

Social Class Identity and Quarter-Life Crisis: Class Identity Conflict, Dual Non-Belonging, and the Moderating Role of Cultural Capital Confidence

Dr. Sora Pazer

IU International University of Applied Sciences, Erfurt, Germany

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.68050/JAMS.2026.778>

Received: 10 October 2026; Accepted: 15 October 2026; Published: 21 October 2026

ABSTRACT

This cross-sectional study examined associations of class identity conflict and dual non-belonging with quarter-life crisis symptomatology, and whether cultural capital confidence moderates the class identity conflict association, controlling for general distress. Emerging adults recruited anonymously through Reddit ($N = 373$; age $M = 24.82$, $SD = 2.57$, range 21–29 years) completed self-report measures, including the Developmental Crisis Questionnaire, and an embedded randomized vignette experiment. Class identity conflict ($r = .627$, 95% CI [.561, .685]) and dual non-belonging ($r = .621$, 95% CI [.554, .680]) were strongly associated with crisis scores. Adding cultural capital confidence and its interaction with class identity conflict raised the variance accounted for from 59.3% to 64.3% ($\Delta R^2 = .051$, $f^2 = 0.14$). The negative interaction ($\beta = -.203$, 95% CI [-.258, -.147]) indicated a weaker, though still positive, association at higher cultural capital confidence. In the experiment, a hypothetical class-mobility threat scenario elicited higher state ratings of perceived status threat ($d = 0.57$) and anticipated identity distress ($d = 0.60$) than a neutral scenario. Common-method variance and construct overlap may partly account for the survey associations, whose direction remains undetermined.

Keywords: social class identity, dual non-belonging, cultural capital, quarter-life crisis, emerging adulthood, class mobility

INTRODUCTION

A young professional sits in an open-plan office wearing clothes bought to look like she belongs there, answering emails in a register she rehearsed rather than the one she grew up speaking, and returning most weekends to a childhood home where that same register now sounds foreign. She is, by most external indicators, upwardly mobile and successful. She is also, by her own description, unsettled in a way that has no obvious external source. This composite, illustrative scene echoes themes reported in qualitative accounts of social mobility (Friedman, 2016; Reay, 2005), and it is the starting point of the present study: social class is not only a position in an economic hierarchy but also an identity, and moving across class boundaries – whether upward, downward, or laterally between an origin milieu and a destination milieu – can leave that identity in a state of ongoing negotiation rather than settled coherence.

Arnett (2000) proposed that the years between the late teens and late twenties constitute a distinct developmental period, emerging adulthood, characterized by identity exploration, instability, and a pervasive sense that one's life is still “in between.” Arnett observed that emerging adults typically feel they have not yet reached full adulthood even when they have left education and entered paid employment, an in-between status that later work has linked to periods of developmental crisis (Robinson, 2015). Bourdieu (1984) argued, from a very different theoretical tradition, that class is internalized as habitus – a durable, largely unconscious set of dispositions, tastes, and bodily comportments acquired in childhood that continues to organize how a person perceives and acts in the world long after their objective economic position has changed. Friedman (2016) extended this argument to the specific experience of the socially mobile, describing a “habitus clivé” or cleft habitus in which upwardly mobile individuals carry two incompatible sets of dispositions simultaneously,



accompanied by what he described as an enduring emotional imprint of unease. Stephens et al. (2012) documented a related phenomenon empirically, showing that first-generation university students experience a “cultural mismatch” between the independent norms of middle-class institutions and the interdependent norms in which they were raised, and that this mismatch is measurably associated with academic and psychological difficulty.

These three literatures – developmental research on emerging adulthood, sociological theory on habitus and class, and social-psychological research on cultural mismatch – converge on a shared expectation that has rarely been tested directly with validated psychometric instruments in a single study: that the subjective experience of class identity conflict, and the related experience of not fully belonging to either one's class of origin or one's class of destination, should be associated with the kind of acute developmental turbulence that has come to be labeled the quarter-life crisis (Robinson, 2015). The quarter-life crisis is most often operationalized as a cluster of feelings – pervasive uncertainty about life direction, comparison-related distress, a sense of being behind schedule, and anxious rumination about identity and achievement – that cluster together in the years immediately following the transition out of structured education (Robinson et al., 2013).

Existing quarter-life crisis research has documented associations with occupational uncertainty, relationship instability, and generalized anxiety, but has rarely asked whether the specific texture of a person's social class identity – not merely their income or occupational status, but their subjective sense of belonging to a class group and the coherence of that sense across contexts – is itself implicated. At the same time, social mobility research has documented the subjective costs of class transition in qualitative and ethnographic terms (Reay, 2005) but has seldom connected these costs, using validated quantitative instruments, to the developmental crisis literature. This leaves an identifiable gap: how, and under what conditions, is class identity conflict associated with quarter-life crisis symptomatology among emerging adults, and does confidence in one's command of middle-class cultural capital – the tacit knowledge of how to navigate professional, educational, and social settings – condition the strength of that association?

The present study addresses this gap directly. Using a cross-sectional online survey of emerging adults recruited through Reddit communities, it examines whether class identity conflict and dual non-belonging are associated with quarter-life crisis symptomatology, whether this association holds after accounting for general psychological distress, and whether cultural capital confidence moderates the strength of the association between class identity conflict and crisis symptomatology. An embedded randomized vignette experiment additionally examines whether a hypothetical class-mobility threat scenario elicits greater perceived status threat and anticipated identity distress than a neutral control scenario. Clarifying these associations carries practical relevance for counseling services, student support programs, and workplace onboarding practices that serve first-generation professionals and other socially mobile young adults, for whom class identity may be an underrecognized dimension of psychological adjustment.

