

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF-MASTERY EXPERIENCES AND MANAGEMENT OF QUARTER-LIFE CRISIS AMONG FOURTH-YEAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN THE EASTERN REGION OF KENYA

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Abstract

University students often face quarter-life crisis which is a developmental experience that typically occurs to emerging adults during the transitional period from adolescence to adulthood. It is a period of uncertainty and questioning that typically occurs when students in the university feel trapped, uninspired, and disillusioned in their early twenties. The study sought to examine the relationship between self-mastery experiences and management of quarter-life crisis among fourth year students in public universities in the eastern region of Kenya. The correlational research design was adopted for the study with a population of 9,006 made up of fourth year university students and student counsellors. Purposive and stratified sampling techniques were used to select a sample of 368 respondents with 358 university students and 10 student counsellors. The instruments used for data collection were, self-mastery scale, students' questionnaire and an interview guide. Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was done, the necessary permits obtained and respondents assured of confidentiality as well as voluntary participation. The data were analyzed using correlational analysis, descriptive statistics and thematic analysis by use of SPSS version 21.0. The findings indicated that there was a weak positive relationship between self-mastery experiences and management of quarter-life crisis among fourth-year university students in public universities in the upper eastern region of Kenya. The findings affirmed that self-mastery experiences are revealed through university students' ability in making informed decisions with confidence, having self-awareness, exercising self-control, adaptation to unforeseen situations and applying problem solving skills effectively aided in managing quarter-life crisis. Based on the findings it is recommended that university students to enhance their self-mastery experiences decision making, self-control, realistic goal setting, effective problem -solving and emotional regulation. Enhancing these competencies promotes self-mastery experiences that enable the students to manage setbacks, uncertainties and well-being thus managing quarter-life crisis. University psychologists and student counselors to develop and establish comprehensive student development programs focused on self-mastery experiences which can be achieved through workshops, and seminars, mentorship and skill-building activities. The policy makers in the Ministry of Education and university administration to adopt an integrated psychosocial and developmental approach that promotes student's self-mastery, resilience and adaptability through supportive and empowering educational policies.

Key Words: Self- Efficacy, Self-mastery, Quarter-life Crisis, Emerging Adults, Fourth year students, university, Kenya

Introduction

Maintaining the wellbeing of university students is the university's priority by enhancing higher self-efficacy and effective coping strategies. Thus, it is essential for university students experiencing quarter-life crisis to enhance their self-efficacy which is the belief in a student's ability to control and manage life circumstances. Within the framework of social cognitive theory, self-efficacy and self-mastery experiences are central enhancing resilience and psychological adjustments. Self-efficacy illustrates a university students' belief in their ability to organize and execute actions required to manage specific situations while, self-mastery experiences include the deliberate regulation of thoughts, emotions and behaviors that foster personal competence and growth. Kleppang *et al.* (2023) noted that, self-mastery experiences are considered essential for developing a strong sense of self-efficacy, which is particularly influential in university students. In the recent years, there has been a growing concern over the increasing prevalence of quarter-life crisis among university students in the upper eastern region of Kenya. Many students during this time, go through an emotional crisis known as quarter-life

crisis which is a period of significant uncertainty, anxiety, and self-doubt that typically occurs between the ages of nineteen and twenty-five. The study established how these factors contributed to effective coping strategies, emotional regulation, and decision-making during quarter-life crisis.

Self-mastery experiences are manifested through self-awareness, self-regulation, goal setting, emotional control and resilience. Thus, it is important for university students to be confident in their ability to make adult choices as they navigate quarter-life crisis. This is acknowledged by, Jayesh & Thomas (2022) explaining that, self-confidence is an emerging adult's respect for their own skills, love for themselves and general awareness of their own feelings. Respecting oneself, knowing oneself, establishing clear goals, and adopting a positive outlook contributes to developing inner trust. Emerging adults who have a high sense of self-worth and inner confidence are content with who they are. Bowman (2014) also explains the importance of persistence and enthusiasm towards achieving long-term objectives has been emphasized as a component of self-control. Duckworth & Gross, (2014),

emphasize that one important determinant of success is self-control which is the capacity to regulate attention, emotion, and behavior in the presence of temptation. Additionally, Neff and McGehee (2010) note that self-compassion plays a crucial role in achieving self-control and navigating the period of uncertainty and stress commonly referred to as the quarter-life crisis. Grit is also another important determinant of success as it is the tenacious pursuit of a dominant superordinate goal despite setbacks. Higher levels of self-control earlier in life predict later academic achievements and attainment, prosocial behavior, employment, earnings, savings and physical health. Grit empowers individuals with the determination to pursue their goals despite obstacles, mitigating the sense of being stuck and lacking direction commonly associated with quarter-life crisis. Furthermore, Jones & McConnel (2022) reveal that adopting a growth mindset, combined with grit, helps emerging adults develop agency and succeed in various aspects of life outside the university.

