

## Quarterlife Crisis in Popular Literature: Riffaterrian Semiotics Analysis on Neck Deep's '*All Distortions Are Intentional*' Album

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### ABSTRACT

*All Distortions Are Intentional* is an album from Neck Deep, which was released in 2020. The album consists of twelve songs that explore various themes, including the quarterlife crisis phenomenon. The research seeks to analyse the depiction of the quarterlife crisis phenomenon as experienced by the character through the theory of Michael Riffaterre's semiotics theory, emphasising two key approaches: 1) heuristic and hermeneutic reading, and 2) indirect expression. This research employs a qualitative approach, emphasising content analysis. This research employed content analysis to analyse the song lyrics from *All Distortions Are Intentional* album. This research identifies that the depiction of quarterlife crisis in *All Distortions Are Intentional* album presents in only three songs: Sonderland, Telling Stories, and Sick Joke. Those songs depict the quarterlife crisis through hermeneutic reading and indirect expression. Displacing of meaning consists of four data, while distorting of meaning and creating of meaning consist of three data that depict the quarterlife crisis phenomenon.

**Keywords:** *Album, All Distortions Are Intentional, Quarterlife Crisis, Riffaterrian Semiotics, Song Lyrics*

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### INTRODUCTION

The quarterlife crisis (QLC) is a widespread subject of discussion in this age of globalisation. Rapid technological advances facilitate easy access to various information, including social media posts that illustrate pathways to achieve success at a young age. The posts discussing effortless success can create feelings of lacking among fresh graduates from college who have not yet secured job or built-up relationships. Individuals may experience a sense of social exclusion when observing others frequently sharing their achievements on social media, such as securing ideal job, finding adequate partners, and establishing stable lifestyles. Individuals who perceive themselves as excluded may experience anxiety, insecurity, and ambiguity, leading them to question the value of their lives. Individuals experiencing these feelings are in the quarterlife crisis phase.

In 2001, American authors Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner developed and popularised the term "quarterlife crisis (QLC)" in their book, "Quarterlife Crisis: The Unique Challenges of Life in Your Twenties." The book examines the psychological challenges experienced by individuals in their twenties as they explore the transition to adulthood, typically occurring after college graduation and the starting point of their careers. The crisis will lead to anxiety regarding future prospects and provoke reflection on life choices. Their lives will be significantly impacted, leading to feelings of isolation from peers and anxiety to build relationships – whether friendships, romantic relationships, or familial bonds – while also enhancing doubts about acceptance by society. The most serious negative impact is the potential of going down into despair about being alive, which can potentially lead to suicide.

The phenomenon of QLC is increasingly widespread in social media, discussion forums, and various literary works that feature it as the main theme. In this present era, songs represent a widely accessible literary works and one of the popular literatures, due to the lyrics displaying a structure similar to poetry. Rosita argues that song lyrics constitute a literary work that displays features similar to poetry, conveys personal emotions and thoughts, and is linked to composed music (2019, p. 61). Song lyrics represent a form of popular literature, serving as a contemporary medium for expression. Songwriters convey various elements in song lyrics, including the expression of personal and communal emotions, dissatisfaction against government authorities, adaptation from prior literary works, and reflection on current social issues.

Neck Deep, a band hailing from Wrexham, Wales, discusses social issues in their lyrics. Neck Deep is a pop punk band that emerged in 2012 with the release of a mini album titled "Rain in July". Neck Deep has released five albums, each featuring distinct themes. Themes represent government dissatisfaction, complex relationships including friendship, romance, and family, personal challenges experienced by youth, and social issues. Their fourth album, "*All Distortions Are Intentional*", released by Hopeless Records on 24 July 2020 explores themes of personal struggles experienced by young individual, such as problems with family, society, and romance. Those problems that experienced by the character in the album indirectly indicates a depiction of the phenomenon of quarterlife crisis. The depiction of the quarterlife crisis on the album is still an argument, therefore a deeper analysis is needed to prove the depiction of the quarterlife crisis phenomenon.