The present investigation is designed to speak to three audiences simultaneously. For developmental psychologists, it offers a test of whether a specific, theoretically motivated identity variable – class identity conflict – adds incremental value to the quarter-life crisis literature beyond generalized distress. For social-class researchers working in the Bourdieusian tradition, it offers a rare quantitative, psychometrically validated complement to a literature that has relied heavily on qualitative and ethnographic methods. For practitioners in counseling, higher education, and workplace support roles, it offers preliminary evidence about which emerging adults – those reporting both high class identity conflict and low cultural capital confidence – report particularly elevated crisis symptomatology, and therefore where limited support resources might be most usefully directed.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Social Identity Theory and Class as a Social Category

Tajfel and Turner (1979) proposed that individuals derive a substantial portion of their self-concept from membership in social groups, and that this social identity carries emotional significance independent of any



personal attributes the individual might also possess. Social identity theory holds that people categorize themselves and others into in-groups and out-groups, that this categorization is accompanied by comparative evaluation, and that threats to a valued group membership – or ambiguity about which group one belongs to – generate psychological discomfort. Class has historically received less attention within social identity research than gender, ethnicity, or nationality, in part because class boundaries are less visibly marked and less consistently self-labeled than other social categories (Manstead, 2018). Yet class meets the core criteria of a social identity category: it is associated with distinctive norms, tastes, and communicative styles; it structures in-group and out-group comparison; and, crucially for the present argument, it can be occupied ambiguously. A person raised in a working-class household who has since acquired a university degree and a professional occupation typically cannot straightforwardly claim either a working-class or a middle-class identity without qualification, and it is precisely this ambiguity that social identity theory suggests should be psychologically taxing.

Jetten et al. (2008) showed that the psychological costs of individual mobility depend on social identity factors, such as whether the new group membership can be reconciled with the group of origin, rather than on the status transition itself, a finding directly relevant to class mobility. Applied to class, this suggests that it is not upward or downward movement per se that should be distressing, but rather the failure to resolve which class identity one now holds. This distinction motivates the present study's focus on subjective class identity conflict rather than on objective socioeconomic position alone.

A further implication of social identity theory concerns the comparative dimension of class identity. Kraus et al. (2011) argued that social class functions as a form of culture, encompassing not only material resources but also patterns of cognition, self-construal, and social behavior that persist across contexts. From this perspective, a person navigating two class cultures simultaneously must manage two distinct comparative frames – evaluating themselves against origin-class referents and against destination-class referents – a demand that social identity theory would expect to be cognitively and emotionally taxing whenever the two frames yield divergent self-evaluations. This comparative burden is conceptually distinct from, but likely to compound, the felt conflict between the two identities themselves, and it motivates treating class identity conflict as a construct of genuine relevance to developmental distress rather than as a proxy for socioeconomic disadvantage.

Habitus, Cultural Capital, and the Costs of Class Mobility

Bourdieu's (1984, 1986) sociological framework offers a complementary account. Habitus refers to the embodied, largely tacit dispositions – ways of speaking, moving, evaluating, and desiring – acquired through early socialization within a given class position. Cultural capital refers to the accumulated stock of culturally valued knowledge, credentials, and competencies (for example, familiarity with the unwritten rules of professional or academic settings) that can be converted into social and economic advantage and that is transmitted, in part, through class-specific childrearing practices (Lareau, 2011). Bourdieu argued that habitus, once formed, is durable and resistant to conscious revision, which implies that individuals who move into a new class context via education or occupational achievement continue to carry the dispositions of their class of origin even as they acquire the cultural capital of their destination class. Friedman (2016) termed the resulting condition a cleft habitus, characterized by a persistent, low-grade sense of not quite fitting either context. Reay (2005) documented a similar pattern in interviews with working-class-origin university students in the United Kingdom, who described feeling simultaneously estranged from family and community of origin and unable to feel fully at ease among middle-class peers. This body of work anticipates two of the present study's central constructs: class identity conflict, capturing the subjective sense of incompatibility between origin and destination class identities, and dual non-belonging, capturing the sense of not fully belonging to either context.

Cultural capital, in Bourdieu's original formulation, is not merely a stock of knowledge but also a source of confidence: individuals who feel fluent in the cultural codes of a professional or educational setting are able to navigate that setting with less anticipatory anxiety. Stephens et al. (2012) operationalized a closely related construct, showing that a cultural mismatch between the interdependent norms common among first-



generation students and the independent norms of American universities is associated with poorer academic performance, and that framing the university culture in more interdependent terms reduced this performance gap. A subsequent randomized difference-education intervention, which helped incoming students understand how their different backgrounds matter in college, likewise closed the social-class achievement gap (Stephens et al., 2014). This evidence motivates the hypothesis that a person's confidence in their command of cultural capital – rather than cultural capital as an objective stock – should condition how strongly class identity conflict is associated with psychological distress.

Sennett and Cobb (1972), in an early and influential account, described the “hidden injuries of class” experienced by upwardly mobile workers who internalized class hierarchy as a personal verdict on their own worth rather than as a structural condition, a dynamic that anticipates the present study's emphasis on subjective, internalized class identity conflict rather than objective class position. Taken together, the habitus literature converges on the proposition that class mobility carries a psychological cost that is only loosely coupled to its economic benefits, and that this cost is best captured by measures of subjective identity conflict and belonging rather than by income, occupational prestige, or education level alone.

The Quarter-Life Crisis as a Developmental Construct

Robinson et al. (2013) and Robinson (2015) characterized the quarter-life crisis as a period, typically occurring in the mid-to-late twenties, in which young adults experience acute uncertainty about career direction, relationships, and identity, accompanied by feelings of being trapped, of comparing unfavorably with peers, and of urgency to make major life changes. Unlike normative developmental transitions, the quarter-life crisis as measured in self-report instruments such as the Developmental Crisis Questionnaire (Petrov et al., 2022) captures the acute, emotionally charged variant of this uncertainty rather than mere exploration. Arnett's (2000) concept of emerging adulthood provides the developmental backdrop within which quarter-life crisis symptomatology is best understood: emerging adulthood is defined by identity exploration precisely because the social scaffolding that constrained identity in adolescence – school, parental household, a fixed peer group – has been removed, leaving young adults to construct an adult identity with comparatively little external structure. Class identity conflict adds a specific layer of difficulty to this already unstructured process: an emerging adult who is also renegotiating which class group they belong to must resolve two identity projects simultaneously, occupational or relational identity and class identity, and the present study proposes that the co-occurrence of these two projects should be especially taxing.

