

Filtered Identities: Social Media Engagement and Quarter Life Crisis among College Students

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Abstract: *The phenomenal rise of social media has introduced a new form of pressure, particularly among college students, who navigate the challenges of identity formation, academic expectations, and personal growth. This paper attempts to examine what we call “The Aesthetic Pressures” generated by the delineation of perfect lifestyles portrayed in social media for youths and their relationship with quarter-life crisis, a phenomenon affecting young adults. A quarter-life crisis typically occurs between the ages of 18 and 30, which is marked by feelings of self-doubt, uncertainty, identity issues and existential questioning, intensified by societal expectations. Social media exacerbates this crisis by presenting often unrealistic yet unattainable representations of perfect success, beauty, and happiness. Through qualitative and quantitative research methods, including surveys and interviews conducted with college students, this study examines how social media’s aesthetic portrayal of perfection influences students’ self-perception, mental health, and overall life satisfaction. Participants were asked to reflect on their social media usage. Findings reveal a significant correlation between frequent social media engagement and heightened anxiety, dissatisfaction, and a sense of inadequacy caused by social media. Many students reported their struggles coping with the unrealistic comparison to their peers’ highlighting reels, which often led to an increased sense of disconnection from their authentic selves. Additionally, students reported the need to constantly project an image of success online, which contributed to feelings of pressure and a sense of purpose crisis.*

Keywords: quarter-life crisis, social media, college students, anxiety, stress.

Introduction

Social media- a new form of disease from which almost no one is immune in today's world. According to Merriam-Webster (2014), social media is a "form of electronic communication (as websites for social networking and micro-blogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (as videos)." In recent years, social media has evolved from a mere platform for communication into a pervasive force that shapes much of our identity, behaviour, and self-perception. With billions of users worldwide, platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and Twitter have become not only spaces for social interaction but also for cultivating idealised versions of life and self. The image of a perfect life, often curated through filtered photographs, carefully crafted captions, and meticulously designed posts, has become the new standard by which many measure success, happiness, and even personal worth. In a new modern era, utmost importance is given to the aesthetic world that is showcased on various social media platforms. According to a study by Pittman & Reich (2016), social media usage is rapidly increasing, particularly among young adults. Interestingly, even with enhanced connectivity, today's younger generation reports feeling lonelier than other age groups and is considered the loneliest generation to date. The overuse of social media has raised serious concerns among parents, researchers, and society as a whole about its impact on individuals' mental health. Spending excessive time on social media platforms has become one of the most widespread habits among today's generation (Bhat, 2017). In today's world, nearly everyone between the ages of 11 and 93 is engaged with social media. Research by Strickland (2014) indicates that young adults are the most frequent users and are particularly vulnerable to experiencing mental health issues at an alarmingly high rate. People on social media tend to portray only filtered images of themselves who have only successes and fun in their lives, while making the viewers often feel anxious about their own lives. This pursuit of an idealised life comes at a cost, particularly for young adults who are in the throes of a phase in their lives that is already marked by uncertainty and self-doubt: the quarter-life crisis.

According to Robbins and Wilner (2001), a Quarter-Life crisis is a period of uncertainty, doubt, and confusion that an individual faces around their twenties. Due to the immense modernity, urbanisation, and peer pressure, this phenomenon can now be faced as early as the age of 18. Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner first propounded the term "quarter-life crisis" in their book *Quarterlife Crisis: The Unique Challenges of Life in Your*

Twenties. It marks a transition from the idealism of youth to the realisation that adult life involves greater responsibility, uncertainty, and the daunting challenge of defining one's path in a rapidly changing world. For many, social media intensifies these feelings. The constant stream of 'perfect' lives, from picturesque vacations to career milestones, relationships, and personal achievements, can create an overwhelming sense of inadequacy. What was once a place for connection and fun has morphed into an arena where external validation, perfection, and comparison reign supreme. The pressure to present an idealised version of one's life can significantly impact mental health and well-being. Young adults, particularly those in their mid-to-late twenties, are bombarded with images that project unattainable standards of beauty, success, and happiness. This constant exposure to such images not only distorts perceptions of what 'normal' life should look like but also encourages a toxic culture of comparison. The result is a growing sense of disillusionment, anxiety, and self-doubt that many people struggle to reconcile with their real-life experiences. As social media continues to shape the social and cultural landscape, it plays an undeniable role in shaping the quarter-life crisis.