Analysing signs and symbols in song lyrics requires a semiotic framework relevant to literary analysis. The semiotic theory developed by Michael Riffaterre examines the relationship between signs and meaning in literary works, including song lyrics. This theory clarifies the use of language, narrative structure, and themes within song lyrics. Riffaterre outlines four key theories in his book "Semiotics of Poetry" (1978): 1) Heuristic and Hermeneutic Reading, 2) Indirect Expression, 3) Matrix, Model, and Variant, and 4) Hypogram. This research will focus on two of Riffaterre's theories: 1) Heuristic and Hermeneutic Readings and 2) Indirect Expression.

A comparison with previous research is essential to prove the novelty of this research. There are two previous researches utilise Michael Riffaterre's semiotics theory. The first research, written by Yanti Sariasih and Agus Yulianto, has the title "Analysis of the Meaning of Mantra Ajian Jaran Goyang" (2018). This research focusses on a mantra from the Indonesian region of Java. While the explanation of the mantra is clear and understandable, this research focusses solely on a single conceptual framework within Riffaterrian semiotics, specifically heuristic and hermeneutic reading theories. Consequently, this approach is poorly comprehensive, as it is limited to one conceptual framework.

Another research utilising Riffaterrian semiotics as its main conceptual framework has the title "Reading Poverty in Modernist Literature: Riffaterrian Semiotic Analysis on T.S. Eliot's Morning at the Window." This research was written by Nestiani Hutami and Diaz Adrian in 2021. This research examines poetry as its primary subject, differing from previous research that concentrated on mantras. This research analyses the social realities depicted in T.S. Eliot's poem "Morning at the Window." This research focusses on three theories: indirect expression, heuristic and hermeneutic reading, and matrix. The research is insufficiently complete due to the lack of detail in the explanation of the three theories. The methodologies used in this research are poorly explained.

This research presents a novelty, defining itself from previous research that apply Riffaterrian semiotic theory primarily to poetry rather than song lyrics. In contrast, this research will examine song lyrics, specifically from Neck Deep's album, *All Distortions Are Intentional*. This research will identify the depiction of the quarterlife crisis phenomenon in *All Distortions Are Intentional* album through two theories of Michael Riffaterre's semiotics theory: 1) Heuristic and Hermeneutic Readings, and 2) Indirect Expression.

## Literature Review

### *Riffaterrian Semiotics*

Semiotics is a conceptual framework that analyses signs and symbols, focussing on the meanings it communicates. Semiotics in science involves the analysis of signs, symbols, and the processes of signification. It analyses the processes by which meaning is generated and communicated through various forms of representation, such as language, imagery, gestures, and additional communicative modalities. Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure are acknowledged as the primary figures in the development of semiotics. Both individuals made substantial contributions to the discipline in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The theory of semiotics subsequently developed significantly and now includes various subfields, one of which is Riffaterrian semiotics. Michael Riffaterre introduced the concept of semiotics that focuses to analyse literary works, including song lyrics, in his book "Semiotics of Poetry" (1978). This book demonstrates his integration of literary analysis and semiotic theory. It highlights the significance of indicators in understanding poetry and the interpretative processes required. Riffaterre's method developed in three separate stages: stylistic, semiotic, and intertextual. During his semiotic phase, he drew upon Saussure's theories regarding language structure and Peirce's concepts of signs. These concepts assisted him in developing his perspectives on the communication of meaning in texts through intertextual connections and poetic structures. Both poetry and song lyrics have distinct grammatical structures, as explained by Riffaterre in the following quotation:

"The language of poetry differs from common linguistic usage – this much the most unsophisticated reader senses instinctively. Yet, while it is true that poetry often employs words excluded from common usage and has its own special grammar, even a grammar not valid beyond the narrow compass of a given poem, it may also happen that poetry uses the same words and the same grammar as everyday language." (Riffaterre, 1978, p. 1)

Several theories are available for the analysis of semiotics in poetry and song lyrics, as previously mentioned. Riffaterre presents four theories for the analysis of poetry and song lyrics in his work, *Semiotics of Poetry*. Two of the four theories include: 1) Heuristic and Hermeneutic Readings, and 2) Indirect Expression.