Furlong and Cartmel (2007) described contemporary youth transitions as characterized by an “epistemological fallacy” in which young people experience their trajectories as individualized and self-determined even though those trajectories remain structured by class, and Twenge (2017) documented a broader generational rise in reported anxiety and uncertainty among young adults navigating an increasingly credentialed and competitive labor market. Within this structural context, class identity conflict can be understood as one specific, underexamined thread in the wider fabric of quarter-life uncertainty: it is not merely that emerging adults today report more generalized crisis symptomatology, but that some of this symptomatology may be traceable to identity-specific sources, of which class is one, that have received comparatively little empirical attention relative to occupational or relational uncertainty.

Quarter-life crisis symptomatology must also be distinguished conceptually from general psychological distress. General distress refers to a non-specific state of negative affect, such as tension, worry, or low mood, that can arise in any life phase and in response to any stressor. Quarter-life crisis symptomatology, by contrast, is defined by its developmental content: it concerns appraisals of one's life course relative to age-graded expectations, such as feeling behind schedule, being uncertain about one's direction, or feeling trapped in commitments entered in early adulthood (Petrov et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2013). The two are expected to overlap, because crisis episodes are typically accompanied by negative affect, but they are not interchangeable: a person can report elevated distress without framing it as a developmental crisis, and vice versa. For this reason, the present study treats general distress as a covariate rather than as an alternative index of the outcome, so that the class identity variables can be examined in relation to crisis symptomatology over and above their shared variance with non-specific negative affect.



The Moderation Hypothesis

Integrating the three preceding subsections yields a coherent set of expectations. Following social identity theory, class identity conflict – the subjective difficulty of reconciling origin and destination class identities – should be positively associated with quarter-life crisis symptomatology (H1). Following the habitus literature, dual non-belonging – the sense of not fully belonging to either class context – should likewise be positively associated with quarter-life crisis symptomatology, as a related but empirically distinguishable facet of the same underlying tension (H2). Because general psychological distress could plausibly account for any observed association through shared method variance or trait negative affectivity, general distress was entered as a covariate in every model (H1a, H2a: the associations in H1 and H2 remain statistically significant after controlling for general distress). Finally, following Bourdieu's account of cultural capital as a source of situational confidence and Stephens et al.'s (2012, 2014) demonstrations that reframing institutional norms or explaining the role of background reduces the costs of cultural mismatch, cultural capital confidence was hypothesized to moderate the association between class identity conflict and quarter-life crisis symptomatology, such that the positive association is weaker among individuals who report high confidence in their command of middle-class cultural capital (H3). An embedded randomized vignette experiment additionally tested whether a hypothetical class-mobility threat scenario, relative to a neutral control scenario, elicits greater perceived status threat and anticipated identity distress (H4), providing an experimentally controlled complement to the correlational hypotheses.

METHOD

Study Design

The study employed a single-wave, cross-sectional online survey design combined with an embedded, individually randomized vignette experiment. The cross-sectional design allows for the estimation of associations and a conditional (moderated) association between class identity conflict and quarter-life crisis symptomatology, but does not permit causal or directional inference; this limitation is addressed explicitly in the Discussion. The embedded vignette experiment, in which participants were randomly assigned to a class-mobility threat scenario or a neutral control scenario before rating two dependent measures, provides a between-subjects experimental complement that does permit causal inference for the specific, narrow comparison it was designed to test.

Sample and Recruitment

Participants were recruited anonymously and without monetary or other compensation through several Reddit communities frequented by emerging adults discussing career, identity, and class-related topics. Recruitment posts described the study as a survey on social background and life transitions and linked to an external survey platform; the first survey page repeated the study information and the eligibility criteria. Eligibility criteria were (a) an age between 21 and 29 years, (b) sufficient English proficiency to complete an English-language questionnaire, and (c) agreement to the participant information. Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any point without penalty. Only fully completed surveys were retained. The survey included three embedded attention-check items; all $N = 373$ respondents who completed the survey passed all three attention checks, so no cases were excluded on data-quality grounds and the final analytic sample is identical to the completed sample ($N = 373$).

Participant Characteristics

Participants ranged in age from 21 to 29 years ($M = 24.82$, $SD = 2.57$). Parental socioeconomic status, indexed by a standardized composite of parental occupational status (scaled around a reference value of 50), averaged $M = 50.00$ ($SD = 10.01$), indicating a sample spanning a broad range of class-origin backgrounds. Subjective social status on the 10-point MacArthur ladder averaged $M = 5.47$ ($SD = 1.54$), placing the typical respondent near the middle of the perceived social hierarchy. Random allocation to the vignette conditions yielded groups of comparable size (control: $n = 195$, 52.3%; class-mobility threat: $n = 178$, 47.7%). Median completion time



was 16.8 minutes ($M = 16.81$, $SD = 3.85$). Because the platform did not collect demographic variables beyond age and class-origin status, gender, ethnicity, country of residence, educational attainment, and employment status are not available; the implications of this for generalisability are addressed in the Limitations.

Measures

Quarter-life crisis symptomatology was measured with the Developmental Crisis Questionnaire (DCQ), a 12-item scale rated on a 6-point response format, with higher scores indicating more pronounced crisis symptomatology (sample item: "I often feel that my life is not going the way it should at this point"). Internal consistency in the present sample was excellent, $\alpha = .92$ ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 0.75$).

