



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Scrolling into Crisis: Social Comparison as a Predictor of Quarter-Life Crisis among Emerging Adults on TikTok

Syafira Suniyah Nur Fahmi^{1*}, Sarita Candra Merida², Sandra Adetya³

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Abstract: The rapid development of social media, particularly TikTok, has increased social comparison among emerging adults. Algorithm-driven content often presents curated portrayals of success, ideal lifestyles, and appearance, which may influence users' self-evaluations. During emerging adulthood, a phase marked by identity exploration and instability, such exposure may contribute to psychological distress, including quarter-life crisis. This study aimed to examine social comparison as a predictor of quarter-life crisis among TikTok users. A quantitative correlational design was employed with 116 emerging adults in Bekasi City selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using social comparison and quarter-life crisis scales with acceptable psychometric properties. Data were analyzed using simple linear regression. The results showed that social comparison significantly predicted quarter-life crisis ($p < .001$), with an R^2 value of 0.651, indicating that 65.1% of the variance in quarter-life crisis is explained by social comparison. These findings indicate that social comparison contributes substantially to vulnerability to quarter-life crisis. The study emphasizes the importance of media literacy and self-regulation to mitigate its negative psychological impact.

Keywords: social comparison, quarter-life crisis, emerging adulthood, TikTok

Abstrak: Perkembangan pesat media sosial, khususnya TikTok, telah meningkatkan kecenderungan perbandingan sosial pada dewasa awal. Konten berbasis algoritma sering menampilkan gambaran yang telah dikurasi mengenai kesuksesan, gaya hidup ideal, dan penampilan, yang dapat memengaruhi evaluasi diri pengguna. Pada masa dewasa awal, yang ditandai dengan eksplorasi identitas dan ketidakstabilan, paparan tersebut dapat berkontribusi pada tekanan psikologis, termasuk quarter-life crisis. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menguji perbandingan sosial sebagai predictor quarter-life crisis pada pengguna TikTok. Pendekatan kuantitatif dengan desain korelasional digunakan pada 116 dewasa awal di Kota Bekasi yang dipilih melalui purposive sampling. Data dikumpulkan menggunakan skala perbandingan sosial dan quarter-life crisis yang memiliki kualitas psikometrik yang memadai. Analisis data dilakukan dengan regresi linear sederhana. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa perbandingan sosial berpengaruh signifikan terhadap quarter-life crisis ($p < 0,001$), dengan nilai R^2 sebesar 0,651, yang berarti 65,1% variasi quarter-life crisis dijelaskan oleh perbandingan sosial. Temuan ini menegaskan pentingnya literasi media dan regulasi diri untuk mengurangi dampak psikologis negatif.

Kata kunci: perbandingan sosial, quarter life-crisis, dewasa awal, TikTok

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of digital technology and social media has changed how individuals communicate, obtain information, and construct their identities in everyday life

(Regita et al., 2024) Among various platforms, TikTok has become one of the most popular social media applications, especially among younger users because of its short-video format and personalized recommendation system (Kustiawan et al., 2025). In Indonesia, TikTok was reported as the most frequently accessed social media platform, with a usage rate of 35.17%, surpassing YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram based on the 2025 APJII survey (Suharno, 2025). As a result, TikTok is widely used not only for entertainment, but also for self-expression, lifestyle presentation, and social interaction among young people.

The majority of TikTok users in Indonesia are emerging adults aged 18–25 years, an age group largely represented by Generation Z. According to APJII data, Generation Z represented the largest proportion of TikTok users at 42.27%, followed by Millennials and Generation X (Suharno, 2025). Emerging adulthood itself is often described as a

^{1*),2,3} Faculty Psychology, Bhayangkara Jakarta Raya University

**) corresponding author*

Syafira Suniyah Nur Fahmi
Faculty Psychology, Bhayangkara Jakarta Raya University
Jl. Harsono RM No.67, Ragunan, Ps. Minggu, Kota Jakarta Selatan, Daerah Khusus Ibukota Jakarta 12550

Email: syafirasnf11@gmail.com

developmental phase marked by identity exploration, instability, and important decisions regarding education, career, and interpersonal relationships (Santrock, 2012). During this period, individuals commonly experience uncertainty about the future and pressure to achieve independence and success (Permatasari et al., 2022).

