperempat hidup (quarter-life crisis/QLC) dalam konteks pendidikan dengan pendekatan Linguistik Fungsional Sistemik (SFL). Tujuannya menunjukkan bahwa QLC tidak hanya bersifat psikologis, tetapi juga tampak sebagai performa linguistik identitas, rasa tidak aman, dan ketahanan. Metode yang digunakan adalah campuran, menggabungkan statistik deskriptif dan analisis wacana. Data dikumpulkan dari 33 responden berusia 18–30 tahun di Makassar melalui kuesioner Likert 17 item mencakup rasa tidak aman, kecemasan masa depan, motivasi, perbandingan sosial, religiusitas, dan kepuasan. Analisis kuantitatif dilakukan dengan menghitung frekuensi, sedangkan tanggapan dianalisis ulang dengan kerangka Penilaian SFL (Sikap, Keterlibatan, Kelulusan). Hasil menunjukkan tiga tema utama: (1) kecemasan tinggi, 36,4% selalu khawatir masa depan dan 54,5% kadang merasa tidak aman; (2) kesulitan relasional, 66,7% sulit memercayai orang lain dan 21,2% sering membandingkan diri di media sosial; (3) religiusitas dominan sebagai strategi koping, 72,7% mengandalkan keyakinan pada pertolongan Tuhan. Secara linguistik, pola ini muncul sebagai afek negatif, penilaian negatif terhadap orang lain, dan modalitas positif berbasis iman.

This study analyzes how young Indonesian adults express their quarter-life crisis (QLC) experiences in an educational context using a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach. The aim is to demonstrate that QLC is not only psychological in nature, but also manifests as linguistic performances of identity, insecurity, and resilience. The method used is mixed, combining descriptive statistics and discourse analysis. Data were collected from 33 respondents aged 18–30 years in Makassar through a 17-item Likert questionnaire covering insecurity, future anxiety, motivation, social comparison, religiosity, and satisfaction. Quantitative analysis was conducted by calculating frequencies, while responses were reanalyzed using the SFL Assessment framework (Attitude, Engagement, Graduation). The results reveal three main themes: (1) high anxiety, 36.4% always worry about the future and 54.5% sometimes feel insecure; (2) relational difficulties, 66.7% have difficulty trusting others and 21.2% often compare themselves on social media; (3) religiosity as a dominant coping strategy, 72.7% rely on faith in God's help. Linguistically, this pattern appears as negative affect, negative judgments of others, and positive faith-based modalities.



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INTRODUCTION

The period between adolescence and full adulthood is widely recognized as a unique and transitional developmental stage. Arnett (2000, 2015) conceptualizes this phase as emerging adulthood, typically occurring between the ages of 18 and 30, in which young people explore possibilities in education, work, relationships, and identity while delaying permanent commitments. Unlike adolescence, which is often characterized by dependency, and adulthood, which entails role stability, emerging adulthood is marked by instability, identity exploration, and self-focus. This stage is particularly salient in higher education contexts, where universities serve not only as institutions for academic advancement but also as key social spaces for negotiating identity and coping with psychosocial demands (Syed & McLean, 2016; Schwartz et al., 2013).

Within this transitional phase, the quarter-life crisis (QLC) has emerged as a phenomenon of growing academic and popular concern. Originally coined in media and counseling contexts, the concept refers to episodes of anxiety, uncertainty, and paralysis experienced by young adults who feel overwhelmed by the tasks of establishing careers, forming relationships, and defining a stable identity (Robinson et al., 2013). Empirical studies have shown that individuals in their twenties often report high levels of stress linked to social comparison, economic precarity, and pressure to succeed (Buhl, 2007; Rosenberg & Arnett, 2015). In Indonesia, where higher education expansion has increased the number of students aged 18–24 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2021), QLC is increasingly visible among university students who are confronted with both academic demands and cultural expectations such as early marriage, financial independence, and filial obligations (Rahmawati & Rachmawati, 2021).

Theoretically, this crisis resonates with Erikson's (1968) psychosocial stage of intimacy versus isolation, in which young adults negotiate closeness with others while consolidating their own identities. Failure to achieve a sense of intimacy and self-coherence can result in feelings of isolation and insecurity. Relatedly, Marcia's (1980) identity status model—later refined by Kroger (2017)—emphasizes identity achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and diffusion as critical outcomes of identity exploration, many of which align with QLC experiences. For instance, young adults in moratorium may feel paralyzed by indecision, while those in diffusion may exhibit low motivation and direction. These theoretical frameworks highlight the significance of QLC as a developmental rather than merely pathological phenomenon.