Class identity conflict was measured with a 12-item scale (CIC) adapted from bicultural identity integration methodology and rated on a 5-point response format, with higher scores indicating greater subjective conflict between one's class of origin and class of destination identities (sample item: "I feel torn between the world I grew up in and the world I live in now"). Internal consistency was excellent, $\alpha = .92$ ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 0.61$).

Dual non-belonging was measured with a 12-item scale (DNB) assessing the sense of not fully belonging to either one's class of origin or one's current class context, rated on a 5-point response format (sample item: "I do not feel that I truly fit in with the people I grew up around, or with the people I work and study with now"). Internal consistency was excellent, $\alpha = .92$ ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 0.62$).

Cultural capital confidence was measured with an 8-item scale (CC) assessing confidence in one's command of the tacit norms and competencies of middle-class professional and educational settings, rated on a 5-point response format (sample item: "I feel confident that I know how to behave appropriately in professional or academic settings"). Internal consistency was good, $\alpha = .89$ ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 0.63$).

Subjective social status was measured with the 3-item MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status adapted for the present sample (SUB_CLASS), rated on a 10-point ladder format (sample item: "Where would you place yourself on this ladder relative to other people in your country?"). Internal consistency was acceptable, $\alpha = .79$ ($M = 5.47$, $SD = 1.54$).

General psychological distress was measured with a 4-item covariate marker scale (GD) rated on a 5-point response format and included in every model to account for generalized negative affectivity (sample item: "In the past two weeks, I have generally felt tense or anxious"). Whereas the DCQ asks about appraisals of one's life course relative to age-graded expectations, the GD items refer to non-specific affective states without reference to developmental content; including GD as a covariate therefore allows the class identity associations to be examined over and above shared variance with general negative affect. Internal consistency was good, $\alpha = .80$ ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 0.66$).

An additional 4-item marker scale assessing an unrelated, theoretically unconnected construct (MARKER) was included to support the marker-variable technique for evaluating common method bias (Lindell & Whitney, 2001; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003), rated on a 5-point response format. Internal consistency was acceptable, $\alpha = .79$ ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 0.67$). The marker scale correlated negligibly with all substantive study variables (all $|r| \leq .074$, all $p \geq .15$), including quarter-life crisis symptomatology ($r = .016$, $p = .754$), suggesting that common method variance was unlikely to account for the substantive associations reported below.

Finally, participants were randomly assigned to one of two brief written vignettes describing a hypothetical scenario involving a class-mobility transition (control scenario, $n = 195$; class-mobility threat scenario, $n = 178$) and then rated two dependent measures on 7-point scales: perceived status threat (VIG_DV_1) and anticipated identity distress (VIG_DV_2).

Statistical Analysis

All analyses were conducted in Python 3 using pandas, SciPy, and statsmodels. Internal consistency for each



multi-item scale was estimated with Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951) computed directly from item-level covariances in the present sample. Analyses proceeded in five steps. First, descriptive statistics (n items, M , SD , α) were computed for every scale. Second, a Pearson correlation matrix was computed among quarter-life crisis symptomatology, class identity conflict, dual non-belonging, cultural capital confidence, subjective social status, general distress, and parental socioeconomic status; 95% confidence intervals for the focal correlations were obtained via Fisher's z transformation. Third, quarter-life crisis symptomatology was regressed on class identity conflict, dual non-belonging, and general distress in a hierarchical multiple regression (Model 1), followed by the addition of cultural capital confidence and its interaction with class identity conflict (Model 2); all continuous variables entering the interaction term were mean-centered prior to computing the product term, following standard moderated regression practice. Standardized coefficients and their 95% confidence intervals were computed by z -standardizing all variables prior to estimation. The increment in variance accounted for was tested with an F -change test, and model-level effect sizes were expressed as Cohen's f^2 , with values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 conventionally denoting small, medium, and large effects (Cohen, 1988). To interpret the interaction, conditional (simple-slope) associations between class identity conflict and crisis symptomatology were estimated at low ($-1 SD$), average (mean), and high ($+1 SD$) levels of cultural capital confidence (Aiken & West, 1991). Fourth, construct overlap and common method variance were assessed in three ways: (a) variance inflation factors (VIFs) for the predictors in Model 1; (b) the marker-variable technique (Lindell & Whitney, 2001), in which the focal correlations were adjusted for the largest absolute correlation between the marker scale and any substantive variable ($r_M = .074$), used as a deliberately conservative estimate of method variance; and (c) inspection of the discriminant pattern of correlations, in particular whether the class identity scales were associated with crisis symptomatology but not with general distress. Fifth, the embedded vignette experiment was analyzed with independent-samples t -tests comparing the threat and control conditions on each dependent measure; because the group standard deviations were nearly identical, Welch-corrected tests yielded the same conclusions. Mean differences are reported with 95% confidence intervals, and Cohen's d was computed from the pooled standard deviation and reported with its 95% confidence interval. The significance threshold was set at $\alpha = .05$ for all tests.

RESULTS

Descriptive Findings

Descriptive statistics and internal consistency estimates for all multi-item scales are reported in Table 1. All scales showed good to excellent internal consistency (α range = .79–.92). Mean quarter-life crisis symptomatology ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 0.75$, on a 1–6 scale) indicated a moderate average level of crisis symptomatology with substantial variability across the sample.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Internal Consistency of Study Scales

Scale	Items (n)	M	SD	α
DCQ (Quarter-Life Crisis)	12	3.5	0.75	0.92
CIC (Class Identity Conflict)	12	3	0.61	0.92
DNB (Dual Non-Belonging)	12	2.99	0.62	0.92
CC (Cultural Capital Confidence)	8	3	0.63	0.89
SUB_CLASS (Subjective Social Status)	3	5.47	1.54	0.79
GD (General Distress)	4	3.02	0.66	0.8
MARKER (CFA Marker Variable)	4	2.99	0.67	0.79

Note. $N = 373$. M = arithmetic mean; SD = standard deviation; α = Cronbach's alpha. DCQ, CIC, DNB, CC, and GD were rated on 5- or 6-point response formats as described in the Method; SUB_CLASS was rated on a 10-point ladder format.