These developmental pressures may become stronger in social media environments such as TikTok. Through features like the For You Page (FYP), viral trends, and algorithm-based recommendations, users are continuously exposed to curated portrayals of achievement, financial success, productivity, and attractive lifestyles (Nugraha et al., 2025). Content such as daily vlogs, “A Day in My Life,” and personal branding videos often highlights positive experiences while minimizing struggles or failure (Saragih et al., 2025). Previous studies also found that “A Day in My Life” content on TikTok may influence followers’ self-perception and evaluation of their own lives and may shape unrealistic standards of success and personal accomplishment among viewers. (Nur et al., 2023).

One psychological mechanism that may explain this phenomenon is social comparison. Festinger (1954) explained that individuals naturally evaluate themselves by comparing their abilities, achievements, and opinions with others. Gibbons and Buunk (1999) further stated that social comparison includes evaluations in the domains of ability and opinion. In digital environments such as TikTok, comparison processes may occur more frequently because users can easily observe the lifestyles, achievements, and appearances of others (Nasidi et al., 2024). This condition may encourage upward social comparison, where individuals compare themselves with others who are perceived as more successful or superior.

When individuals repeatedly perceive a gap between their actual condition and the idealized lives displayed online, negative self-evaluation may emerge in the form of inadequacy, dissatisfaction, self-doubt, and anxiety (Setyowati et al., 2025). These experiences are closely related to quarter-life crisis, which is defined as a psychological condition characterized by confusion about life direction, emotional distress, uncertainty, and worries regarding future responsibilities during the transition to adulthood (Robbins & Wilner, 2001). Previous studies found that young adults frequently experience moderate to high levels of quarter-life crisis, especially regarding career uncertainty, fear of failure, and concerns about personal achievement (Tenggara & Idulfilastri, 2024).

Several previous studies have shown that intensive social media use is associated with lower self-esteem, psychological distress, and dissatisfaction among young adults (Manek & Virlia, 2025). Other studies also reported that social comparison on digital platforms may strengthen emotional pressure and increase vulnerability to quarter-life crisis (Fahriansyah & Paryontri, 2025). However, most previous studies examined social media in general or focused on platforms such as Instagram. Research specifically investigating social comparison as a predictor of quarter-life crisis in the TikTok context, particularly among emerging adults in Indonesia, remains limited (Maharani & Merida, 2025).

This issue is important because TikTok possesses unique characteristics that may intensify social comparison processes more strongly than other social media platforms. Its algorithm-driven recommendations, continuous short-video exposure, and strong emphasis on visibility, trends, and achievement displays may encourage users to evaluate themselves based on the lives and achievements presented online. Therefore, examining TikTok specifically may provide a more accurate understanding of psychological

challenges experienced by emerging adults in the digital era (Rosyiddin & Afandi, 2023).

Based on these considerations, this study aims to examine the role of social comparison as a predictor of quarter-life crisis among emerging adulthood TikTok users in Bekasi City. The hypothesis proposed in this study is that social comparison significantly and positively predicts quarter-life crisis among emerging adult TikTok users (Nasidi et al., 2024).

METHODS

Study Design

This research employed a quantitative cross-sectional correlational design to examine the relationship and predictive role of social comparison on quarter-life crisis among emerging adults in Bekasi City. Social comparison was treated as the independent variable, referring to individuals’ tendency to evaluate and understand themselves through comparisons with others, while quarter-life crisis served as the dependent variable.

Population and Sampling Technique

The population of this study consisted of individuals in the emerging adulthood stage who resided in Bekasi City. The sample comprised 116 respondents selected using a purposive sampling technique. The sample size was considered adequate for regression analysis because it exceeded the minimum recommended number of participants for studies with one predictor variable (Periantalo, 2016).

This sampling technique ensured that participants met the characteristics relevant to the study objectives. The inclusion criteria were individuals aged 18–25 years, residing in Bekasi City, and using TikTok for approximately 1–3 hours per day, either as active or passive users. TikTok usage duration was measured through self-report questions regarding participants’ average daily usage time.