It is essential for the university students to strengthen their self-soothing skills which involve the ability to manage distressing emotions through calming thoughts and comforting behaviors. This enables university students to remain calm during difficult situations by enhancing their awareness of effective coping mechanisms thereby improving their ability to manage quarter-life crisis (Johnny & Queen 2024). Developing structures, routines, and beneficial habits contribute to the high self-control of emerging adults in achieving their goals (Kokoris & Stavrova 2021). Career coaching interventions are valuable tools for addressing the quarter-life crisis. The career coaching programs have been effective in improving career decision-making self-efficacy and in reducing anxiety among university students (Hafnidar 2024). When university students have the ability to exercise self-control, and set achievable goals, they succeed in resolving daily life control conflicts. Another aspect of self-mastery that can help alleviate symptoms of quarter-life crisis is the notion of flow which refers to a state of complete absorption and involvement in an activity. To achieve a state of flow, university students must find a harmonious equilibrium between the level of challenge they face and their skill level. This involves setting attainable goals and continuously improving one's abilities over time (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi 2002). Goal setting and strategic planning are key components of self-mastery experiences. It is necessary to define distinct challenging, yet realistic goals to boost motivation and performance. When university students adopt these concepts, they can establish an organized road through uncertainties of early adulthood lowering feelings of aimlessness and strengthening a sense of direction (Forneris *et al.* 2007). During quarter life crisis university students require to high level of resiliency which is the ability to overcome and rise above adversity and difficult situations. Resiliency describes a student's ability to move forward with optimism and self-confidence even when they are immersed in adversi-

ty (Sedas, 2015). It is important to note that, crucial links in the chain of successful coping and adaptation include creative problem finding that involves the ability to generate whole new problems to solve or issues to explore and problem solving which is the ability to entertain a wide range of possible options or solutions then selecting the best action or response (Carson & Rundo 2011). When university students possess soft skills, problem-solving abilities, social competencies, and adopt a growth mindset combined with grit, they become confident in handling complex challenges and setbacks during quarter-life crisis. Therefore, this study sought to examine the relationship between self-mastery experiences and the management of quarter-life crisis among fourth year students in public universities in Eastern region of Kenya.

Methodology

Location

The study was conducted among fourth year students in the University of Embu, Chuka University, Tharaka University and Meru University of Science and Technology (MUST) in the Eastern region of Kenya.

Research Design

The study adopted a correlational research design to examine the relationship between self-mastery experiences and the management of quarter-life crisis among fourth year students in the public universities in the upper Eastern region of Kenya. This design was suitable because it enabled the researcher to determine the direction and strength of the association between the two variables without manipulating them (Bhandari 2022).

Target Population

The target population was fourth year university students in public universities who are in the emerging adulthood developmental stage and in their fourth-year of study as they prepare to transit from school to the world of work. The population was 9006 fourth years' students in public universities in upper Eastern Region of Kenya.

Sample Size and Sampling Procedure

In the upper Eastern region of Kenya, four public universities were chosen for the study with a total of 9006 fourth year students. A sample size of 368 respondents was adequate for a population of 9006 according to Krejcie and Morgan (1970) a sample size of 358 respondents is sufficient for a population of 9000 respondents. Therefore, the sample size of the study was 368 respondents comprising of 358 fourth year university students and 10 student counselors in universities in upper Eastern region in Kenya. Proportionate sampling method was employed for the larger fourth student population from the respective universities so as to inform the study. Then the fourth years were divided into the different faculties to form a stratum, then the simple random sampling method was employed to pick fourth year students from each stratum in proportion to its size

in the student population. The census sampling method was used to pick all the student counsellors from each of the universities. This eventually provided a sample size of 358 fourth year students and 10 student counsellors a total of 368 respondents.

Research Instruments

The study engaged psychological tests which include quarter-life crisis scale, self-mastery scale, and a self-efficacy questionnaire to measure the five attributes among the fourth-year students based on the study variables. An interview guide to measure the three attributes was used to obtain in depth information from the student counsellors. This enabled triangulation of the results from the main respondents. A letter of introduction was obtained from Chuka University.