### *Heuristic and Hermeneutic Readings*

The initial theory involves the reading stage. Riffaterre categorises the reading process into two distinct stages: 1) Heuristic Reading and 2) Hermeneutic Reading. Both stages are essential preliminary steps for understanding a poem. The initial phase involves heuristic reading, wherein the reader engages with the poem verbally and focusses on its linguistic components. As stated in this quotation:

"This first, heuristic reading is also where the first interpretation takes place, since it is during this reading that meaning is apprehended. The reader's input is his linguistic competence, which includes an assumption that language is referential - and at this stage words do indeed seem to relate first of all to things." (Riffaterre, 1978, p. 5)

Heuristic reading represents the preliminary stage in understanding the significance of a literary work, especially poetry, focussing on language structure and linguistic conventions. Readers aim to understand meaning in a denotative or literal meaning, following established linguistic conventions. This involves the analysis of words, sentences, and syntactic structures to determine clear and direct meanings.

In contrast, hermeneutic reading represents the second stage of reading, allowing the reader to explore the deeper meanings established within the literary text. Related to the following quotation:

"The second stage is that of retroactive reading. This is the time for a second interpretation, for the truly hermeneutic reading. As he progresses through the text, the reader remembers what he has just read and modifies his understanding of it in the light of what he is now decoding. As he works forward from start to finish, he is reviewing, revising, comparing backwards." (Riffaterre, 1978, pp. 5-6)

This approach encourages the reader to seek not only the literal meaning but also to consider the symbolism, implications, and nuances inherent in the language. This aids in uncovering hidden messages that may not be easily noticeable to direct analysis.

### **Indirect Expression**

Indirect expression is the process of conveying meaning through figurative language and various semiotic processes. This contrasts with the ability to convey meaning directly through words. This theory is essential to Riffaterre's semiotic theory, highlighting the complex and varied meanings of literary texts. Riffaterre describes poetry as a mode of literary criticism. Riffaterre asserts that indirect expression occurs under three conditions: 1) displacing of meaning, 2) distorting of meaning, and 3) creating of meaning.

Riffaterre (1978, p. 2) claimed that "Displacing, when the sign shifts from one meaning to another, when one word 'stands for' another, as happens with metaphor and metonymy." The statement implies the displacing of meaning occurs when a word, sentence, or phrase in song lyrics conveys an alternative meaning. This relates specifically to figurative language, including: 1) simile, 2) metaphor, 3) metonymy, and 4) hyperbole. 1) Simile is a figurative language technique that implies a direct comparison between two distinct entities utilising a conjunction such as "like" or "as." 2) Metaphor is a direct comparison between two distinct entities that does not utilise conjunctions such as "like" or "as." 3) Metonymy is a figurative language that utilises one term or phrase to replace another with which it shares a close physical or intellectual connection. 4) Hyperbole is a figurative language used to highlight or dramatize a concept or emotion by exaggerating reality.

The second indirect expression is "distorting of meaning", which refers to the alteration or deviation of meaning from standard language in literary texts, as illustrated by the statement, "Distorting, when there is ambiguity, contradiction, or nonsense." (Riffaterre, 1978, p. 2). Ambiguity refers to the use of language that allows various interpretations. Words or phrases can have several meanings, enabling readers to assign interpretations based on their personal associations. Contradiction refers to the incorporation of opposing statements within a text, which can provoke critical thought and reflection in the reader. Nonsense refers to the use of language that seems irrational or illogical, which may evoke specific effects and encourage readers to explore the deeper meaning behind the words.