Despite these insights, much of the literature on QLC remains concentrated in Western contexts. For example, Robinson et al. (2013) described early adult crisis patterns in the UK, while Rosenberg and Arnett (2015) studied American young adults navigating transitions into the workforce. Studies in Asia are fewer but growing: Chung et al. (2020) explored QLC among Korean college students, finding links to academic burnout and mental health. In Indonesia, Rahmawati and Rachmawati (2021) examined QLC among undergraduate students, highlighting perfectionism and social comparison as major predictors. However, these studies are primarily psychological, focusing on emotional outcomes, stress levels, or coping strategies.

Very little research has analyzed the role of language in how QLC is expressed, negotiated, or resisted. Yet language is central to how individuals make sense of their experiences and present their identities. For example, Agarwal et al. (2020) analyzed social media posts and found that linguistic patterns such as intensifiers, negative evaluations, and metaphors were prominent in QLC discourse. Their study demonstrates that QLC is not only a psychological phenomenon but also a discursive construction, produced and reproduced in language. However, such work remains scarce in non-Western and educational contexts, where linguistic and cultural resources may shape QLC differently.

In Indonesia, cultural expectations interact with developmental tasks in distinctive ways. Many young adults face pressure to secure employment quickly, to marry before the age of 30, or to contribute financially to extended families (Prasetyo, 2022). At the same time, Indonesia is characterized by high levels of religiosity, which can act as both a protective factor and a source of pressure. Park (2005) and Krok (2014) demonstrate that religious meaning-making provides coherence and coping in times of stress. Consistent with these findings, Indonesian students often invoke spiritual language as a way to frame uncertainty about the future, a pattern confirmed in preliminary surveys in Makassar (Suriyani, 2022). These linguistic choices are not trivial; they index values, cultural schemas, and identity positions.

To capture such dynamics, this article adopts Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as its theoretical and analytical framework. Developed by Halliday (1994) and elaborated by Halliday and

Matthiessen (2014), SFL views language as a social semiotic system with three metafunctions: ideational (representing experience), interpersonal (enacting relationships and attitudes), and textual (organizing messages). Applying SFL allows researchers to see how young adults construe their lived experiences of insecurity, hope, or religiosity through specific linguistic patterns. For example, statements of anxiety (“I always worry about my future”) realize ideational processes of mental states, while commitments of faith (“I am sure of God’s help”) enact interpersonal stance and modalization.

In particular, the study draws on the Appraisal framework (Martin & White, 2005), which extends SFL to systematically analyze evaluative language. Appraisal theory categorizes stance into Attitude (emotions, judgments, appreciations), Engagement (ways of sourcing or dialoguing voices), and Graduation (scaling intensity and focus). The Likert-scale responses in our survey—never, rarely, sometimes, often, always—map directly onto the Graduation system, showing how students linguistically grade their feelings of self-doubt, motivation, or religiosity. By combining quantitative frequencies with appraisal analysis, this approach reveals not only how many students feel insecure but also how strongly they position themselves discursively.

The significance of adopting an SFL perspective is threefold. First, it highlights the semiotic nature of QLC, treating language not as a transparent medium but as a constitutive force in identity construction. Second, it bridges psychology and education: while psychology has focused on symptoms and coping, education must attend to how students express and negotiate crises in classrooms, counseling sessions, and academic writing. Third, it provides practical tools for educators. By analyzing how students linguistically frame their anxieties or motivations, teachers and counselors can design interventions that reframe negative narratives into developmental opportunities.

From an educational standpoint, QLC has profound implications. Students experiencing identity diffusion or crisis are at greater risk of academic disengagement, poor performance, and dropout (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Social comparison exacerbated by digital media can undermine self-efficacy, making students reluctant to participate in classroom discussions (Twenge, 2017; Valkenburg et al., 2022). Conversely, positive discourse—such as narratives of resilience or faith—can strengthen persistence and meaning-making. Recognizing and analyzing these discursive resources is essential for higher education institutions that aim to support not only students’ cognitive but also their socio-emotional and linguistic development (Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Rose & Martin, 2012).