This research paper aims to explore the complex relationship between social media, the aesthetics of online perfection, and the quarter-life crisis. It will examine how the pressure to conform to idealised images on social media fuels a sense of personal inadequacy, dissatisfaction, and confusion during a time of life that is already fraught with change. By investigating both the psychological impact of this online aesthetic pressure and the broader cultural implications, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how social media is influencing mental health, self-perception, and life satisfaction among young adults.

Social Media Fuels the Quarter-Life Crisis

College- a life that all high school students dream of for academic growth, social exploration, identity formation and self-exploration. But in the age of social media, this period has become intense due to the social pressure of presenting yourself as extremely successful, beautiful, or cool enough to be relevant. So, now what is happening is that there is a total shift in the focus among college students. Earlier, the focus was on personal development and academic achievement; the focus in college life is to make their college life *look aesthetic online*. Now, the everyday life experience of college students has turned into social media performances

where the portrayal of “an aesthetic lifestyle” is mandatory, or else FOMO is created. FOMO is a term in the Gen Z dictionary, which generally means the fear of missing out or a constant pressure to stay relevant. Cambridge Dictionary (2020) defines FOMO as a state of anxiety that occurs when people are not aware of fun and exciting events shared by their friends on social platforms (Tanhan, Özok, & Tayiz, 2022: 75). According to Blum (2016), FOMO is defined as seeing the photos of one’s friends on social media platforms, not seeing herself/himself in the photos and therefore feeling negative emotions (Tanhan, Özok, & Tayiz, 2022: 75). Study hours are no longer just about absorbing knowledge and learning, but it’s more about creating an aesthetic room straight out of Pinterest. These days, college life is supposed to be a mix of travel, late-night clubbing, and daily updates on social media to let the world know about their happening lives. These sorts of posts on social media lead to unrealistic expectations of college life, resulting in dissatisfaction among many young minds when reality does not match the reels on social media. There is a constant negative emotion towards their own life, which leads to self-doubt, exacerbating the quarter-life crisis.

As discussed earlier, a quarter-life crisis is experienced by young adults due to uncertainty about the future and constant comparison with their peer groups. UG students these days are constantly comparing their grades, internships, relationships, and social lives to those on social media. Seeing someone from their college or peer group or of the same age buying expensive gadgets, cars, or travelling abroad creates crippling self-doubt. Many start questioning:

Why am I not as successful?

Why doesn’t my life look this exciting?

Success is no longer a final goal, but rather, it is about how aesthetically pleasing those successes are on the posts of Instagram and Facebook. Success is also determined by how many people give attention to those posts and congratulate them. And those students who are doing well in their grades might still be dissatisfied and feel inadequate with their way of life.

Career-building is no longer just about getting a good degree and gaining skills. It’s about how good one is at showing the “hustle culture” through online posts. Those social media posts make hustle look extremely motivational yet easy, rather than real and messy. The world was different without social media; students had a systematic life track of getting a degree

and doing jobs that were available according to their degrees. Millennials, also known as 'Gen Y,' 'digital natives' (Berger, 2017), were born and raised amidst the socio-economic conditions following the recession and the internet explosion, and possess distinct characteristics in their understanding of work and life compared to their prior or following generations (Chairunnisah & Kurnia, 2023: 185). But now, the present-day scenario is totally different. Growing up in a rapidly changing and challenging environment has shaped them into a flexible, innovative, adaptive, and resilient generation (Chou, 2012, p. 75). The extravagant life seen on social media is making these UG students hustle way before completing their degrees. The hustle culture is making traditional jobs look typical and boring. These days, the job of a teacher is extremely boring compared to a social-media-driven freelance career. Young people tend to travel not for experiences but rather to show it online to 500 other people. Nothing is left personal or private anymore. Social media showcases only success & happiness, not the behind-the-scenes of failures, rejections, and stress, creating a distorted reality. Young students may feel every other individual of their age is effortlessly thriving while only they are suffering from self-doubt, uncertainty and academic pressure. Nobody talks about the harsh truth of breakdowns, sleepless nights, and self-doubts. These lead to uncertainty, anxiety, and stress. Stress is described as the sense of distress that arises from the interaction between an individual and their surrounding environment (Cohen, Miller, & Rabin, 2001). However, social media can make these struggles feel invalid or invisible. Because people rarely post their low moments, students dealing with mental health struggles often feel they are alone in their feelings, even though these struggles are common.