In addition, participants were required to regularly consume TikTok content related to personal achievements, lifestyle, and interpersonal relationships. This criterion was assessed using screening questions regarding the frequency of exposure to such content on TikTok. These criteria were applied to obtain a sample that reflected the characteristics of emerging adults who are actively exposed to social comparison content on TikTok.

Research Instrument

This study employed two validated scales to measure the research variables, namely the Social Comparison Scale and the Quarter-Life Crisis Scale. Both instruments used a 1–4 point Likert scale to minimize neutral responses and encourage participants to provide more definitive answers, thereby improving response accuracy (Widhiarso, 2010).

a. Quarter-Life Crisis Scale

Quarter-life crisis was measured using a scale adapted from Maharani and Merida (2025), which had undergone content validity assessment and prior modification. The scale encompasses several aspects reflecting psychological experiences during the transition to adulthood. The instrument consisted of 21 items with a Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient of 0.941. The blueprint of the Quarter-Life Crisis Scale is presented in table 1.

Table 1. Blueprint Quarter-life crisis Scale

No	Aspect	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

Table 2. Blueprint Social Comparison Scale

No	Aspect	Item Number	Number of Items
1.	Ability	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6	6
2.	Opinion	7, 8, 9, 10, 11	5

b. Social Comparison Scale

Social comparison was measured using a scale adapted from Maharani and Merida (2025) which had undergone content validity assessment and prior modification by previous researchers. The scale was constructed based on two dimensions, namely ability and opinion. The instrument consisted of 11 items and demonstrated acceptable reliability with a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.804. The blueprint of the Social Comparison Scale is presented in table 2.

Data Collection Process

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire distributed online through Google Forms from December 14 to December 28, 2025. The questionnaire was disseminated through social media platforms, particularly WhatsApp, as well as through direct distribution to eligible participants. The respondents in this study were emerging adults who were active TikTok users and resided in Bekasi City. The sampling technique employed was non-probability sampling using a purposive sampling approach, in which participants were selected based on predetermined criteria aligned with the objectives of the study. To ensure response quality, only participants who met the inclusion criteria were allowed to complete the questionnaire, and incomplete responses were excluded from the analysis. The final sample consisted of 116 respondents.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27 for Windows. Descriptive statistics were used to describe respondent characteristics and research variables. Prior to hypothesis testing, normality and linearity tests were conducted to ensure that the data met the assumptions for regression analysis. Hypothesis testing was performed using simple linear regression analysis to examine the predictive role of social comparison on quarter-life crisis among emerging adults. In addition, reliability analysis using Cronbach's Alpha was conducted to evaluate the internal consistency of the research instruments.

Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted in accordance with ethical principles, including voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality of participant data. Prior to participation, respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and agreed to participate voluntarily.

Although this research did not undergo formal ethical review procedures, the research instruments had undergone professional judgment and content validation by Ms. Sandra Adetya, M.Psi., Psychologist, a lecturer at Universitas Bhayangkara Jakarta Raya.

RESULTS OF STUDY

This study involved 116 emerging adult TikTok users aged 18–25 years who resided in Bekasi City and met the predetermined inclusion criteria. As presented in Table 3, most participants were female ($n = 80$, 69.0%), whereas 36 participants (31.0%) were male.

The participants were distributed across four districts of Bekasi City. The largest proportion resided in North Bekasi ($n = 39$, 33.6%), followed by East Bekasi ($n = 35$, 30.2%), South Bekasi ($n = 23$, 19.8%), and West Bekasi ($n = 19$, 16.4%). Regarding occupational status, most participants were students ($n = 87$, 75.0%), while 23 participants (19.8%) were employed and six participants (5.2%) were unemployed. Thus, the sample was predominantly composed of students.