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-method design that integrates descriptive survey analysis with discourse-based interpretation informed by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). The rationale for this design is twofold. First, the use of questionnaires enables the systematic collection of quantitative data regarding psychosocial and developmental characteristics of emerging adults (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Second, the adoption of SFL and the Appraisal framework provides a qualitative interpretive layer that allows us to treat responses not merely as numerical outcomes but as semiotic realizations of identity, stance, and evaluation (Martin & White, 2005). Such an integrated approach responds to calls for more interdisciplinary methods in the study of emerging adulthood (Schwartz et al., 2013; Syed & McLean, 2016).

By combining statistical analysis with linguistic inquiry, this design enables a richer understanding of the quarter-life crisis (QLC): not only how frequent particular anxieties are, but also how they are discursively construed by young adults in educational contexts. This methodological choice also addresses the research gap identified in the Introduction—namely, the lack of linguistic approaches to QLC in non-Western educational settings.

Participants

The participants in this study were 33 emerging adults aged between 18 and 30 years, residing in Makassar, Indonesia. The sample was recruited through purposive sampling, with inclusion criteria being (a) current enrollment in or recent graduation from a tertiary education program, and (b) age within the 18–30 range. Of the participants, 57.6% were university students, while the remainder were young professionals, unemployed graduates, or homemakers. This demographic profile aligns with national statistics showing that the majority of Indonesians in this age group are engaged in higher education or early career transitions (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2021).

While the sample size is modest, it is consistent with exploratory studies that seek to combine linguistic and psychological perspectives (Agarwal et al., 2020). Moreover, the sample represents a theoretically significant population: Indonesian emerging adults navigating the combined pressures of higher education, cultural expectations, and globalized media environments.

Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed by the research team. The instrument consisted of two main sections. The first section gathered demographic information, including age, gender, educational background, and employment status. The second section comprised seventeen items designed to capture psychosocial and identity-related characteristics typical of emerging adulthood (Robinson et al., 2013; Arnett, 2015). Example items included: “I often feel insecure about my achievements compared to others,” “I worry excessively about the future,” “I find it difficult to trust others with my personal concerns,” “I feel unmotivated and lack direction in life,” and “I am confident that God will help me in difficult times.” Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, 5 = always). This format enabled both statistical aggregation and linguistic interpretation, particularly in analyzing Graduation resources within Appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005). The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha, which yielded a coefficient of 0.82, indicating good internal consistency (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed online through social media platforms (WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook) over a two-day period (4–5 December 2022). Online distribution was chosen due to accessibility and cost-efficiency, particularly in reaching digitally active young adults (Evans & Mathur, 2018). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained digitally before participants began the survey. Anonymity was assured to minimize social desirability bias.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Faculty of Language and Arts, Universitas Negeri Makassar, and the study adhered to the ethical guidelines for social research involving human participants (American Psychological Association, 2017).

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded in two main stages. First, descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were computed for the seventeen items, offering a profile of respondents’ psychosocial characteristics such as insecurity, trust, religiosity, and motivation. Visualizations using charts provided a clear overview of response patterns (Field, 2018).

Second, responses were examined linguistically using Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and the Appraisal framework (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Martin & White, 2005). Likert options were reinterpreted as evaluative resources of Graduation (e.g., “always” as maximal force, “never” as absence of attitude). Attitude resources were identified across Affect (worry, insecurity), Judgment (trust, comparison), and Appreciation (satisfaction), while Engagement was traced through references to external authorities such as God. This approach enabled us to treat quantitative data as evidence of evaluative stance and discursive positioning.

The two layers of analysis were then integrated, showing QLC as both a measurable prevalence and a linguistic phenomenon. For instance, frequent reports of “always worrying” indicated high graduation of negative affect, while strong religiosity reflected positive judgment and modalized commitment. Reliability was supported by Cronbach’s alpha (0.82), and validity ensured through triangulation, theoretical grounding, and reflexive memoing (Charmaz, 2014). Limitations include the small sample size and the constraint of closed-ended items, though future studies may incorporate open-ended discourse to enrich linguistic analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Profile of Respondents

A total of 33 emerging adults between the ages of 18 and 30 participated in this study. The demographic profile reflects the characteristics of the Indonesian higher education population, with the majority of respondents (57.6%) currently enrolled as university students, while the remainder were young professionals, unemployed graduates, or homemakers. Gender distribution was balanced, though

slightly skewed toward females, a common pattern in psychosocial survey research in Indonesia (Rahmawati & Rachmawati, 2021).