Data Analysis Procedure

A research permit to carry out the study was sought from the National Council for Science, Technology and Innovations (NACOSTI). Authorization to carry out the research was sought from the Vice Chancellor's office of each respective university. With the permission to collect data the dean of students assisted in getting the student counsellors and the fourth years student class leaders of each faculty in the University. The class leaders were trained as the research assistants, on how to complete the questionnaires, how to distribute and how complete the questionnaires. The research assistants were recruited and trained in order to ensure uniformity of data collection. The researcher conducted the interviews from the student counselors in each university. Thereafter, the sampled respondents were given instructions, assured of confidentiality and also were requested to give honest responses. The serialized questionnaires and the interview schedules were collected for data analysis. Content validity of the instruments was established through the expert review by lecturers in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Chuka University as recommended by Yue (2016). The reliability of the study was determined during a pilot study conducted in Chuka University Chogoria campus which was selected because it provided a suitable context for testing the research instruments before the main study. The campus shares similar social, economic and educational characteristics with the main student target population. This was done to improve the reliability of the study instruments. Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha 0.896 obtained demonstrated a statistically significant positive correlation between self-efficacy and management of quarter-life crisis.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data cleaning was done to remove outliers or even any missing responses. After data analysis, the findings were interpreted so as to draw conclusions. Data was categorized into qualitative and quantitative data. Thematic analysis was used for the qualitative data that was collected from the open-ended questions and the interview schedule. A correlation analysis was used to test the research hypotheses.

The Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) was used to do the correlational analysis which revealed the strength of the association between the variables. Data was coded then entered into the computer via Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) 21.0.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical requirements will be fulfilled by acquiring a research permit from NACOSTI after clearance from Chuka University Research and Ethics committee. Permission to conduct research in Embu, Tharaka Nithi and Meru counties was obtained from the respective Universities. Confidentiality was maintained at all stages of the research including data collection, data analysis, report writing, and the dissemination of the information. Assurance that deliberates attempts were taken to guard against plagiarism by ensuring that authorities of various publications, information and ideas are appropriately acknowledged. The language used throughout the research study was be sensitive to the feelings of the respondents as well as free from prejudice and discrimination.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

The study received 314 university students and 8 student counselors' respondents out of the 368 that were intended, this indicates 85.8% response rate which indicates a strong and reliable level of conducting analysis and drawing conclusions. An item in the students' questionnaire required the students to indicate the following: gender, religious affiliation, relationship status and age. The study had 314 students who participated, comprising 60% male and 40% females. Out of the 314 students, 89% were Christians, 8% were Muslims and 3 % didn't have a religious affiliation. The study findings showed that out of the 314 of the students, 47% of the students were single, 44% were dating, 8 % were married and 1% were single parents. Out of the 314 students who took part of the study, 69% of the students were in the age bracket of between (20-23) years old, 30% of the students were in the age bracket of between (24-27) years old, while 1% were above 28 years old.

Correlation between Self-Mastery Experiences and Management of Quarter- Life Crisis

The study sought to test the hypothesis that there is no statistically significant relationship between self-mastery experiences and management of quarter-life crisis among fourth year students in public universities in the upper Eastern region of Kenya. The self-mastery scale and quarter-life scale were used to evaluate the student's self-mastery experiences and management of quarter-life crisis. To examine the relationship between a self-mastery experiences and management of quarter-life crisis, a correlation analysis was conducted to test the following null hypothesis at a significant level of $\alpha = 0.05$. H_0 1: There is no statistically significant relationship between self-mastery experiences and management of quarter-life crisis among fourth year students in public universities in the upper Eastern region of Kenya.

A Pearson Correlation statistic was used to determine if there was a significant statistical relationship between self-mastery experiences and the management of quarter-life crisis among fourth year students in universities in the upper eastern region of Kenya. The correlation results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Correlation between self-mastery experiences and management of quarter-life crisis

		Quarter-Life Scales
Self-mastery experience scale	Pearson correlation	0.19
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001
	N	314
Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).		

The study findings revealed a statistically significant relationship between self-mastery experiences and management of quarter-life crisis ($r = 0.19$, $p < 0.001$). The Pearson's correlation coefficient of 0.19 indicates that the relationship between self-mastery experiences and management of quarter-life crisis was positive but weak. This means the null hypothesis was rejected. Therefore, higher values of self-mastery experiences were weakly associated with higher values of quarter-life crisis. This demonstrates that an increase self-mastery experience reduces the impact of the quarter-life crisis among fourth year students in universities in the Eastern region of Kenya.

