

Social Comparison and Quarter-Life Crisis in Generation Z: A Study of Instagram Users

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Keywords

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Instagram, Quarter
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Abstract

Generation Z was born and grew up during rapid technological development. Instagram, one of the social media platforms often used by Generation Z, provides an opportunity for social comparison, which can contribute to triggering and worsening quarter-life crises. This study aims to determine the relationship between social comparison and quarter-life crisis in Generation Z active Instagram users in Bekasi City. This research uses a quantitative approach with a correlational study method. The sample comprised 164 respondents aged 20-28 years who were selected using a purposive sampling technique. The research instruments included the INCOM scale, used to measure social comparison and a modified Quarter-Life Crisis scale. The results of data analysis using the Pearson product-moment correlation test showed a significant positive correlation between social comparison and quarter-life crisis ($r = 0.757$; $p < 0.05$). The results indicate that the higher the tendency of individuals to do social comparison, the higher the level of quarter-life crisis experienced. This finding reinforces the role of social media, especially Instagram, in triggering and exacerbating the quarter-life crisis in Generation Z through social comparison. Consequently, Generation Z must focus on their goals and improve their time management skills when using Instagram.

INTRODUCTION

Digital technology has made internet access and social media ubiquitous, serving as a hub for information, entertainment, lifestyle, knowledge, and communication that shapes individual identity (Sa'diyah et al., 2022). Indonesia was home to the world's 4th-largest Instagram user base in 2024 (Rizaty, 2024). We Are Social data shows that in January 2024, Instagram in Indonesia had a proportion of users of 85.3%, followed by Facebook 81.6%, TikTok 73.5% and X (formerly Twitter) 57.5% (Annur, 2024). Most Instagram users in Indonesia are Generation Z, born in the age range of 1997 to 2012 (Azaria et al., 2024). Generation Z is known as the original generation of digital "*digital natives*" because they are used to social interaction activities in cyberspace and social media (Arini et al., 2022).

Instagram serves as the primary source of information for Generation Z, a means of building personal branding, entertainment and media to facilitate interaction. Behind the benefits, it turns out that Instagram significantly impacts Generation Z's lives, especially regarding mental health and psychological well-being. Instagram can indirectly lead to worry or fear for the future, competition for a luxurious life, and the crisis of confidence and instability when faced with choices, so individuals feel panic and worry (Permatasari et al., 2022). The individual's condition frequently aligns with the quarter-life crisis, a phenomenon observed in Generation Z during their emerging adulthood developmental stage.

In the developmental phase of emerging adulthood, Generation Z faces various challenges in becoming adults during their transition from late adolescence. Individuals will face many changes due to the emergence of new developmental tasks (Laily et al., 2024). Transitions that occurred in emerging adulthood cause changes in relationships, lifestyle, education, and work that cause psychological stress and distress (Matud et al., 2020). The various pressures faced during this transition period have the potential to trigger and worsen the quarter-life crisis in Generation Z.

Robbins and Wilner (2001) quarter-life crisis refers to the response to unusual, unstable circumstances, too many life choices, feelings of helplessness, and continuous changes experienced by individuals in their late teens to mid-thirties that cause feelings of fear due to the change from academic life as a student to real life. It usually occurs most intensely in the twenties. It is characterized by seven things: self-doubt in making decisions, worry about interpersonal relationships, anxious feelings, pressure, negative self-assessment, being stuck in a difficult situation, and hopelessness.

Sari (2021) various factors influence the quarter-life crisis, such as environmental demands, social media influence, family support, occupation, alignment between desires and social demands, and educational background. In the digital era, social media such as Instagram is a significant contributing factor that can trigger and exacerbate quarter-life crisis, one of which is through social

comparison behavior. Festinger (1954) Social comparison is the tendency of individuals to compare themselves with others as a way of evaluating themselves. Social comparison is divided into two types: upward comparison (comparing oneself with people considered superior) and downward comparison (comparing oneself with people considered inferior).