In terms of age, most respondents fell within the 18–22 years range, reflecting the developmental period where quarter-life crisis (QLC) symptoms are most visible (Arnett, 2015). This concentration is consistent with Badan Pusat Statistik (2021) data showing that young adults in this age group form the bulk of tertiary education enrollment in Indonesia. Thus, the sample represents a critical population in which issues of identity, insecurity, and coping strategies can significantly influence both personal well-being and educational trajectories.

Descriptive Statistics of Quarter-Life Crisis Indicators

Seven items were identified as key indicators of QLC, capturing dimensions of insecurity, trust, anxiety about the future, motivation, social comparison, religiosity, and satisfaction with achievements. Responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale (Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Always). The distribution is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Responses (N = 33, in %)

Item	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Insecurity about achievements	18.2	6.1	54.5	12.1	9.1
Difficulty trusting others	3.0	12.1	18.2	48.5	18.2
Worry about the future	6.0	9.1	30.3	18.2	36.4
Lack of motivation	27.3	12.1	36.4	18.2	6.0
Social media comparison	42.4	12.1	24.2	21.2	0.0
Religiosity (trust in God)	0.0	3.0	12.1	12.1	72.7
Satisfaction with achievements	0.0	3.0	24.2	21.2	51.5

Analysis of Table 1 highlights several key psychosocial tendencies among the respondents. First, insecurity emerged as a pervasive issue, with more than half of the participants reporting that they *sometimes* felt uncertain about their achievements. This indicates that while students may outwardly demonstrate progress, internally they grapple with self-doubt and fluctuating confidence. Distrust also surfaced as a prominent concern, with nearly two-thirds of respondents indicating that they *often* or *always* experienced difficulty trusting others. Such relational challenges underscore the fragility of interpersonal bonds during emerging adulthood, a period in which the negotiation of intimacy and social support is developmentally critical.

Future anxiety was particularly striking, with more than 80% of respondents acknowledging that they “sometimes,” “often,” or “always” worried about what lies ahead. This high prevalence points to the intense pressure young adults feel in relation to academic, career, and personal trajectories. In contrast, religiosity appeared as a stabilizing force: nearly three-quarters of respondents endorsed “always” placing confidence in God’s help. This strong religious orientation reflects the cultural salience of faith in Indonesia and illustrates how spiritual discourse can provide psychological anchoring. Finally, satisfaction with achievements was also reported at high levels, though it was often accompanied by feelings of insecurity. This paradox suggests that while many students recognize their accomplishments, they simultaneously evaluate themselves against external standards, leaving space for ambivalence.

Religiosity and Future Anxiety

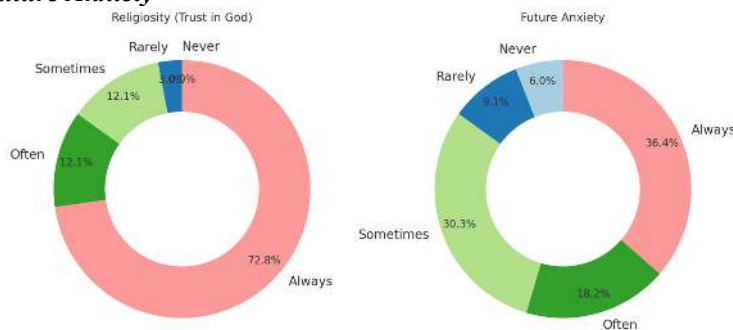


Figure 1. Religiosity vs. Future Anxiety. The figure shows comparative distribution of responses across categories for Religiosity (Trust in God) and Future Anxiety.

Figure 1 illustrates a striking duality between religiosity and future anxiety. On the one hand, religiosity is overwhelmingly endorsed by respondents, with 72.7% selecting “always.” This finding underscores the centrality of faith as a stabilizing discourse in Indonesian student life, offering a sense of security and guidance in the midst of uncertainty. On the other hand, anxiety about the future remains highly prevalent, with 36.4% indicating “always” and 18.2% reporting “often” feeling anxious. The coexistence of these two tendencies suggests that participants simultaneously construct two dominant discourses: faith as a stabilizing resource and uncertainty as a destabilizing force. This juxtaposition highlights the complex psychosocial landscape of emerging adulthood, where resilience and vulnerability are expressed concurrently in language and evaluation.