Correlational Findings

Pearson correlations among the study variables are reported in Table 2. Consistent with H1 and H2, class identity conflict ($r = .627$, 95% CI [.561, .685], $p < .001$) and dual non-belonging ($r = .621$, 95% CI [.554, .680], $p < .001$) were both substantially and positively correlated with quarter-life crisis symptomatology. General distress was moderately correlated with quarter-life crisis symptomatology ($r = .346$, 95% CI [.253, .432], $p < .001$); the two measures thus shared only about 12% of their variance, indicating that the DCQ captures content that is not reducible to non-specific negative affect. Cultural capital confidence was essentially uncorrelated with quarter-life crisis symptomatology at the bivariate level ($r = -.008$, 95% CI [-.109, .094], $p = .884$), as was subjective social status ($r = .038$, $p = .465$) and parental socioeconomic status ($r = -.075$, $p = .146$). Class identity conflict and dual non-belonging were themselves strongly intercorrelated ($r = .711$, 95% CI [.657, .758], $p < .001$), consistent with their conceptual overlap as related facets of class identity strain, while showing negligible associations with cultural capital confidence, subjective social status, general distress, and parental socioeconomic status (all $|r| \leq .10$).

Table 2

Pearson Correlation Matrix Among Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. DCQ	—						
2. CIC	.627**	—					
3. DNB	.621**	.711**	—				
4. CC	-0.008	0.071	-0.04	—			
5. SUB_CLASS	0.038	0.061	.103*	0.004	—		
6. GD	.346**	-0.01	-0.055	-0.083	0.003	—	
7. Class_Origin_SES	-0.075	-0.036	-0.061	0.065	-0.014	0.016	—

Note. $N = 373$. DCQ = Quarter-Life Crisis; CIC = Class Identity Conflict; DNB = Dual Non-Belonging; CC = Cultural Capital Confidence; SUB_CLASS = Subjective Social Status; GD = General Distress; Class_Origin_SES = parental occupational status index. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Assessment of Construct Overlap and Common Method Variance

Three indicators were used to gauge how far construct overlap and shared method variance might account for the substantive associations. First, VIFs in Model 1 were 2.03 for class identity conflict, 2.03 for dual non-belonging, and 1.00 for general distress, well below conventional thresholds; the two class identity measures were therefore strongly related but not statistically redundant. Second, after applying the Lindell and Whitney (2001) correction with the conservative estimate $rM = .074$, the correlations of crisis symptomatology with class identity conflict ($r_{adj} = .597$), dual non-belonging ($r_{adj} = .591$), and general distress ($r_{adj} = .294$) remained substantial and statistically significant (all $p < .001$). Third, the correlational pattern was discriminant: class identity conflict and dual non-belonging were strongly associated with crisis symptomatology but essentially unrelated to general distress ($r = -.010$ and $-.055$), whereas general distress showed a moderate association with crisis symptomatology. If the class identity scales merely indexed generalized negative affect or a uniform response tendency, they would be expected to correlate with the distress and marker scales as well. These checks reduce, but do not eliminate, the possibility that overlapping item content among the self-report scales inflates the associations; item-level confirmatory factor analysis was not conducted and is discussed as a limitation.

Main Analysis: Hierarchical Moderated Regression

Table 3 reports the hierarchical multiple regression of quarter-life crisis symptomatology on the study variables. In Model 1, class identity conflict, dual non-belonging, and general distress jointly accounted for



59.3% of the variance in crisis symptomatology, $R^2 = .593$, $F(3, 369) = 179.0$, $p < .001$, $f^2 = 1.46$. Class identity conflict ($\beta = .315$, 95% CI [.226, .403], $p < .001$) and dual non-belonging ($\beta = .426$, 95% CI [.337, .514], $p < .001$) each showed an independent positive association with crisis symptomatology after accounting for the other, and general distress remained significantly associated with crisis symptomatology ($\beta = .386$, 95% CI [.325, .448], $p < .001$) even after both class-identity variables were entered, consistent with H1a and H2a.

In Model 2, the addition of cultural capital confidence and its mean-centered interaction with class identity conflict raised the variance accounted for to 64.3%, $R^2 = .643$, $F(5, 367) = 132.4$, $p < .001$, an increase of $\Delta R^2 = .051$, $F_{change}(2, 367) = 26.2$, $p < .001$, $f^2 = 0.14$, an increment between small and medium in size. The conditional coefficient of cultural capital confidence (at mean class identity conflict) was not significant ($\beta = .003$, 95% CI [-.059, .066], $p = .918$), but the interaction between class identity conflict and cultural capital confidence was significant and negative ($\beta = -.203$, 95% CI [-.258, -.147], $p < .001$), consistent with H3. Simple-slope analysis clarified the form of the interaction (Table 3, lower panel). The conditional association between class identity conflict and crisis symptomatology was strongest at low cultural capital confidence (-1 SD: $\beta = .518$, 95% CI [.414, .622], $p < .001$), intermediate at average cultural capital confidence ($\beta = .315$, 95% CI [.226, .403], $p < .001$), and weaker but still positive at high cultural capital confidence ($+1$ SD: $\beta = .112$, 95% CI [.008, .216], $p = .036$). Within the model, the point estimate of the conditional association reaches zero only at approximately 1.55 SD above the mean of cultural capital confidence. Class identity conflict, dual non-belonging ($\beta = .426$, $p < .001$), and general distress ($\beta = .386$, $p < .001$) all remained significant in the full model.