The last indirect expression utilises "creating of meaning," referring to the process through which readers extract significance from texts without direct or explicit meaning. In this quotation, Riffaterre states:

"Creating, when textual space serves as a principle of organization for making signs out of linguistic items that may not be meaningful otherwise (for instance, symmetry, rhyme, or semantic equivalences between positional homologues in a stanza)," (Riffaterre, 1978, p. 2)

Several factors can contribute to creating of meaning, including: 1) symmetry, 2) rhyme, and 3) homologues. 1) Symmetry refers to the balance and coherence among components in the text that create a coherent structure. 2) Rhyme refers to the repetition of sounds at the end of words across different lines. 3) Homologues refer to the connection or similarity of elements within the text that may assist in meaning construction.

### **Quarterlife Crisis (QLC)**

The quarterlife crisis is a contemporary phenomenon observed in early adulthood, particularly between the ages of twenty and thirty. Robbins and Wilner, in "Quarterlife Crisis - The Unique Challenges of Life in Your Twenties" (2001, p. 2), define it as the transitional phase from academia to the professional realm. This transition is most pronounced in individuals in their twenties, though it may extend from late adolescence to the mid-thirties.

Robbins and Wilner draw a comparison between the quarterlife crisis and the midlife crisis. According to this quote, "The quarterlife crisis and the midlife crisis stem from the same basic problem, but the resulting panic couldn't be more opposite. At their cores, both the quarterlife crisis and the midlife crisis are about a major life change." (Robbins & Wilner, 2001, p. 2), whereas quarterlife crisis and midlife crisis originate from similar underlying reasons,



their effects differ significantly. A midlife crisis generates anxiety in middle-aged individuals, leading to reflections on their past and the alignment of their current existence with previous goals. In contrast to a midlife crisis, a quarter-life crisis has a more significant impact, as individuals facing it frequently lack preparation, leading to deep feelings of despair concerning their careers, relationships—romantic, platonic, familial—and, ultimately, their existence. This results from the multiple possibilities accessible upon entering early adulthood. This assertion aligns with this quote:

“The extreme uncertainty that twentysomethings experience after graduation occurs because what was once a solid line that they could follow throughout their series of educational institutions has now disintegrated into millions of different options. The sheer number of possibilities can certainly inspire hope — that is why people say that twentysomethings have their whole lives ahead of them. But the endless array of decisions can also make a recent graduate feel utterly lost.” (Robbins & Wilner, 2001, p. 3)

## METHOD

The research utilises a qualitative method. Ugwu and Eze state that qualitative research involves the collection and analysis of non-numerical data, such as text, video, or audio, to achieve a deeper understanding of concepts, perspectives, or experiences (2023, p. 20). The main objective is to provide a clear and thorough description of specific situations, events, or phenomena without modifying or affecting the current circumstances. The researcher aims to understand the significance from the perspective of the research topic, rather than simply quantifying specific elements of the phenomenon. Grounded theory serves as the methodological framework for qualitative research, as noted by Khan (2014, p. 225). Understanding a comprehensive and significant meaning requires critical thinking, which is essential for this type of research. Moreover, he claimed that societal issues are typically acknowledged through this approach. This research examines the branch of literature that produces literary criticism. Literary criticism encompasses the comparison, assessment, analysis, and interpretation of literary texts.

This research utilises song lyrics from Neck Deep's *All Distortions Are Intentional* album, which serves as the main object of the research. This research utilises content analysis as the method for data collection and analysis. Content analysis is a research method used to systematically interpret and analyse various forms of communication, including text, images, audio, and video. This strategy allows researchers to identify patterns, themes, and meanings within the content under analysis. The researcher will analyse the lyrics of Neck Deep's album, *All Distortions Are Intentional*. The following steps detail the data collection process conducted by the researcher: 1. Listening to songs from Neck Deep's *All Distortions Are Intentional* album through the streaming service, that is Spotify. 2. Discovering song lyrics of the album online, and 3. Finding song lyrics of the album from the website, that is Genius. 4. Collecting the lyrics of the album.