Social Comparison and Insecurity

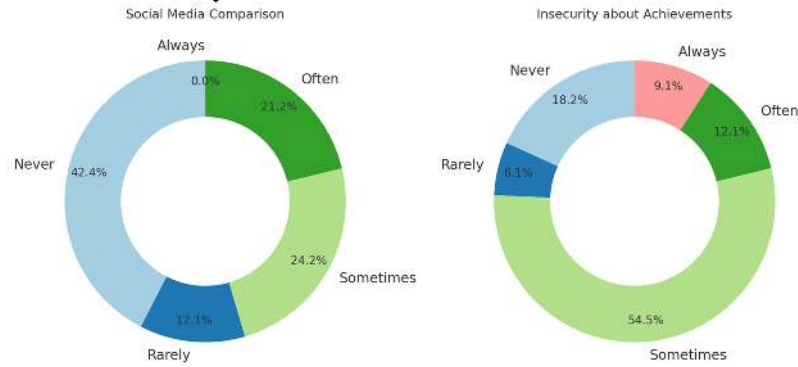


Figure 2. Social Comparison and Insecurity. The figure shows comparative distribution of responses across categories.

Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between insecurity about achievements and the impact of social media. Insecurity peaks at “sometimes” (54.5%), suggesting that many respondents experience occasional self-doubt about their performance and accomplishments. In contrast, social media comparison reveals a polarized pattern: while 42.4% report “never” being influenced by online peer success, 21.2% indicate that they are “often” affected. This divergence suggests ambivalence among emerging adults—some resist the influence of social comparison, while others internalize it as a benchmark for self-worth. Such findings align with Valkenburg et al. (2022), who demonstrated that the effects of social media on well-being are heterogeneous and highly dependent on individual usage patterns and context.

Trust and Motivation

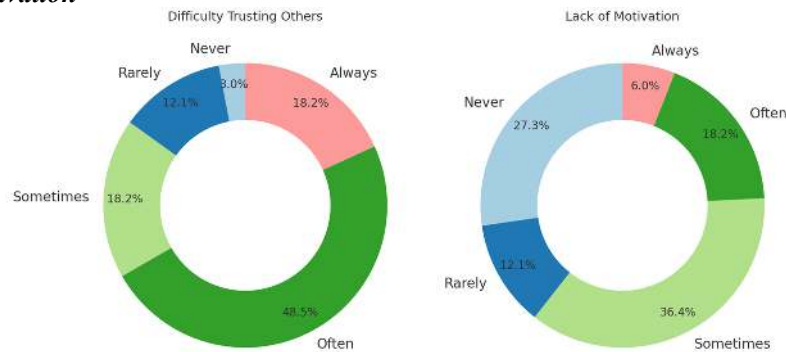


Figure 3. Trust and Motivation. The figure shows comparative distribution of responses across categories.

Figure 3 highlights two critical dimensions of the quarter-life crisis: interpersonal trust and motivation. Almost two-thirds of respondents reported difficulty trusting others “often” (48.5%) or “always” (18.2%), underscoring relational vulnerability during emerging adulthood. This tendency reflects the developmental challenges identified by Erikson (1968), in which failure to establish secure

relationships may result in isolation and heightened insecurity. In contrast, responses related to motivation were more evenly distributed. While 27.3% indicated they “never” lacked motivation, a significant proportion reported “sometimes” (36.4%) or “often” (18.2%) experiencing low drive. This distribution suggests that while some emerging adults demonstrate resilience and persistence, others struggle with fluctuating engagement, a dynamic that directly influences academic performance and personal growth. Together, the patterns point to the dual struggle of maintaining relational trust while sustaining motivation, both of which are central to identity formation in higher education contexts.

This reflects a complex negotiation in the lives of emerging adults: while many students demonstrate persistence and resilience in their academic pursuits, trust in interpersonal contexts remains fragile. Such a tension suggests that academic motivation and relational security do not always develop in parallel, but instead may follow divergent trajectories. This finding resonates with Erikson’s (1968) psychosocial theory, particularly the stage of intimacy versus isolation, which posits that young adults face the developmental task of establishing meaningful and trusting relationships. When difficulties in trust predominate, individuals may withdraw or experience heightened insecurity, even as they continue to advance academically. The coexistence of academic persistence and relational vulnerability thus highlights the dual pressures faced by Indonesian emerging adults as they navigate both institutional demands and psychosocial development.