Instagram facilitates the occurrence of social comparisons through features that allow users to observe the lives of others Dewi and Ningsih (2023). Social comparisons on Instagram harm self-esteem, particularly in young adults, because they evaluate themselves based on other people's lives (Fagundes et al., 2020). Exposure to selectively presented content triggers unrealistic expectations and a feeling of inadequacy, especially when users feel their lives are less successful. This context is relevant to the existing economic conditions in Bekasi City. The Central Statistics Agency (BPS) recorded Regional Tax and Retribution revenues of IDR 279 trillion in the second quarter of 2024, which puts Bekasi as the wealthiest city in West Java, surpassing Bandung (Arfian, 2024). Relatively high economic conditions are often one of the social comparison materials among Generation Z, which comprises most Instagram users.

Panjaitan and Rahmasari (2021) Instagram provides an excellent opportunity for individuals to make social comparisons because Instagram presents various information related to economic aspects (lifestyle and possessions), achievements (achievements achieved in careers, education, skills mastered and raising a family), social elements (interpersonal relationships), and experiences that can be accessed freely. Kross et al. (in Auliannisa & Hatta, 2022) state that social comparisons on Instagram differ from those made in the real world. On Instagram, the information published continuously shows the best things about oneself, so that upward social comparisons are more likely to occur. Social upward comparisons can affect behavior and self-perception and cause negative emotions such as stress, low self-esteem, and anxiety when individuals compare themselves to superior others (Tenggara & Idulfilastri, 2024). This makes upward social comparisons can contribute directly to triggering and exacerbating the quarter-life crisis among Generation Z.

Based on an initial survey conducted on Generation Z Instagram users in Bekasi city, the results show that some respondents experienced a quarter-life crisis. The most common signs felt by Generation Z are anxiety related to the future, difficulty in making decisions, lagging behind peers, and pressure to achieve goals. Survey results also show that using social media such as Instagram has a considerable influence as a source of social comparison. Generation Z revealed that they often compare themselves on social media, resulting in feelings of inferiority, confusion, sadness, and anxiety. These findings reveal a discrepancy between theoretical concepts and field facts. In the theory of quarter-life crisis, social comparison does not directly influence the emergence of the crisis. However, the

results of the initial survey indicate that Instagram users often compare themselves with others, suggesting that social comparison significantly contributes to psychological distress. Considering the scarcity of previous research, this study directly examines quarter-life crisis and social comparison among Generation Z social media users set against Bekasi City's social and economic conditions, which boast a relatively high economic level. This is increasingly relevant and allows for greater social pressure therefore, this study aims to examine the relationship between social comparison and quarter-life crisis in generation Z Instagram users in Bekasi City more deeply.

METHOD

Design

This study uses a quantitative approach with a correlational study method to determine the relationship between variables. Sugiyono (2017) The quantitative approach is a research method based on positivism that is used to research a specific population or sample. Research instruments were employed for data collection, followed by statistical analysis to test the predetermined hypothesis.

Participants

The sample used in this study is Generation Z active Instagram users aged 20-28 (born between 1997 and 2005) living in Bekasi City. The sampling method used a purposive sampling technique with 164 participants. Participants came from several sub-districts, namely East Bekasi as many as 75 people, West Bekasi 31 people, South Bekasi 21 people and North Bekasi 37 people.

Instruments

a. Quarter Life Crisis

In this research, the instrument used to measure quarter life crisis is a measuring instrument adapted by Rahmawati (2023) from previous research, with item validity ($p > 0.3$) and reliability of 0.762. The instrument was prepared based on aspects of the quarter life crisis proposed by Robbins & Wilner (2001) and has been modified by the researcher to be relevant to the context of this study. The instrument includes seven aspects, which are:

Table 1

Blueprint Quarter Life Crisis Scale

| No. | Aspects | Item Number | Number of Items |
|--------------|---|-------------|-----------------|
| 1. | Self-doubt in making decisions | 1, 14, 19 | 3 |
| 2. | Worried about interpersonal relationships | 9, 13, 18 | 3 |
| 3. | Anxious feeling | 6, 12, 20 | 3 |
| 4. | Pressured | 10, 7, 21 | 3 |
| 5. | Negative self-assessment | 3, 11, 16 | 3 |
| 6. | Stuck in a difficult situation | 4, 5, 17 | 3 |
| 7. | Hopeless | 2, 8, 15 | 3 |
| <i>Total</i> | | | 21 |

b. Social Comparison

The instrument used to measure social comparison in this research is the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM) scale, developed by Gibbons & Buunk (1999). This scale has validity with item correlation values >0.3 and reliability of 0.83. The researcher modified the INCOM scale to suit the research context. The instrument covers two aspects, which are:

Table 2

Blueprint Social Comparison Scale

| No. | Aspects | Item Number | Number of Items |
|--------------|---------|------------------|-----------------|
| 1. | Ability | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 | 6 |
| 2. | Opinion | 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 | 5 |
| <i>Total</i> | | | 11 |

Procedure

The research was conducted by paying attention to several things, namely before conducting research, the researcher determined the phenomenon to be studied through observation. To reinforce that the phenomenon is indeed occurring, the researcher surveyed several people and collected relevant previous research. Based on the phenomenon and supporting data that have been collected, the researcher then determines the dependent variable and the independent variable. After that, the grand theory will be collected and determined, which will be used as a basis for research. Then, we adjusted the measuring instruments used in research from previous studies. The data collection process was conducted from 20 February to 9 April 2025. Data collection uses Google Forms by distributing Google Forms links via *WhatsApp*, *Instagram*, *Twitter*, and *TikTok* according to predetermined respondent criteria. The sampling process resulted in 164 respondents participating in the study.

Data Analysis

After the data collection process is completed, based on the results obtained, data processing. Data processing aims to answer the hypothesis that has been established, namely, the relationship between social comparison and quarter-life crisis in Generation Z. In this study, data analysis begins with conducting a pre-assessment test, namely an assumption test and a linearity test. Furthermore, based on the prerequisite test, the researcher conducted a hypothesis test using Pearson Product Moment.

RESULT

Researchers conducted research on Generation Z in Bekasi City with an age range of 20-28 years or Gen Z born from 1997 to 2005. Based on the completed data collection process, 164 respondents met the research criteria. Respondents in the

study came from different sub-districts, including East Bekasi, South Bekasi, West Bekasi, and North Bekasi. Apart from different sub-districts, respondents were divided into occupational groups such as students, working and non-working. As shown in the table below, presents demographic information about respondents who participated in the study. Table 4 shows the characteristics of respondents from East Bekasi District as many as 75 people (45.7%), West Bekasi with 31 respondents (18.9%), South Bekasi with 21 respondents (12.8%) and North Bekasi with 37 respondents (22.6%). This data shows that respondents are quite spread across several regions, with the highest concentration in East Bekasi.

Based on employment status, there was a variation in the background of respondents with the majority of them, namely 96 respondents (58.50%) having the status of students. This is in line with the dominance of respondents aged 20–22 years (72%), who are generally in college. As for the intensity of Instagram use, most respondents used Instagram for 1-2 hours per day, which was 83 people (50.6%). A total of 40 respondents (24.4%) used Instagram for 3 hours per day, and the rest, 41 people (25%), used it for more than 3 hours. The duration of use in the table illustrates that Instagram is part of a daily routine that is quite significant for most respondents, especially respondents aged 20–22 years who live in East Bekasi and have a student status.

Table 4

Respondent Demographic Data

| | Profile | N | Percentage |
|---------------------------|-------------------|-----|------------|
| District | East Bekasi | 75 | 45,70% |
| | West Bekasi | 31 | 18,90% |
| | North Bekasi | 37 | 22,60% |
| | South Bekasi | 21 | 12,80% |
| Work | Students | 96 | 58,50% |
| | Employed | 49 | 29,90% |
| | Unemployed | 19 | 11,60% |
| Age | 20-22 Years | 118 | 72% |
| | 23-25 Years | 41 | 25% |
| | 26-28 Years | 5 | 3% |
| Instagram usage intensity | 1-2 hours | 83 | 50.6% |
| | 3 hours | 40 | 24.4% |
| | More than 3 hours | 41 | 25% |

Assumption Testing

The normality test results for the quarter-life crisis and social comparison variables showed a significance value of 0.200 ($p > 0.05$), indicating that the data for both variables are normally distributed. Furthermore, the linearity test results

showed a linear relationship between the two variables, with a significance value of 0.061 ($p > 0.05$).