Social media has successfully promoted false images, personalities and lives of more or less every youngster. Students are mentally pressured to post online and stay relevant to be seen, even when they are feeling overwhelmed. This sort of mental pressure among these young, fragile minds is very harmful to their own mental health. Young students are now extremely engaged with social media. Their worth is determined by the number of likes, comments, and followers on their Instagram IDs. If a post does not have sufficient likes comment, it can lead to self-doubt, anxiety, and comparison with other peers. It also causes overthinking and self-dissatisfaction. Today's youths need constant external validation, which can damage self-esteem and confidence, making the students dependent on online approval to know their self-worth.

Methodology

This study uses a mixed method, i.e., both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The fieldwork was conducted among the college-going students of 3 colleges in Siliguri, District Darjeeling. A total of 28 samples of data were collected through an online survey using Google Forms, and an open-ended interview was conducted to collect qualitative data.

Each sample was selected randomly based on availability. Rapport was established to help respondents understand the objective of the research. After that, a questionnaire was sent as a Google Form via WhatsApp, and respondents were asked to fill it out accordingly. The interview process began after the questionnaire was completed. Each interview took an average of 40 minutes, with an open-ended question. Each interview/data was collected only after receiving the consent of each participant.

Discussion and findings

The data were collected among college students, starting with their demographic details, which included age, gender, year in college, and field of study. While the effect of social media among college students was explored through interviews. Respondents were mainly between 18 and 22 years old.

Table 1: Background of the respondents

Age	No.	%
18-20	23	82.1
20-22	5	17.9
23-24	0	0
Gender		
Male	11	39.3
Female	17	60.7
Prefer not to say	0	0
Year in College		
1 st Year	14	50
2 nd Year	14	50
3 rd Year	0	0
Field of Study		
B.A	20	71.4
B. Com	2	7.1
BBA	2	7.1
BCA	4	14.3
Multidisciplinary	0	0

Source: field data

Social media usage

After collecting the demographic details. Questions were asked directly regarding the social media usage of the respondents. In today's world, we are all aware of the excessive use of mobile phones/social media platforms. Hence, it was seen in this study as well. College youths are excessively active on social media throughout their day, as shown in Table 2. They were aware of the fact but couldn't refrain from using social media, especially a social networking site, "Instagram", which has gained worldwide popularity, especially among the youth. This site is used for connecting with people, uploading images, and is famous for its filters. There is also a craze among the youngsters regarding the number of followers on both Instagram and Facebook. Their life revolves around the number of likes and comments they have received on their photos and videos. In today's era, social media addiction has grown remarkably, and once someone starts using it, it becomes challenging to stop. Likes and comments serve as positive reinforcement, making it even harder to disengage. Some individuals also tend to compare their own lives with the seemingly perfect lives of their peers (Bashir et al., 2017). One of the respondents says:

"I am well aware that these likes and comments don't define my worth, but getting more likes and comments does make me feel happy..."

Table 2- Social Media Usage of the Respondents

Number of hours spent on social media per day	Number	%
Less than 1 hour	3	11.1
1-2 hours	11	33.3
3-4 hours	12	44.4
More than 5 years	11	33.3
Social media platform used		
Instagram	21	77.8
Facebook	2	7.4
Twitter	0	0
Snapchat	0	0
Other	4	14.8
Actively browse posts or content related to personal success, beauty, or happiness		
Always	2	7.4
Frequently	5	18.5
Occasionally	14	51.9
Never	6	22.2
Social media creates pressure to present a "perfect" image of your life		
Always	5	18.5
Frequently	11	40.7
Occasionally	7	25.9
Never	4	14.8

Source: Field data

Social media is known to portray a ‘perfect’ image of an individual where life seems to be only about happiness, achievements, and fun, while in reality, life is about an ‘absolute imperfection’. This often results in feelings of envy or the perception that others within their social network are doing better than they are (CMAJ, 2020). It also creates a leading issue of body image among young girls, which is also one of the causes of a quarter-life crisis. Another respondent says:

*“Everyone looks so pretty on social media; I know it’s a filter...
But when I use the same filter, I don’t look that pretty...”*

A systematic review of 20 studies revealed a link between social media use and issues related to body image, as well as disordered eating behaviours (Holland et al., 2016), which is also one of the causes of not only a quarter-life crisis but also a triggering cause of depression among young girls.