Linguistic Interpretation of Likert Responses

Using Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) and the Appraisal framework (Martin & White, 2005), the Likert-scale responses were reinterpreted as linguistic realizations of stance rather than merely numerical values. Within this perspective, Graduation resources indicate the degree of intensity: “always” corresponds to maximal force, “sometimes” reflects hedging or moderation, and “never” signals the absence of stance. Attitudinal meanings were also made visible. Expressions of worry about the future encode negative affect with high graduation, as in “always worry.” Similarly, difficulty trusting others represents negative judgment of social relations, while satisfaction with achievements constitutes positive appreciation of outcomes. Religiosity, exemplified by the item “I am confident that God will help me,” encodes positive judgment with strong modalization, enacting certainty and solidarity within interpersonal meaning-making. These interpretations suggest that even in a closed-ended survey format, responses carry evaluative and interpersonal significance. They demonstrate how students linguistically negotiate the tension between uncertainty and resilience, thereby transforming survey items into semiotic traces of identity construction.

Thematic Clusters of Findings

Based on the integration of quantitative results and linguistic interpretation, three major thematic clusters emerge. The first cluster concerns anxiety and insecurity, where 36.4% of respondents reported “always” worrying about the future and 54.5% indicated they “sometimes” felt insecure about their achievements. This cluster resonates with Marcia’s (1980) notion of identity moratorium, a state in which young adults delay commitments and experience paralysis in decision-making. Linguistically, this cluster is dominated by negative affect and high graduation, exemplified by statements such as “always worry,” which encode the intensity of emotional struggle.

The second cluster centers on relational trust and social comparison. Here, 66.7% of respondents acknowledged that they “often” or “always” had difficulties trusting others, while 21.2% admitted to being “often” influenced by social media. These patterns reflect Erikson’s (1968) stage of intimacy versus isolation, suggesting that mistrust and peer comparison hinder the establishment of meaningful relationships. From a linguistic perspective, this cluster is realized through negative judgments of others as unreliable and through external attributions, such as “social media makes me doubt,” which position external forces as destabilizing influences.

The third cluster highlights religiosity and resilience. A dominant 72.7% of respondents reported “always” being confident that God would help them, and 51.5% expressed being “always” satisfied with their achievements. Faith thus emerges as a coping discourse that provides stability amid the turbulence of quarter-life crises, consistent with findings by Park (2005) and Krok (2014). Linguistically, this discourse is realized through high-modalized interpersonal stances such as “I am sure,” which enact certainty and solidarity, reinforcing resilience in the face of uncertainty.

Discussion

Interpreting Findings through Systemic Functional Linguistics

The findings of this study demonstrate that Indonesian emerging adults experience the quarter-life crisis (QLC) through a discourse that blends anxiety, insecurity, relational challenges, and strong religious conviction. When analyzed with Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the data reveal how respondents' linguistic choices construct their identities and coping strategies. Halliday (1994) and Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) emphasized that language is a social semiotic organized around three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. In this study, insecurity about the future is expressed ideationally through mental process verbs ("worry," "doubt"), while interpersonal stance is realized in the trust-distrust dichotomy, and textual coherence is achieved by grounding discourse in religious conviction.

Using the Appraisal framework (Martin & White, 2005), responses on Likert scales were interpreted not merely as frequencies but as linguistic realizations of Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation. For instance, the response "always" in "I always worry about my future" encodes maximal graduation of negative affect. In contrast, "I am always confident that God will help" realizes positive judgment with strong modalization, reflecting certainty and solidarity. This demonstrates that QLC is not only experienced but linguistically performed through evaluative language choices. Recent reviews of SFL research in education highlight the power of appraisal analysis in understanding both reflective and action-oriented language (Moncada Linares & Zhi-Ying, 2020).

Theories of Emerging Adulthood and Identity

The results can also be situated within broader developmental frameworks. Arnett (2015) conceptualizes emerging adulthood as a distinct life stage characterized by exploration, instability, self-focus, and identity development. This framework helps explain why our respondents, primarily aged 18–22, exhibit heightened anxiety and ambivalence: they are navigating multiple life tasks without yet achieving stable commitments.

Similarly, Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory identifies the stage of intimacy vs. isolation, where the developmental task is to establish close relationships without losing identity. The high percentage of participants reporting difficulty in trusting others (48.5% "often," 18.2% "always") illustrates the challenge of negotiating intimacy. Failure in this stage may lead to isolation and further exacerbate crisis.