Perceptions on Self-Mastery experiences and Quarter- life experiences

This section presents an analysis of the relationship between self-mastery experiences and the management of quarter-life crisis among fourth-year university students in the Upper Eastern region of Kenya. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements linking self-mastery experiences to the management of quarter-life crisis using a five-point Likert scale: Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Neutral (N), Agree (A), and Strongly Agree (SA). The results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Perceptions on Self-Mastery experiences and Quarter- life experiences.

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD
Being confident in my ability to make adult choices helps me in managing quarter-life crisis.	200 64%	88 28%	21 7%	1 0%	4 1%
Being able to have self-control and setting achievable goals helps me in managing quarter-life crisis.	146 46%	141 45%	17 5%	8 3%	2 1%
Being calm and having awareness of the coping resources helps in management of quarter-life crisis.	147 47%	120 38%	31 10%	10 3%	6 2%
Being able to set realistic goals helps manage various life aspects and manage quarter-life crisis.	151 48%	119 38%	35 11%	6 2%	3 1%
Being confident in handling unforeseen situations helps manage quarter-life crisis.	142 45%	112 36%	39 12%	16 5%	5 2%
Being effective in problem solving and being confident in handling setbacks helps me manage quarter-life crisis.	159 51%	116 37%	21 7%	9 3%	9 3%

The results findings in Table 2 shows the fourth-year students' perception on the relationship between self-mastery experiences and the management of quarter life crisis. Majority of the students (92%) strongly agreed that they had the ability to make adult choices, which enhances their confidence and thereby assisting them in managing the quarter-life crisis. These results suggest that university students who are self-confident in their decision-making abilities desire more choice than those who lacked confidence. This finding reveals that, students with low levels of confidence, places them in a subordinate position to others, which causes them to follow their behavior in an attempt to be socially accepted. The study's findings established

that most of the (91%) of the students strongly agreed, that they could have self-control and set achievable goals helped them manage their quarter-life crisis. The results show that self-control, or resisting the appeal of temptations and short-term goals to achieve long-term objectives, plays a pivotal role in goal pursuit and wellbeing. The perceived choice may increase task engagement and success. The findings suggest that, when students feel it is their free choice to perform a task; they are more likely to engage and ultimately succeed thus alleviating quarter-life crisis.

Information on Table 2 established that majority (85%) of the fourth-year university students believed that they had the ability to be calm during difficulties and they were aware of the coping resources available helped them manage quarter-life crisis. The results reveal that when university students get encouraged to develop self-regulation skills, it increases the tendency to autonomously use approach coping mechanisms such as, establishing a plan of action, assessing the positive aspects of the situation or seeking advice and emotional support from peers and mentors (Freire et al. 2020). Most (86%) university students stated that have the ability to set realistic goals, assisted management of various aspects of life during the quarter-life crisis. The results emphasize the importance of setting realistic goals which are crucial for the success and personal growth of university students. This is achieved by following the SMART goals framework, breaking down larger objectives, and practicing effective time management. The study's findings revealed that most (81%) of the university students strongly agreed that they were confident in handling unforeseen situations, which helped them manage quarter-life crises. The results confirm that when university students have self-confidence it leads to improved participation, reduced anxiety, increased interest in goal setting, growth in comfort with peers, and help them share their experiences (Akbari & Sahibzadz 2020). Most (51%) of the fourth-year university students have the ability in effectiveness in problem-solving and being confident in handling setbacks, which helps them manage quarter-life crises. Taken together these findings suggest that self-confidence fuels optimism and encourages university students to believe in their skills, no matter how difficult the endeavor could be. Self-confidence motivates them to take chances, try new things, and learn new abilities in order to deal with a difficult circumstance.

Qualitative Analysis

Interviews were conducted with the university student counselors to triangulate the results of the main respondents. The researcher inquired from the student counselors whether there was a relationship between self-mastery experiences and management of quarter-life crisis among fourth-year university students in the Eastern region of Kenya.

Theme 1: Self-confidence and decision making

Respondents were asked if students had the ability of being confident in their abilities to make adult choices thus helping them in managing quarter-life crisis. Generally, student counselors affirmed that; *"Students with self-awareness know their strengths and weaknesses and understand their challenges, which helps them to maneuver through the developmental stage."* *"Students who are confident in making adult choices are able to tackle challenges unlike those who are not."* The results findings revealed the importance of university students having self-awareness that makes them recognize their strengths and weaknesses, thereby understanding the

challenges they faced and gaining confidence in their decision-making processes.