In terms of age, most participants were between 21 and 23 years old ($n = 78$, 67.2%). Participants aged 24–25 years accounted for 19.8% of the sample ($n = 23$), while those aged 18–20 years represented 12.9% ($n = 15$). Regarding daily TikTok use, 49 participants (42.2%) reported using TikTok for more than three hours per day, 38 participants (32.8%) reported using it for one to two hours, and 29 participants (25.0%) reported using it for approximately three hours per day. These findings indicate that a substantial proportion of the participants used TikTok for at least three hours daily.

The descriptive statistics for the study variables are presented in Table 4. The mean quarter-life crisis score was 60.20 ($SD = 12.67$), with a median of 61.50. The mean social comparison score was 31.01 ($SD = 5.50$), with a median of 32.00. The relatively close mean and median values for both variables indicate that the score distributions were reasonably balanced around their central values.

Assumption Testing

Normality and linearity were examined before conducting the correlation and regression analyses. As shown in Table 5, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test yielded a significance value of $p = .200$ for both quarter-life crisis and social comparison. Because these values were greater than .05, the distributions of both variables were considered normal.

The linearity test also showed a nonsignificant deviation from linearity, $p = .219$. This result indicates that the relationship between social comparison and quarter-life crisis could be treated as linear. Therefore, the assumptions required for Pearson correlation and simple linear regression analysis were considered satisfied.

Table 3. Respondent Characteristics (N=116)

Characteristics	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	36	31%
	Female	80	69%
District	West Bekasi	19	16.4%
	South Bekasi	23	19.8%
	East Bekasi	35	30.2%
	North Bekasi	39	33.6%
Occupation	Student	87	75%
	Employed	23	19.8%
	Unemployed	6	5.2%
Age	18 – 20	15	12.9%
	21 – 23	78	67.2%
	24 – 25	23	19.8%
Tiktok Usage Duration	1 – 2 Hours	38	32.8%
	3 Hours	29	25%
	> 3 Hours	49	42.2%

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

Variable	Mean	Median	SD
Quarter-life crisis	60.20	61.50	12.67
Social Comparison	31.01	32	5.50

Table 5. Normality and Linearity Testing Result

Test	Variable	Sig.	Interpretation
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Linearity (Deviation from Linearity)	Quarter-Life Crisis	.200	Normal
	Social Comparison	.200	Normal
	Social Comparison → Quarter-Life Crisis	.219	Linear

Categorization

The categorization results for quarter-life crisis and social comparison are presented in Table 6. For quarter-life crisis, 56 participants (48.3%) were classified in the very high category, while 31 participants (26.7%) were classified in the high category. Meanwhile, 19 participants (16.4%) were categorized as low, and 10 participants (8.6%) were categorized as very low. Thus, 75.0% of the participants were classified as having high or very high levels of quarter-life crisis.

A similar pattern was observed for social comparison. A total of 52 participants (44.8%) were classified in the very high category, and 32 participants (27.6%) were classified in the high category. In contrast, 25 participants (21.6%) were categorized as low, while seven participants (6.0%) were categorized as very low. Overall, 72.4% of the participants were classified as having high or very high levels of social comparison. These findings indicate that elevated levels of both quarter-life crisis and social comparison were common among the participants.

Table 6. Categorization of Quarter-Life Crisis and Social Comparison Scores (N= 116)

Variable	Category	Score Range	n	Percentage
Quarter-Life Crisis	Very Low	$X < 42$	10	8.6%
	Low	$42 \leq X < 52.5$	19	16.4%
	High	$52.5 \leq X < 63$	31	26.7%
	Very High	$X \geq 63$	56	48.3%
Social Comparison	Very Low	$X < 22$	7	6.0%
	Low	$22 \leq X < 27.5$	25	21.6%
	High	$27.5 \leq X < 33$	32	27.6%
	Very High	$X \geq 33$	52	44.8%

Correlation Analysis

The results of the Pearson product-moment correlation analysis are presented in Table 7. Social comparison was positively and significantly correlated with quarter-life crisis, $r = .807$, $p < .001$. The positive direction of the relationship indicates that participants with higher social comparison scores also tended to report higher quarter-life crisis scores. The magnitude of the coefficient indicates a strong association between the two variables.