Marcia's (1980) identity status paradigm and Kroger's (2017) updates provide additional explanatory power. Many respondents fall into the moratorium status—actively exploring but not yet committing. This status explains the ambivalence evident in responses such as being insecure about achievements while simultaneously expressing satisfaction. Such discursive contradictions are a hallmark of moratorium, reflecting ongoing identity negotiation rather than resolution.

Empirical Research in the Last Five Years

The present findings can be further contextualized in relation to recent international and Indonesian research on the quarter-life crisis. Ballesteros et al. (2024), in their study of 219 emerging adults, identified uncertainty, dissatisfaction, and indecisiveness as significant predictors of QLC, although they noted that its overall prevalence was moderate. These predictors resonate with the Makassar respondents' frequent expressions of worry and insecurity, suggesting a degree of cross-cultural commonality in the antecedents of crisis. At the national level, Suprayogi and Santoso (2024) found that emotional maturity and social support served as significant buffers against QLC among Indonesian youth. In light of our data, the difficulties in trusting others expressed by respondents indicate fragile social support networks, while the high reliance on religiosity suggests that faith functions as a substitute stabilizing discourse in the absence of interpersonal security.

Comparative research has also highlighted emotional regulation as a global challenge in emerging adulthood. A recent study in the *Journal of Emerging Adulthood* (Jager et al., 2025) documented that young adults worldwide struggle with stress, anxiety, and reduced well-being when regulation falters. The prominence of "always worry" in the Makassar sample directly aligns with these global findings, reinforcing the universality of future-related anxieties. In the digital sphere, Agarwal et al. (2020) analyzed social media posts connected to QLC and identified the recurrent use of linguistic intensifiers, metaphors of being "stuck," and discourses of comparative inadequacy. Our finding that 21.2% of

respondents reported being “often” influenced by social media demonstrates that similar linguistic footprints are evident in the Indonesian context, where discursive resources both amplify and mitigate crisis.

Finally, Chung et al. (2020) reported QLC among Korean college students, noting that academic burnout and career indecision were central correlates of their struggles. While the Korean sample articulated anxieties in relation to institutional and occupational expectations, the Indonesian respondents in this study framed similar concerns through the language of religiosity. Collectively, these comparisons suggest that while the structural drivers of QLC—uncertainty, indecisiveness, and social comparison—are widespread across cultures, the linguistic framing of crisis is culturally specific. Indonesian emerging adults foreground faith as a primary coping mechanism, while simultaneously negotiating insecurities and relational comparisons, a duality that reflects the unique sociocultural fabric of the Indonesian educational context.

1. Analisis wacana (Eriyanto, Crystal, Hamad)
2. Analisis wacana kritis (Fairclough, Kriyantono, Zienkowski, Breeze, Hanitzsch, Vos)
3. Berita (Koespradono, Fachrudin, Yosef, Muslimin, Mondry)

Terima kasih yang sebesar-besarnya saya sampaikan kepada Bapak/Ibu dosen penguji dan pembimbing yang telah meluangkan waktu serta berkenan hadir sejak awal untuk membimbing dan menguji.

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Religiosity as a Discursive Anchor

One of the most significant findings in this study is the overwhelming reliance on religiosity: 72.7% “always” confident that God will help. This aligns with Park’s (2005) meaning-making theory, which emphasizes religion as a framework for interpreting stress, and Krok’s (2014) empirical findings that religiosity contributes to psychological well-being via coherence and purpose. Recent Indonesian studies (Prasetyo, 2022; Rahmawati & Rachmawati, 2021) confirm that religiosity remains a salient coping mechanism for students.

From an SFL perspective, religious statements are realized as modalized interpersonal meanings, using resources such as “will” and “must,” which enact certainty and collective identity. These linguistic forms create stability in discourse and strengthen resilience against uncertainty. Thus, religiosity operates as both psychological coping and linguistic performance of stability.

Social Comparison and Digital Culture

Another theme is social comparison, particularly mediated by social media. While 42.4% reported “never” influenced by peer success online, a significant minority admitted “often” or “sometimes.” This ambivalence mirrors findings by Valkenburg, Meier, and Beyens (2022), who concluded that the effect of social media on well-being is small but highly heterogeneous, depending on usage patterns.

In discourse terms, social comparison statements encode causal appraisal: “posts make me doubt.” The external attribution of agency to peers or media reflects the Engagement system of Appraisal, where external voices are invoked to validate or challenge self-evaluations. For Indonesian students, resisting or internalizing these voices reflects broader cultural scripts about achievement and communal reputation.