The embedded vignette experiment provided an experimentally controlled complement to these correlational findings. Because condition was randomly assigned, its results permit a causal interpretation confined to the state ratings following the vignette; they do not establish the causal direction of the trait-level associations reported above. Participants assigned to the class-mobility threat scenario ($n = 178$) reported significantly higher perceived status threat ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.21$) than participants assigned to the neutral control scenario ($n = 195$, $M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.21$), $t(371) = 5.474$, $p < .001$, mean difference = 0.68, 95% CI [0.43, 0.93], $d = 0.568$, 95% CI [0.36, 0.78]. The threat condition likewise elicited significantly higher anticipated identity distress ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 1.19$) than the control condition ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.18$), $t(371) = 5.800$, $p < .001$, mean difference = 0.71, 95% CI [0.47, 0.95], $d = 0.601$, 95% CI [0.39, 0.81], consistent with H4. Both effects are of medium size. Taken together, the results are consistent with all four hypotheses, but the two strands of evidence differ in status: H1 to H3 rest on cross-sectional associations among self-reported trait measures, whereas H4 rests on an experimental comparison of state ratings in response to hypothetical scenarios.

Table 3

Hierarchical Moderated Regression of Quarter-Life Crisis Symptomatology on Class Identity Variables, General Distress, and Cultural Capital Confidence

Variable	β	p	95% CI
Model 1 ($R^2 = .593$, $F(3, 369) = 179.0$, $p < .001$, $f^2 = 1.46$)			
Class Identity Conflict (CIC)	0.315	< .001	[.226, .403]
Dual Non-Belonging (DNB)	0.426	< .001	[.337, .514]
General Distress (GD)	0.386	< .001	[.325, .448]
Model 2 ($R^2 = .643$, $\Delta R^2 = .051$, $F_{change}(2, 367) = 26.2$, $p < .001$, $f^2 = 0.14$)			
Class Identity Conflict (CIC)	0.315	< .001	[.226, .403]
Dual Non-Belonging (DNB)	0.426	< .001	[.337, .514]
General Distress (GD)	0.386	< .001	[.325, .448]
Cultural Capital Confidence (CC)	0.003	0.918	[-.059, .066]
CIC $\times$ CC (interaction)	-0.203	< .001	[-.258, -.147]
Conditional association of CIC at levels of CC (Model 2)			



CC low (-1 SD)	0.518	< .001	[.414, .622]
CC mean	0.315	< .001	[.226, .403]
CC high (+1 SD)	0.112	0.036	[.008, .216]

Note. $N = 373$. Coefficients are standardized regression coefficients (β) from ordinary least squares regression; variables entering the interaction term were mean-centered prior to computing the product term. CI = 95% confidence interval for β . Dependent variable: quarter-life crisis symptomatology (DCQ). f^2 = Cohen's f^2 for the full model (Model 1) and for the increment from Model 1 to Model 2 (Model 2). Conditional associations are simple slopes of CIC at one standard deviation below the mean, at the mean, and one standard deviation above the mean of CC.

DISCUSSION

Summary and Theoretical Integration

The present study examined the association between class identity conflict, dual non-belonging, and quarter-life crisis symptomatology among emerging adults, and tested whether cultural capital confidence conditions the strength of this association. Class identity conflict and dual non-belonging were both substantially and independently associated with crisis symptomatology, together with general distress accounting for close to two-thirds of its variance. Consistent with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and with Jetten et al.'s (2008) finding that the costs of individual mobility depend on social identity factors rather than on the status transition itself, the present data suggest that it is the unresolved, conflictual character of class identity – rather than class position itself, which was unrelated to crisis symptomatology in this sample – that is associated with developmental distress in emerging adulthood.

The moderating role of cultural capital confidence is consistent with, and extends, Bourdieu's (1984) account of cultural capital and Stephens et al.'s (2012, 2014) demonstrations that the costs of cultural mismatch can be reduced when institutional norms are reframed or the role of background is made explicit. The interaction observed here indicates that class identity conflict is not uniformly associated with crisis symptomatology: among participants who reported high confidence in their command of the tacit norms of professional and educational settings, the association was markedly attenuated, although it remained positive at one standard deviation above the mean. One reading of this pattern is that cultural capital confidence functions as a coping resource that allows individuals to hold a conflicted class identity with less developmental distress. This reading should not be treated as established, however, and the present data do not justify describing cultural capital confidence as protective. At least four alternative explanations are compatible with the same pattern. First, the direction of association may be reversed: lower crisis symptomatology may make it easier to feel confident in unfamiliar settings. Second, an unmeasured third variable, such as self-esteem, neuroticism, or social support, may be associated both with cultural capital confidence and with a weaker link between class identity conflict and crisis symptomatology. Third, the interaction may partly reflect measurement properties, such as response styles or restricted variance at the upper end of the scales, rather than a substantive buffering process. Fourth, because the moderation has not yet been replicated in an independent sample, its magnitude may be overestimated. Notably, cultural capital confidence showed no meaningful bivariate association with crisis symptomatology on its own; its relevance emerged only as a conditional association with class identity conflict, underscoring the value of testing moderation rather than relying on bivariate associations alone.

It is important to keep the two strands of evidence apart. The survey findings describe how self-reported class identity conflict, dual non-belonging, cultural capital confidence, and crisis symptomatology co-vary across individuals at a single point in time; they do not show that class identity conflict gives rise to crisis symptomatology, nor that a change in cultural capital confidence would alter it. The vignette experiment, by contrast, permits a causal inference, but only for a narrow outcome: reading a hypothetical class-mobility threat scenario, compared with a neutral scenario, raised immediate state ratings of perceived status threat and anticipated identity distress. These ratings referred to an imagined situation, were collected directly after the manipulation, and were not linked to participants' own class trajectories or to the DCQ. The experiment theref-

ore suggests that class-identity threat is a psychologically meaningful stimulus even outside the context of a respondent's own biography, but it does not show that real-life class transitions bring about quarter-life crisis symptomatology, and it does not speak to the direction of the trait-level associations.