After collecting the lyrics of the album, the next step is to analyse the lyrics of each song. The researcher will proceed with the following stages while examining the lyrics of the album: 1. Reading the lyrics of each songs several times, 2. Gaining an understanding of the lyrics, 3. Reading and analysing the lyrics of each song through heuristic and hermeneutic reading stages. 4. Recognising the indirect expressions included in each song, 5. Describing the findings of the analysis conducted by the researcher on the song lyrics from Neck Deep's album, *All Distortions Are Intentional*.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The lyrics from Neck Deep's album, *All Distortions Are Intentional*, depict a social phenomenon related to quarterlife crisis experienced by a character, as well as a narrator. The album illustrates an individual's being trapped in QLC phase. The analysis of QLC will be conducted through the examination of song lyrics of the album utilising the framework of Riffaterrian semiotics. This will involve 1) heuristic and hermeneutic readings, and 2) indirect

*Quarterlife Crisis in Popular Literature: Riffaterrian Semiotics Analysis on Neck Deep's 'All Distortions Are Intentional' Album* expression. This section presents the results and discussion of the analysis conducted by the researcher.

### **The Depiction of Quarterlife Crisis in Neck Deep's *All Distortions Are Intentional* Album Through Heuristic and Hermeneutic Readings**

According to Riffaterre, there are two stages of reading song lyrics: 1) Heuristic reading and 2) Hermeneutic reading. The two stages of reading represent the preliminary steps in the analysis of song lyrics.

#### ***Heuristic Readings***

Heuristic reading constitutes the initial stage of understanding song lyrics, wherein readers engage with the lyrics on a literal meaning. Riffaterre (1978, p. 5) posits that the reader's input includes linguistic competence, implying that language functions referentially; at this stage, words primarily seem to connect with objects. At this stage, the reader aims to understand the explicit meaning of the words in the text, avoiding from interpreting any hidden or implicit meanings. Heuristic reading allows the reader to figure out the surface structure of the text, including grammar, vocabulary, and the explicit meanings of sentences. This analysis presents heuristic readings of Neck Deep's album, *All Distortions Are Intentional*.

*All Distortions Are Intentional* album does not address the phenomenon of quarterlife crisis through heuristic reading. The album consists of twelve songs, each narrating the personal struggles of a character named Jett, set in a faraway place referred to as "Sonderland." This place is introduced in the first song, titled "Sonderland," specifically in the lyrics:

*Far away, as far as the eye can see  
Is a place that I don't understand  
A place we know as Sonderland* (Neck Deep, *Sonderland*, 2020)

The lyrics presents the place of Jett's living, characterised by its being far away, rendering it hard to understand to him. The place is referred to as Sonderland. The next songs, especially "Fall" and "Lowlife" depict a scenario in which Jett meets a woman named Alice. It can be seen in the following lyrics:

*Trust me, it's been a little slice of heaven  
I hope we get together again  
And then the next time we meet  
I swear I won't be such a freak  
We can do ordinary shit* (Neck Deep, *Fall*, 2020)

*My dreamworld is Alice and me  
My life is one big jamboree* (Neck Deep, *Lowlife*, 2020)

The lyrics introduce that Jett met a woman named Alice. Furthermore, it is shown that Jett is unemployed, leading him to the realisation that he and Alice are unequal and have to part ways. This aligns with the lyrics from the song "Telling Stories" and "When You Know" specifically in the lyrics:

*Ten years standing at the bus stop  
Never had a real job  
Never had anything  
One more night dying on the inside  
Dying trying to get it right  
Is anybody listening?* (Neck Deep, *Telling Stories*, 2020)

*Break free  
Oh no, not literally  
'Cause you've got work at eight  
And I've got friends who hate me* (Neck Deep, *When You Know*, 2020)

The lyrics "Never had a real job" illustrate that Jett does not have a job; whereas Alice has a job, as per the lyrics "'Cause you've got work at eight". This results in Jett experiencing stress and a lost enthusiasm for life, as conveyed in the songs "Quarry" and "Sick Joke". Both songs examine Jett's depression. Specifically in the lyrics:

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*Have you ever lost a real friend?*

*Have you ever sat on messages you've written them but can't send?*

*All alone in your apartment*

*Thinking 'bout when it wasn't all so hard and now* (Neck Deep, *Quarry*, 2020)

*And most days it all feels the same*

*I can't tell no difference in pleasure and pain*

*And it makes me sick, sick joke*

*Like life is shoving its fingers to the back of my throat* (Neck Deep, *Sick Joke*, 2020)

The lyrics of the song “Quarry” indicate that Jett is wondering various issues following his separation from Alice. Conversely, the lyrics of “Sick Joke” reveal his profound dissatisfaction with his life. However he expresses gratitude for meeting Alice, who enhanced his awareness and enthusiasm for improving his life. This is articulated in the song “What Took You So Long?” through the lyrics:

*And I was not me until I*

*Discovered you for the first time* (Neck Deep, *What Took You So Long?*, 2020)

Jett believes that his meet with Alice has led to personal improvement and a transformation from his previous self. The subsequent songs, “Empty House,” “Little Dove,” and “I Revolve (Around You),” illustrate Jett's profound love for Alice. It can be seen in the following lyrics:

*There can be no other way*

*When i love you so much* (Neck Deep, *Empty House*, 2020)

*My little love, keep looking up*

*Better days are yet to come* (Neck Deep, *Little Dove*, 2020)

*We drift like lonely planets and feel like, like cold moons*

*Like satellites drawn to your gravity*

*I revolve around you* (Neck Deep, *I Revolve (Around You)*, 2020)

The album concludes with “Pushing Daisies,” which depicts the end of Jett's journey, illustrating his acceptance that he and Alice cannot unite. Conversely, he accepts his existence, as indicated by the lyrics:

*You gotta let it go, you gotta let it be*

*And know that I can't change the world*

*And that's just how it is* (Neck Deep, *Pushing Daisies*, 2020)

In the lyrics, Jett accepts his circumstances, including his separation with Alice and his life situation. Jett believes that he is unable to control past events and must simply let it go.

In a heuristic reading, the album *All Distortions Are Intentional* solely tells the personal struggle of Jett. His problems with his environment are detailed in the album, and at the same time, he is also attempting to find a job and a relationship. The album provides an overview of his situation. Consequently, this provides indication that Jett is currently experiencing the quarterlife crisis phase. The hermeneutic reading stage, which is the second reading stage, will be utilised in order to conduct the deeper analysis on the depiction of QLC in the album.

### **Hermeneutic Readings**

Hermeneutic reading represents the second stage of textual analysis, enabling the reader to investigate the deeper meanings present in the literary work. Riffaterre (1978, pp. 5-6) asserts that as readers advance through a text, they retain previous information and modify their understanding in light of new insights. This process encompasses reviewing, revising, and comparing as the reader progresses from the beginning to the end of the text. This approach enables the reader to explore not only the literal meaning but also the symbolism, implications, and nuances inherent in the language. During the heuristic stage, readers understand only the surface elements of the text; conversely, in hermeneutic reading, they analyse and interpret the complex or paradoxical layers of meaning inherent in the text. This analysis presents hermeneutic readings of Neck Deep's album, *All Distortions Are Intentional*.

Heuristically, *All Distortions Are Intentional* album presents a narrative focused on the personal struggles of a character named Jett, exploring themes of love and life. If analysed hermeneutically, the album depicts the phenomenon of quarterlife crisis as experienced by Jett. The QLC phenomenon is depicted through several songs on the album, one of which is "Sonderland". The song lyrics of "Sonderland" depicts the quarterlife crisis experienced by Jett, particularly through the lyrics:

*A place we know as Sonderland*

*I call it home, call it hell* (Neck Deep, *Sonderland*, 2020)