Table 5

Normality and Linearity Testing Result

| | | Normality Test <i>Kolmogorov- Smirnov</i> | Linearity Test <i>Deviation From Linearity</i> |
|------|--|--|--|
| Sig. | <i>Quarter Life Crisis Social Comparison</i> | 0.200 | 0.061 |

Categorization

a. *Quarter Life Crisis*

The results of the quarter-life crisis categorization showed that the majority of respondents, namely 92 people (56.1%) experienced a quarter-life crisis in the moderate category. This finding aligns with Veda (2023) which states that 214 respondents had a moderate level of quarter-life crisis in their research. This suggests that the symptoms of quarter-life crisis are quite common in the age group that is the focus of this study. Meanwhile, 40 respondents (24.4%) were in the high category, indicating that almost a quarter of the total respondents experienced a quarter-life crisis with a more serious intensity. This demonstrates that some individuals face greater psychological pressure during the transition period of life. The low category only included 32 respondents (19.5%), which was the smallest proportion. This indicates that only a small percentage of respondents did not or have not felt the pressure of the quarter-life crisis significantly.

Table 6

Quarter Life Crisis Categorization Testing Result

| Category | Range | N | Percentage |
|----------|---------------|-----|------------|
| Low | $X < 42$ | 32 | 19.5% |
| Moderate | $42 < X < 63$ | 92 | 56.1% |
| High | $63 \leq X$ | 40 | 24.4% |
| Total | | 164 | 100% |

b. *Social Comparison*

The results of the categorization of social comparison levels in 164 respondents showed that most respondents tended to make social comparisons at a moderate level, specifically 100 people (61%). This category can be interpreted as that respondents feel pressure due to social comparisons such as seeing the achievements of others on social media such as Instagram, but, due to their limited power to improve themselves, respondents tend to choose to accept the situation despite this, there is still a feeling of

dissatisfaction and laggard compared to other people who are used as objects of comparison. In contrast to the results of research by Tenggara and Idulfilastri (2024) which found that the majority of respondents, that is, 312 people (98%) had a level of social comparison in the high category. This indicates that although not in the high category, the behavior of comparing themselves with others through social media is quite common among respondents. Meanwhile, the number of respondents in the high and low categories is relatively balanced, each at 19.5%, which indicates a variation in the level of social comparison tendencies among individuals.

Table 7
Social Comparison Categorization Testing Result

| Category | Range | N | Percentage |
|----------|---------------|-----|------------|
| Low | $X < 22$ | 32 | 19.5% |
| Moderate | $22 < X < 33$ | 100 | 61% |
| High | $33 \leq X$ | 32 | 19.5% |
| Total | | 164 | 100% |

Hypothesis Testing

The results of hypothesis testing using Pearson's product-moment correlation showed that the value of the correlation coefficient was 0.757, which was included in the strong category correlation with a significance level of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$). This means a positive relationship exists between social comparison and the quarter-life crisis, which is in a positive direction. The direction of the correlation test results in this study is positive, which indicates that the higher *the social comparison* made by individuals, the higher the level of quarter-life crisis experienced. Conversely, if the level of individual social comparison is low, the quarter-life crisis experienced tends to be low. The research is also in line with the results of a survey conducted by researchers that social media especially Instagram, provides an opportunity to increase the occurrence of social comparisons. Social media displays such as Instagram provide visuals that can form new social standards, so that they affect the way individuals assess life. In the survey results, respondents used Instagram to see and see peer posts related to daily activities and life updates that display personal achievements, lifestyle or social life. These activities indirectly lead to feelings of lack of confidence, anxiety, and fear of being left behind by others, which is closely related to quarter-life crisis due to social comparison.