The magnitude of the associations reported here also warrants caution. Class identity conflict and dual non-belonging were strongly intercorrelated ($r = .711$), and both correlated above .60 with crisis symptomatology; together with general distress they accounted for 59.3% of its variance. Associations of this size between self-report scales are commonly read as a sign of construct or item overlap rather than of a strong substantive association. Items of the three scales share content on feeling torn, out of place, and not where one should be in life, so part of the shared variance may reflect criterion contamination. The checks reported in the Results provide some reassurance: VIFs of about 2 indicate that the two class identity measures were not redundant, the marker-adjusted correlations remained close to .60, and neither class identity scale was associated with general distress. Likewise, the fact that general distress shared only about 12% of its variance with crisis symptomatology supports the view that quarter-life crisis symptomatology, as measured by the DCQ, is distinguishable from non-specific negative affect, although the brief four-item distress marker did not cover broader forms of distress such as depressive symptoms. Nevertheless, confirmatory factor analyses at the item level are needed before the magnitude of these associations is interpreted substantively.

Practical Implications

At the individual level, these findings suggest that counselors and therapists working with socially mobile emerging adults may benefit from explicitly addressing class identity as a distinct clinical theme, separate from occupational or relational identity concerns, and from building interventions that strengthen a client's confidence in navigating unfamiliar cultural codes rather than focusing solely on symptom reduction. At the institutional level, universities and employers that recruit substantial numbers of first-generation or upwardly mobile individuals might consider structured onboarding or mentoring programs that explicitly normalize cultural mismatch, following the logic of the difference-education intervention of Stephens et al. (2014). For the specific life phase under study, student support services and early-career professional networks may be well placed to offer peer-based spaces in which class identity conflict can be discussed openly, which may lessen the isolating quality of dual non-belonging that was closely associated with crisis symptomatology in the present data; these are hypotheses for practice that require evaluation.

These implications should be pursued cautiously given the study's limitations, discussed below, but the pattern of results is at minimum consistent with the view that interventions targeting a sense of competence and belonging in unfamiliar class contexts – rather than interventions aimed narrowly at symptom management – may be worth testing in future applied work. Career services in particular occupy a structurally advantageous position to address this theme, since they already engage emerging adults during the specific transition – from education into the labor market – in which class identity conflict and quarter-life crisis symptomatology are both likely to be most acute.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. First, and most fundamentally, the correlational component of the design is cross-sectional, and cross-sectional data cannot establish the temporal or causal ordering of class identity conflict, cultural capital confidence, and quarter-life crisis symptomatology. A model in which the roles of crisis symptomatology and class identity conflict are reversed is statistically equivalent and therefore fits the data equally well. The present findings thus constrain but do not identify the direction of association. Emerging adults in the midst of a quarter-life crisis may, for instance, reinterpret their class biography as more conflicted.

Second, the sample was recruited through Reddit communities using a non-probabilistic, self-selected procedure, which limits generalisability in several respects. Reddit's user base differs from the general population, for example in age, gender, and national composition, and the English-language survey restricts the sample to English-speaking users. Because gender, ethnicity, country of residence, education, and employment

status were not recorded, the extent to which the sample departs from the broader population of emerging adults cannot be quantified, and the meaning of class identity is likely to vary across national contexts. In addition, individuals who chose to participate in a study explicitly framed around social background and life transitions may differ systematically from non-participants, for instance in their level of reflective engagement with class-related themes, which may inflate the observed associations relative to a representative sample. Finally, the age range of 21 to 29 years excludes the youngest emerging adults, many of whom are still in education, as well as adults in their early thirties, for whom quarter-life crisis episodes have also been described (Robinson et al., 2013); the findings should therefore not be extrapolated beyond this age band without further evidence.

Third, all study variables were assessed with self-report instruments completed in a single sitting. Self-report measures of psychological constructs such as crisis symptomatology and identity conflict are subject to introspective limits and social desirability, and no behavioral or informant-based corroboration was collected.

Fourth, because all substantive variables were measured concurrently via the same self-report method, common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003) cannot be fully ruled out as a source of the observed associations, notwithstanding the negligible correlations between the unrelated marker variable and all substantive constructs, which argue against a strong uniform method artifact. The marker-variable technique only detects method variance that is shared with the marker and may underestimate method variance specific to related content, such as overlapping item wording among the class identity scales and the DCQ.

Fifth, the present models included a single moderator, cultural capital confidence, and a single control variable, general distress. Other plausible moderators – including social support, family cohesion, resilience, and personality traits such as neuroticism – were not assessed and may account for additional variance in the association between class identity conflict and crisis symptomatology.

It is also worth noting that neither cultural capital confidence nor the status indicators showed a bivariate association with crisis symptomatology. Subjective social status, which has been associated with health outcomes independently of objective status in other work (Cohen et al., 2008), was unrelated to crisis symptomatology here, as was parental socioeconomic status. This pattern is consistent with the view that the subjective, conflictual character of class identity, rather than class position as such, is what co-occurs with crisis symptomatology, and that cultural capital confidence was relevant here only as a moderator of class identity conflict rather than as a direct correlate.

Outlook

Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs that track class identity conflict and quarter-life crisis symptomatology across the transition into and through emerging adulthood, which would allow for cross-lagged or panel analyses capable of adjudicating between competing directional accounts. Experimental intervention studies that manipulate cultural capital confidence directly, for example through brief difference-education interventions modeled on Stephens et al. (2014), would help clarify whether the conditional association identified here reflects a manipulable psychological resource. Qualitative work capturing the micro-dynamics of class identity negotiation in daily life would complement the present quantitative approach, and future quantitative studies would benefit from differentiating occupational contexts, since the salience of class identity conflict may vary substantially across sectors and organizational cultures.