Theme 2: Self-Control and Setting Achievable Goals

Regarding university students believe in self-control and setting achievable goals assisted in management of quarter-life crisis. This statement is reflected in the words of counsellors' who noted that; *"Students at the university struggle with increased sexual drives, and they are required to control their sexual energies. The one with no self-control ends up with unplanned pregnancies, which makes them end up with balancing parenting and academics."* *"A university student who has no self-control and is not able to set achievable goals ends up in addiction, like gambling and betting. This leads to a financial crisis because they use the money, rent and upkeep to keep up with the betting addiction."* The themes identified included self-control which is a value system instilled in students by their parents, mentors, and role models. They have developed discipline skills that enable them to set achievable goals and establish boundaries, guided by their mentors and role models.

Theme 3: Calmness and Coping Resources

Concerning university students' ability to remain calm and awareness of coping resources alleviated quarter-life crisis. The students' counselors noted that: *"Those who need it are the ones who do not show up. This refers to students who do not attend seminars and workshops on awareness of coping mechanisms through peer counsellors. The students who attended are calm, but those who do not attend are the ones who need help."* *"Students who are not calm make crazy decisions that make them get involved in risky behavior like taking drugs and bad relationships. Students who are calm are aware of the coping mechanisms as they are able to network with their lecturers, employment bureaus that prepare them to the world of work after school."* These results indicate that calmness is a trait that develops over time. Calm students tend to be resilient and possess practical anger management skills.

Theme 4: Realistic Goals and Various Life Situations

In connection with university students' ability to set realistic goals which helped in various life aspects during quarter-life crisis, student counselors suggested that: *"For students to be able to set realistic goals that can assist them in managing various life aspects, they should start in the first year. They should be well-guided to strike a balance in weighing their options, which include their abilities, strengths, and weaknesses. It is important to note that some students are so independent of their parents' opinions and everything is decided for them, which affects their choices, and some even drop out*

of their courses in the third year because they feel that was not their choice.” “Students should have a value system that has been instilled in them so that they are disciplined to know what boundaries to observe in their lives. When they are self-disciplined, they cannot be manipulated to do other things they would not venture into.”

Theme 5: Self-Confidence and Unforeseen Situations

In relation to university students' ability to remain confident in handling unforeseen situations assisting in managing of quarter-life crisis, student counselors noted that, *“It is important for the students to understand that life is not a straight line. Therefore, they need to develop a mindset that will make them understand that life will not always go the way they want.”* “Students face financial constraints, broken relationships, losing a parent and unexpected pregnancies, during such times their level of self-efficacy matters. Those that have a high level of self-efficacy will handle the situation well while those with low self-efficacy have difficulties.” Therefore, the results of the study, revealed that university students need to understand that life is not on a straight line, so there is a need for a mindset that will make them understand that things will not always go the way they planned, for their financial management, broken relationships, losing a parent, getting pregnant and becoming a parent.

Theme 6: Effective Problem Solving and confidence in Handling Setbacks

In relation to university students' ability to be effective in problem-solving and confident in handling setbacks during quarter-life crises, student counselors suggested that, *“Problem-solving skills are fundamental for they help students to have the knowledge on how to navigate conflict resolution strategies. They are able to look at a crisis as an opportunity for growth, understand the different resources they have to overcome. It should be seen as opportunity for growth and to improve their self-confidence that they are able to navigate the situations they find themselves in.”* Collectively, these perspectives illustrate that student's efficiency in

problem-solving aids them in decision-making, understanding, and managing challenges with greater ease.

The study findings are consistent with Bandura's self-efficacy theory which posits that self-mastery experiences are the most influential source of self-efficacy, as they strengthen university students believe in their capability to handle quarter-life crisis.

Conclusion

The objective of the study examined the relationship between self-mastery experiences and management of quarter-life crisis among fourth year students in the Eastern region of Kenya. University students are encouraged to strengthen their self-mastery experiences by making independent adult choices, exercising self-control, setting achievable goals that assist in managing various aspects of life, remaining calm during difficulties, being aware of the coping resources available to them and demonstrating effectiveness in problem -solving. Consistent with Banduras self-efficacy theory, these abilities enhance university students' confidence in handling setbacks and unforeseen situations thereby managing quarter-life crisis.

Recommendations

Based on the findings it is recommended that university students to enhance their self-mastery experiences decision making, self-control, realistic goal setting, effective problem -solving and emotional regulation. Enhancing these competencies promotes self-mastery experiences that enable the students to manage setbacks, uncertainties and well-being thus managing quarter-life crisis. University psychologists and student counselors to develop and establish comprehensive student development programs focused on self-mastery experiences which can be achieved through workshops, and seminars, mentorship and skill-building activities. The policy makers in the Ministry of Education and university administration to adopt an integrated psychosocial and developmental approach that promotes student's self-mastery, resilience and adaptability through supportive and empowering educational policies.

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