Table 8*Hypothesis Testing Result*

| Variable | Pearson Correlation | Sig. | Description |
|--|---------------------|-------|-------------|
| <i>Social Comparison - Quarter Life Crisis</i> | 0,757 | 0,000 | Correlated |

DISCUSSION

The correlation test results on the research data showed a relationship between social comparison and quarter-life crisis in Generation Z of Instagram social media users. Thus, the alternative hypothesis (H_a), which states that there is a relationship between social comparison and quarter-life crisis, is accepted, and the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected. Consistent with Argasiam and Putri (2023), these results reveal a positive and very significant effect of social comparison on quarter-life crisis ($r = 0.913$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, these findings align with the factors affecting the quarter-life crisis: home, family, and friends. Robbins (2004) observed that individuals in their 20s begin to face pressures from the environment such as home, family and friends. This pressure can affect the formation of self-identity, which is often influenced by social comparisons with peers, causing dissatisfaction and feelings of being left behind. The study's results are also supported by initial screening, which shows that 57.2% of Generation Z respondents who use Instagram feel left behind when they see that others have achieved a lot.

Social comparison cannot only be in real life but also through cyberspace or social media. Hafarinto et al (2024) stated that one factor triggering the quarter-life crisis is social media, which encourages individuals to compare their achievements with those of others. Social media not just displays general information but also includes personal information such as self-identity and daily activities, so that social comparisons can occur easily (Setyowati et al., 2025). This statement follows the research findings and initial screening, which shows that on average, 67.7% of respondents use Instagram more often to see peer posts related to daily activities and life updates that display personal achievements, lifestyle, or social life, such as friends, family, and partners.

The result of the research categorization test, it can be seen that the majority of Generation Z respondents in this study experienced a quarter-life crisis in the middle category, which was 92 respondents with a percentage of 56.1%. Meanwhile, the results of the social comparison variable categorization test show that the average generation Z respondent has a level of social comparison in the moderate category, namely 100 respondents with a percentage of 61%. In this study, most respondents had a level of quarter-life crisis and social comparison in the moderate category. This shows that although social comparison is not in the high category, it can still trigger a quarter-life crisis, especially when respondents see posts of peers' lives on Instagram that display social life, achievements, lifestyle, and appearance. This aligns with the correlation test results, which prove a strong relationship

between social comparison and quarter-life crisis in Generation Z Instagram social media users. Social media has a significant role as a platform that shows an ideal life and achievements, causing pressure and feelings of being left behind (Rahmi & Zarkasi, 2025).

Based on the preference of posts often seen and uploaded by respondents and the research findings, it shows that the social comparison made by respondents leads to upward comparison. This is reinforced in the results of the initial research screening, which states that respondents feel left behind when they see that other people have achieved many things. Feeling left behind is one form of upward comparison, according to the theory of Festinger (1954). The continuous feeling of being left behind will lead to a negative assessment of oneself. Robbins and Wilner (2001) mentioned in one of its aspects that individuals who experience a quarter-life crisis will have a negative assessment of themselves. A negative view of oneself arises due to the process of social comparison with others who are considered to have better achievements.

Generation Z is a generation that grew up in the digital era and has a higher level of openness to information on social media, so that social comparison is more straightforward to occur. In addition, Generation Z, mainly in the transition phase from adolescence to early adulthood, has important developmental tasks. Miller (2011) states that developmental tasks in this phase include academic and career advancement, building deeper relationships, making their own decisions, and achieving emotional maturity. In carrying out developmental tasks in the transition phase to early adulthood, it does not always go smoothly (Rahmah & Masfufah, 2023). The inconsistency between expectations and reality can trigger a quarter-life crisis through social comparisons, such as those on social media.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of research on Generation Z in Instagram social comparison correlates with quarter life crisis, even though it is not explicitly written in theory, where friend factors influence individuals to compare themselves with others. This is shown through the hypothesis result score and the direction of the relationship between the two variables, which indicates that the higher the social comparison made by individuals, the higher the level of quarter-life crisis experienced. Conversely, if the level of individual social comparison is low, the quarter-life crisis experienced tends to be low.

Based on this research, researchers have theoretical and practical suggestions. Theoretical suggestions expand the sample from the population because the results obtained cannot be generalized to the entire Bekasi City in this study. Certain regions and occupational statuses dominated respondents in the study, so the results only showed respondents who were in the East Bekasi area and had employment status as students. For practical advice, it is hoped that Gen Z can set

goals, make plans to achieve goals, focus on plans and goals so as not to be influenced by others, and practice time management using Instagram. With this, it is hoped that Gen Z can focus on itself.

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