Table 7. Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Analysis

Variables	Pearson Correlation (r)	Sig. (2-tailed)
Social Comparison – Quarter-Life Crisis	.807	< .001

Regression Analysis

The results of the simple linear regression analysis are summarized in Table 8. The regression model was statistically significant, $F(1, 114) = 212.251$, $p < .001$, indicating that social comparison significantly contributed to the statistical prediction of quarter-life crisis scores.

The model produced an R value of .807 and an R^2 value of .651, with an adjusted R^2 of .648. These results indicate that social comparison accounted for 65.1% of the observed variance in quarter-life crisis scores within the study sample. The remaining 34.9% of the variance was associated with factors not included in the regression model.

Social comparison was a significant positive predictor of quarter-life crisis, $B = 1.856$, $SE = .127$, $\beta = .807$, $t = 14.569$, $p < .001$. The unstandardized coefficient indicates that each one-point increase in the social comparison score was associated with an estimated increase of 1.856 points in the quarter-life crisis score. The intercept was not statistically significant, $B = 2.640$, $SE = 4.012$, $t = .658$, $p = .512$.

Table 8. Simple Linear Regression Results

	R	R²	Adjusted R²	Std. Error		
Model Summary	.807	.651	.648	7.521		
Anova	Model	SS	df	MS	F	p
	Regression	12007.317	1	12007.317	212.251	< .001
	Residual	6449.123	114	56.571		
Coefficients	Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
	Constant	2.640	4.012	—	.658	.512
	Social Comparison	1.856	.127	.807	14.569	< .001

DISCUSSION

The results of this study showed that social comparison significantly predicts quarter-life crisis among emerging adult TikTok users. The regression analysis revealed that social comparison explained 65.1% of the variance in quarter-life crisis, indicating that social comparison plays a substantial role in shaping psychological experiences during emerging adulthood. In addition, the descriptive findings showed that both social comparison and quarter-life crisis were categorized as high among participants. These findings suggest that emerging adults who frequently engage in social comparison also tend to experience higher levels of uncertainty, dissatisfaction, and psychological pressure related to their future and life direction.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research conducted by Argasiam and Putri (2023), which found a significant positive relationship between social comparison and quarter-life crisis among social media users. Similar findings were also reported by Hafrianto et al., (2024), who explained that social media exposure may encourage individuals to compare their achievements and life progress with others, thereby increasing vulnerability to quarter-life crisis. In the context of TikTok use, users are continuously exposed to content portraying achievements, lifestyle, relationships, and idealized life experiences. Such exposure may intensify self-evaluative comparisons.

The findings can also be understood through the perspective of Social Comparison Orientation proposed by Gibbons and Buunk (1999), which explains that individuals differ in their tendency to compare themselves with others when evaluating their abilities, achievements, and personal progress. Individuals with higher social comparison orientation are more likely to use information about others as a reference for self-evaluation. Within social media environments, these comparison tendencies may become more frequent because social media platforms continuously display carefully curated portrayals of success and achievement. When individuals perceive discrepancies between their current circumstances and socially displayed standards, they may experience feelings of inadequacy, dissatisfaction, and uncertainty regarding their future direction.

Furthermore, the findings support the developmental perspective proposed by Robbins and Wilner (2001), which states that quarter-life crisis often emerges when emerging adults begin questioning their identity, achievements, career direction, and readiness for adult responsibilities. During emerging adulthood, individuals commonly experience developmental pressures related to education, work, financial stability, and interpersonal relationships. Frequent upward social comparison may further intensify these pressures, particularly when individuals perceive themselves as less successful or left behind compared to

others presented on social media. As a result, social comparison may function as an important psychological mechanism contributing to quarter-life crisis during the transition into adulthood.

Although the regression analysis showed that social comparison explained a relatively large proportion of variance in quarter-life crisis, the findings should be interpreted cautiously. One possible explanation for the high R² value is the potential overlap between evaluative aspects of social comparison and psychological experiences related to quarter-life crisis. In addition, the use of self-report instruments administered within a single period of data collection may increase the possibility of common method bias. The characteristics of the sample, consisting specifically of emerging adult TikTok users in Bekasi City, may also contribute to the relatively strong relationship identified in this study.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of increasing awareness regarding social comparison behavior among emerging adults, particularly in social media environments. Emerging adults are encouraged to develop healthier self-evaluation patterns and more realistic interpretations of social media content. Recognizing that social media often presents selective and idealized portrayals of life may help individuals reduce excessive psychological pressure and feelings of inadequacy associated with upward social comparison.