Taken together, the present findings suggest that class identity may be a substantive psychological correlate of quarter-life crisis symptomatology rather than a peripheral demographic detail. Emerging adults who experience their class identity as conflicted, and who feel they belong fully to neither their class of origin nor their class of destination, report markedly elevated crisis symptomatology, an association that holds beyond generalized distress and that is weaker, though still present, among those confident in their command of middle-class cultural codes. These results suggest taking class identity seriously as a clinical and institutional concern in work with socially mobile young adults, while the cross-sectional design leaves open exactly how this association unfolds over time. Longitudinal and experimental extensions of the present design offer the



clearest path toward resolving that open question.

STATEMENTS AND DECLARATIONS

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The author had no financial support for the conception, conduct, analysis, or write-up of the study.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no competing financial or non-financial interests that could be perceived to have influenced the work reported in this article.

Ethics Approval

The study consisted of an anonymous, non-interventional online survey involving no deception, no identifiable data, and no vulnerable populations. In accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013) and applicable institutional guidance, anonymous behavioral survey research of this kind does not require formal ethics committee approval; the study was nonetheless conducted in full accordance with the ethical principles set out in the Declaration of Helsinki.

Informed Consent

All participants received written information about the purpose of the study, the voluntary and anonymous nature of participation, the approximate time required, and their right to withdraw at any point without providing a reason and without penalty, prior to beginning the survey. Submission of the completed survey was treated as informed consent to participate.

Data Availability Statement

The dataset and analysis code are available from the author on reasonable request. The hypotheses and analytic constructs were prespecified prior to data analysis.

Author Contributions

Dr. Dr. Sora Pazer is the sole author of this article and was solely responsible for conceptualization, theoretical framework development, instrument selection and adaptation, recruitment, data collection, statistical analysis, interpretation of results, and drafting and revision of the manuscript.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank the anonymous participants who volunteered their time to complete this survey.

Use of Generative AI

Generative artificial intelligence tools were used in a supporting capacity for language editing and structural formatting of this manuscript. All scientific content, statistical analyses, interpretations, and conclusions are the sole responsibility of the author.

REFERENCES

1. Aiken, L. S., & West, S. G. (1991). *Multiple regression: Testing and interpreting interactions*. Sage.
2. Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), 469–480. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.5.469>



3. Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste* (R. Nice, Trans.). Harvard University Press.
4. Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood Press.
5. Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences* (2nd ed.). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
6. Cohen, S., Alper, C. M., Doyle, W. J., Adler, N., Treanor, J. J., & Turner, R. B. (2008). Objective and subjective socioeconomic status and susceptibility to the common cold. *Health Psychology*, 27(2), 268–274. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0278-6133.27.2.268>
7. Cronbach, L. J. (1951). Coefficient alpha and the internal structure of tests. *Psychometrika*, 16(3), 297–334. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02310555>
8. Friedman, S. (2016). Habitus clivé and the emotional imprint of social mobility. *The Sociological Review*, 64(1), 129–147. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12280>
9. Furlong, A., & Cartmel, F. (2007). *Young people and social change: New perspectives* (2nd ed.). Open University Press.
10. Jetten, J., Iyer, A., Tsivrikos, D., & Young, B. M. (2008). When is individual mobility costly? The role of economic and social identity factors. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 38(5), 866–879. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.471>
11. Kraus, M. W., Piff, P. K., & Keltner, D. (2011). Social class as culture: The convergence of resources and rank in the social realm. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 20(4), 246–250. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721411414654>
12. Lareau, A. (2011). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life* (2nd ed.). University of California Press.
13. Lindell, M. K., & Whitney, D. J. (2001). Accounting for common method variance in cross-sectional research designs. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86(1), 114–121. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.86.1.114>
14. Manstead, A. S. R. (2018). The psychology of social class: How socioeconomic status impacts thought, feelings, and behaviour. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 57(2), 267–291. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12251>
15. Petrov, N., Robinson, O. C., & Arnett, J. J. (2022). The Developmental Crisis Questionnaire (DCQ-12): Psychometric development and validation. *Journal of Adult Development*, 29(4), 265–278. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10804-022-09403-w>
16. Podsakoff, P. M., MacKenzie, S. B., Lee, J.-Y., & Podsakoff, N. P. (2003). Common method biases in behavioral research: A critical review of the literature and recommended remedies. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 88(5), 879–903. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.88.5.879>
17. Reay, D. (2005). Beyond consciousness? The psychic landscape of social class. *Sociology*, 39(5), 911–928. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038505058372>
18. Robinson, O. C. (2015). Emerging adulthood, early adulthood and quarter-life crisis: Updating Erikson for the 21st century. In R. Žukauskienė (Ed.), *Emerging adulthood in a European context* (pp. 17–30). Routledge.
19. Robinson, O. C., Wright, G. R. T., & Smith, J. A. (2013). The holistic phase model of early adult crisis. *Journal of Adult Development*, 20(1), 27–37. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10804-013-9153-y>
20. Sennett, R., & Cobb, J. (1972). *The hidden injuries of class*. Knopf.
21. Stephens, N. M., Fryberg, S. A., Markus, H. R., Johnson, C. S., & Covarrubias, R. (2012). Unseen disadvantage: How American universities' focus on independence undermines the academic performance of first-generation college students. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102(6), 1178–1197. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027143>
22. Stephens, N. M., Hamedani, M. G., & Destin, M. (2014). Closing the social-class achievement gap: A difference-education intervention improves first-generation students' academic performance and all students' college transition. *Psychological Science*, 25(4), 943–953. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797613518349>
23. Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47). Brooks/Cole.



24. Twenge, J. M. (2017). *iGen: Why today's super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious, more tolerant, less happy – and completely unprepared for adulthood – and what that means for the rest of us*. Atria Books.
25. World Medical Association. (2013). World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki: Ethical principles for medical research involving human subjects. *JAMA*, 310(20), 2191–2194.
<https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2013.281053>