Perception about social media among college students

Respondents were aware that the lifestyles that are portrayed in social media about career, physical appearance, social life, etc., are not always real; however, 51.9% of the respondents had a neutral opinion. One of the main causes of the quarter-life crisis among the youth is comparison with their peers. According to Marsidi et al. (2022), early adults (18-29) often experience anxiety and fear, which stems from social pressure that a person experiences due to family, friends, or the surrounding community. This pressure can take the form of expectations to achieve success in one’s career or personal life (Fikri et al., 2023). Regular uploads of images and statuses about career achievements and relationships make an individual more anxious and stressed about a stagnant career or failed relationships, leading to a severe quarter-life crisis. One of the male respondents says:

“Have you seen those luxury bikes and cars like BMW, Porsche, Mercedes? I have scooty that also bought in emi, those are young boys only, but still so successful....”

Not only are relationships or self-images judged, but successes shown in social media are also being compared, making college life more stressful, which leads to less focus on studies among college students.

Table 3- Respondents' Perception about Social Media

Perception of Social Media's Impact	N	%
Lifestyles portrayed on social media (e.g., career, success, social life, physical appearance) are realistic		
Strongly Agree	0	0
Agree	2	7.4
Neutral	14	51.9
Disagree	11	40.7
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Felt inadequate or inferior after seeing posts of others' successes, appearances, or experiences on social media		
Always	4	14.8
Frequently	6	22.2
Occasionally	8	29.6
Never	9	33.3
Comparing your academic achievements or personal milestones (e.g., relationships, travel) to those you see on social media		
Always	4	14.8
Frequently	5	18.5
Occasionally	12	44.4
Never	6	22.2
Life does not measure up to what you see in others' posts on social media		
Strongly Agree	0	0
Agree	10	37
Neutral	13	48.1
Disagree	3	11.1
Strongly Disagree	1	3.7
Experienced feelings of anxiety, stress, or sadness after using social media		
Always	1	3.7
Frequently	4	14.8
Occasionally	8	29.6
Never	14	51.9

Source: Field data

Self-perception and Quarter-life crisis

Out of 27 respondents, 20 are suffering from feelings of doubt, uncertainty, and confusion regarding their life's direction during their college years. Social media is contributing on a large scale to confusing the youth regarding their career choices. One of the respondents says:

Nowadays, I see on social media, you know, like Instagram, these young boys and girls are making money in lakhs and crores, making me feel that what is the point of studying so much? I think even I should make reels... (laughs)

A comparison culture has been set due to excessive usage of social media. Youths are questioning themselves due to the 'picture-perfect' life on reels,

disconnecting them from their authentic self. Social media also leads to symbolic consumption at a high rate. As Clammer (1992) says, “Shopping is not merely acquisition of things: it is buying of identity.” Youth believe in possessing high-end brands at a very young age - buying the latest iPhone, owning a luxurious car, and leading a wealthy lifestyle. Young girls put on make-up; they try to wear dresses that they actually would never have worn. This fetish of luxury life is, however, directly related to social media, where college students see the rich people’s lifestyles, making them unhappy and unfulfilled with their own lives.

Coping mechanisms

A quarter-life crisis refers to an individual’s reaction to transitioning into the realities of adulthood, characterised by instability, constant change, numerous choices, and a sense of panic stemming from feelings of helplessness. These life transitions often trigger a range of emotional responses, including anxiety, stress, panic, uncertainty about life goals, self-doubt, and fear of failure (Pramudya et al., 2023). According to The Hearty Soul (2024), spending more time on social media is linked to increased levels of depression. The report also notes that using social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter is not particularly effective in helping students stay focused or reduce stress. A quarter-life crisis is something that more or less every youth faces. However, there are many strategies these college students are adapting to overcome the stress created by social media. As we see in Table 5, out of 26 respondents, 18 (69.23%) had taken a break from social media due to stress, anxiety, or dissatisfaction. One of the respondents says:

Whenever I get frustrated or stressed, I just go to the hills and spend time with my friends, and you know what, then I don’t look at my phone or click pictures to upload on social media. I just enjoy the moment... this makes me feel so much better...