Interpersonal Trust and Identity Formation

The high levels of difficulty in trusting others point to relational struggles central to Erikson’s intimacy stage. From a linguistic standpoint, distrust encodes negative judgment of others and construes social distance. This aligns with studies showing that limited social support exacerbates QLC (Suprayogi & Santoso, 2024). For educators and counselors, recognizing such linguistic markers is essential for designing supportive environments that foster relational security.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study contributes theoretically by extending research on the quarter-life crisis into the field of linguistics. Whereas most prior studies have relied heavily on psychological scales and quantitative

measures, our approach demonstrates that language itself constitutes an analytical lens for understanding crisis. By combining Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) with developmental psychology, the study makes the crisis visible in discourse rather than treating it solely as a set of psychological symptoms. Building on the work of Arnett, Erikson, and Marcia, we show that identity statuses are discursively realized: ambivalence, insecurity, and religiosity are not only psychological constructs but also semiotic performances of the self. Furthermore, by foregrounding the role of religiosity, the study extends existing frameworks of QLC beyond Western secular contexts, underscoring the importance of culturally localized theories of emerging adulthood.

The findings also carry practical implications for both education and counseling. In the educational domain, teachers can be trained to recognize linguistic cues—such as excessive worry, distrust, or persistent self-comparison—as potential indicators of crisis. Following Christie and Derewianka (2008) and Rose and Martin (2012), explicit teaching of appraisal resources can support students in re-authoring their narratives, helping them shift from deficit discourses of failure toward growth-oriented discourses of resilience. In counseling contexts, practitioners may frame interventions with greater discursive sensitivity, validating religious discourse as a form of resilience while simultaneously guiding students to strengthen relational trust and autonomy. Such approaches position language not only as evidence of student well-being but also as a vehicle for intervention and transformation.

Despite offering these contributions, the study is subject to limitations. The relatively small sample size ($N = 33$) restricts generalizability, while the reliance on closed-ended Likert items limits the range of linguistic expression that can be analyzed. Future research should therefore incorporate open-ended responses, interviews, or reflective journals to capture richer discourse. Longitudinal designs would also be valuable for tracking how linguistic markers of crisis and resilience shift as students transition from university to employment. Future directions may include combining linguistic appraisal with psychological measures of emotional maturity (Suprayogi & Santoso, 2024), examining digital discourse such as Instagram posts and blogs as naturalistic data of QLC, and designing pedagogical or counseling interventions that explicitly teach students to reframe evaluative discourse in ways that foster resilience.

This discussion highlights that QLC among Indonesian emerging adults is not only a psychological stage but also a linguistic performance of identity and coping. By combining developmental theory with SFL, we uncover how anxieties, distrust, and religiosity are enacted through evaluative language. The reliance on faith provides cultural distinctiveness, while insecurity and social comparison align with global patterns. This interdisciplinary perspective enriches both developmental psychology and applied linguistics, offering practical pathways for education and counseling to address QLC in context.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the quarter-life crisis (QLC) among Indonesian emerging adults is not only a psychological condition but also a linguistic phenomenon. By applying Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and the Appraisal framework, Likert-scale responses were reinterpreted as semiotic resources, revealing how anxieties, insecurities, and resilience are discursively performed in educational contexts.

Three key patterns were identified. First, anxiety and insecurity were pervasive, expressed through negative affect with high intensity. Second, interpersonal trust and social comparison posed major challenges, with respondents often attributing doubt to peers and social media. Third, religiosity emerged as a dominant coping discourse, realized through modalized statements of certainty that stabilized identity during crisis. These findings extend Arnett's (2015) and Erikson's (1968) theories of emerging adulthood, enrich Marcia's (1980) identity status paradigm, and contribute to SFL research by linking linguistic choices with psychosocial experience.

Practically, the study highlights the importance of recognizing linguistic cues of crisis in education and counseling. Teachers can identify risk through evaluative language, and SFL-based pedagogy can help students reframe deficit discourses into narratives of growth. Counselors, in turn, can validate religious expressions as culturally meaningful resilience strategies. Although limited by a small sample size and closed-ended responses, the study underscores the need for localized, culturally

sensitive frameworks of emerging adulthood and calls for future research using larger samples, open-ended discourse, and longitudinal designs.

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