These findings may also be understood within the broader developmental context of emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood is a developmental phase characterized by various academic, occupational, interpersonal, and emotional challenges. According to Irwanti et al. (2023) individuals in this phase are expected to accomplish several developmental tasks, including career preparation, emotional maturity, decision-making, and establishing deeper interpersonal relationships. However, these developmental processes do not always occur smoothly. In the context of social media use, continuous exposure to idealized portrayals of achievement and life progress may intensify evaluative comparison processes among emerging adults. When individuals perceive inconsistencies between personal expectations and reality, social comparison may increase feelings of uncertainty, dissatisfaction, and psychological pressure, thereby contributing to the emergence of quarter-life crisis.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings indicate that social comparison is a significant predictor of quarter-life crisis among emerging adult TikTok users. The findings demonstrate that individuals who frequently engage in social comparison are

more likely to experience higher levels of uncertainty, anxiety, and confusion regarding life direction, career, and personal achievements. These findings indicate that social comparison functions as an important psychological factor associated with quarter-life crisis during emerging adulthood.

The findings also suggest that exposure to curated TikTok content, which often portrays idealized achievements, lifestyles, and social relationships, may intensify individuals' tendency to evaluate themselves against others. When individuals perceive discrepancies between their own progress and the standards presented on social media, it may lead to increased self-doubt and psychological pressure, thereby contributing to the emergence of quarter-life crisis. These findings contribute to the development of psychological studies related to social media use and mental health during emerging adulthood.

However, this study has several limitations that should be considered. First, the study used a cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to determine causal relationships between social comparison and quarter-life crisis. Second, the use of purposive sampling and participants limited to emerging adult TikTok users in Bekasi City may reduce the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Third, the study relied on self-report measures, which may increase the possibility of response bias, social desirability bias, and common method bias. In addition, several external variables that may also influence quarter-life crisis, such as personality factors, family environment, academic pressure, financial conditions, and interpersonal relationships, were not controlled in this study.

Therefore, future research is recommended to use broader and more representative sampling techniques, involve participants from more diverse backgrounds, and examine additional psychological variables related to quarter-life crisis. Future studies are also encouraged to explore different forms of social comparison, such as upward and downward comparison, as well as to use longitudinal approaches in order to better understand the development of quarter-life crisis over time.

DECLARATIONS

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research principles. All participants voluntarily participated in this study and were informed about the purpose of the research prior to data collection.

Consent for Publication

All participants agreed that their anonymized data could be used for research and publication purposes.

Availability of Data and Materials

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Artificial Intelligence-Assisted Technology

The authors declare that artificial intelligence tools were used only for language improvement and writing assistance, without affecting the originality and intellectual content of the study.

Authors' Contributions

The first author contributed to conceptualization, data collection, data analysis, and manuscript writing. The second and third authors contributed through supervision, guidance, and critical revision of the manuscript.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Syafira Suniyah Nur Fahmi completed her Bachelor's degree in Psychology at Universitas Bhayangkara Jakarta Raya. Her research focuses on social comparison, social media behavior, and psychological well-being among emerging adults. This study is based on her undergraduate thesis, which examines the role of social comparison in predicting quarter-life crisis among TikTok users.

Sarita Candra Merida completed her Master's degree in Clinical Psychology at Universitas Gadjah Mada. She is currently a lecturer at Universitas Bhayangkara Jakarta Raya. Her academic work focuses on mental health and psychological well-being, and she is actively involved in teaching and supervising undergraduate research.

Sandra Adetya completed her Master's degree at Universitas Persada Indonesia YAI and is currently a lecturer at the Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Bhayangkara Jakarta Raya. Her academic interests include psychological well-being, human behavior, and social psychology, and she contributes to teaching and academic supervision.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Correspondence All inquiries and requests for additional materials should be directed to the Corresponding Author.

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