Another respondent says:

Social media is just so energy-consuming; you just lie in bed and scroll, and still, you will feel very tired at the end of the day. For that, only what I do is force myself to close all the apps, clean and de-clutter my room, or, you know, cook...

Respondents engage in other social activities with their family or friends to manage their stress and anxiety triggered by social media. Taking help

from therapy, counselling was not found among the students. But it was seen that many respondents did portray their false images to ‘fit in’ and be socially accepted by the so-called ‘followers’, creating stress with guilt.

Table 4: Respondents’ Self-Perception and Quarter-Life Crisis

Self-Perception and Quarter-Life Crisis	N	%
Experienced any feelings of doubt, uncertainty, or confusion about your life direction (career, relationships, identity) during your college years		
Always	1	3.7
Frequently	10	37
Occasionally	9	33.3
Never	7	25.9
The portrayal of “perfect” lives on social media contributes to your feelings of uncertainty or crisis about your future (e.g., career, relationships)		
Strongly Contributes	0	0
Moderately Contributes	11	40.7
Slightly Contributes	11	40.7
Does not Contribute	5	18.5
Pressure to meet specific milestones (e.g., career, success, relationships, personal goals) by a certain age due to what you see on social media		
Strongly Agree	4	14.8
Agree	9	33.3
Neutral	9	33.3
Disagree	2	7.4
Strongly Disagree	3	11.1
Feel disconnected from your authentic self, due to the contrast between your real life and the idealised portrayals you see on social media		
Always	2	7.4
Frequently	5	18.5
Occasionally	14	51.9
Never	6	22.2
Your current life trajectory (e.g., academic, career) aligns with the expectations you see on social media		
Always	2	7.4
Frequently	8	29.6
Occasionally	10	37
Never	7	25.9

Source: Field data

Table 5: Respondents' coping mechanisms and mental health

Ever taken a break from social media due to feelings of stress, anxiety, or dissatisfaction	Number	%
Yes, multiple times	9	34.6
Yes, once or twice	5	19.2
No, but I have considered it	4	15.4
No	8	30.8
Engage in activities outside of social media (e.g., hobbies, exercise, and personal time) to manage stress or negative feelings triggered by social media		
Always	7	26.9
Frequently	8	30.8
Occasionally	9	34.6
Never	2	7.7
Strategies to cope with negative feelings caused by comparing yourself to others on social media		
Taking breaks from social media	4	14.3
Spending more time offline with friends/family	12	42.9
Engaging in self-care activities (exercise, meditation)	6	21.4
Seeking professional help (counselling/therapy)	0	0
Journaling/Reflecting	1	3.6
Other	5	17.9
Social media encourages a culture of authenticity and vulnerability, or does it reinforce a curated, "perfect" image		
Strongly encourages authenticity	2	8
Encourage authenticity to some extent	4	16
Neutral	13	52
Reinforces a curated image	4	16
Strongly reinforces a curated image	2	8
Felt the need to portray a version of yourself on social media that differs from your true self to fit in or be accepted		
Always	1	4
Frequently	4	16
Occasionally	7	28
Never	13	52

Source: Field data

Conclusion

College-going students are the future of our country, who will be in the job field and a part of our economy in a few years. Their mental well-being is crucial for a better future, not only for themselves but also for the country. Hence, we cannot afford a generation full of depressed youths, leading to a depressed society altogether. Kaur and Bashir's (2015) study examined both the beneficial and harmful impacts of social media. The negative effects identified include depression, online harassment, cyberbullying, sexting, fatigue, stress, emotional suppression, and a reduction in cognitive abilities. In this particular study, we did find out that social media is thus creating a false 'perfect image', making a wrong perception in these young, fragile minds, leading to a severe quarter-life crisis, causing depression, anxiety, and doubt about themselves, making their self-confidence extremely low.

Social media is a boon to society to connect universally, but the extremism of being relevant is causing FOMO- the language of Gen Z (which means fear of missing out) in the young minds.

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