The lyrics reflect Jett's ambivalence regarding the labelling of his place, oscillating between the concepts of home and hell. Jett's ambivalence regarding the labelling of his place as home or hell depicts the transitional phase experienced by fresh graduates. The fresh graduates will experience a sense of freedom from assignments, lecturers, and the routine stresses of campus life, similar to the comfort that comes from being "home". Conversely, individuals may experience anxiety regarding their future, characterised by pressures associated with job acquisition, relationship development, and the pursuit of success, leading to a profound sense of discomfort similar to a state of "hell". This is in accordance with the quote "But after graduation, the pathways blur. In that crazy, wild nexus that people like to call the "real world," there is no definitive way to get from point A to point B, regardless of whether the points are related to a career, financial situation, home, or social life." (Robins & Wilner, 2001, p. 3)

Another song that depicts the QLC phenomenon experienced by Jett is "Telling Stories". In the song lyrics, Jett compares his life with two individuals around him, Emily and Jack. Emily and Jack represent successful individuals, each having job and reaching success. In comparison to the two individuals, Jett remains jobless, which induces feelings of jealousy. It can be seen from the lyrics "Desperate to be loved but just being thrown out?". The lyrics depict that Jett is not accepted or loved by others and is instead thrown out. Another lyrics that depicts the QLC of Jett is:

*Ten years standing at the bus stop*

*Never had a real job*

*Never had anything*

*One more night dying on the inside*

*Dying trying to get it right*

*Is anybody listening?* (Neck Deep, *Telling Stories*, 2020)

The lyrics depict that Jett has never had a job and anything that makes him always feel alienated and nobody listens to him. This is in accordance with the statement from Robbins and Wilner (2001, p. 10) that "The most widespread, frightening, and quite possibly the most difficult manifestation of the quarterlife crisis is a feeling that can creep up on a twentysomething whether he is unemployed, living at home, and friendless, or in an interesting job, with a great apartment, and dozens of buddies."

Jett's QLC is further highlighted by the lyrics from Sick Joke's song, especially in the lyrics:

*Cause I'm questioning everything*

*It's affecting all my decisions* (Neck Deep, *Sick Joke*, 2020)

Jett expresses a state of questioning that influences all aspects of his life decisions. Individuals experiencing the QLC phase often represent many questions, including demands about their job look for, comparisons of success with others, concerns regarding love and societal acceptance, and reflections on whether they are chasing their dreams or merely caught in this phase. These questions will require individuals to make right decisions, as their decisions will significantly affect their lives. Robbins and Wilner (2001, p. 10) state, "They doubt their decisions, their abilities, their readiness, their past, present, and future, but most of all, they doubt themselves." The twenties represent a phase characterised by significant introspection and self-development, during which young adults frequently perceive themselves as unprepared.

The album *All Distortions Are Intentional*, when analysed through heuristic reading, does not depict the quarterlife crisis phenomenon. The album solely narrates the personal



struggle of a character named Jett. The personal struggle consists of issues related to life, romance, and social dynamics. However, if analysed through a hermeneutic reading, several songs depict the quarterlife crisis experienced by Jett, specifically "Sonderland", "Telling Stories", and "Sick Joke". The QLC phenomenon merges with Jett's life journey, as he seeks to transform his life, secure employment, establish a relationship, and achieve success. Jett's life journey and the resolution of several challenges he experiences depict his being trapped in the quarterlife crisis phase, including the pursuit of a romantic relationship, job acquisition, and the achievement of success.

### The Depiction of Quarterlife Crisis in Neck Deep's *All Distortions Are Intentional* Album Through Indirect Expression

Indirect expression is a theory developed by Riffaterre to understand the meaning contained in a poem or song lyrics. Indirect expression is the process of communicating meaning by using figurative language and various semiotic processes. It was said by Riffaterre (1978, p. 2) that "Indirection is produced by displacing, distorting, or creating meaning." According to that assertion, indirect expression can take place if there are three things that take place: 1) displacing of meaning, 2) distorting of meaning, and 3) creating of meaning.

#### Displacing of Meaning

As stated earlier, displacing of meaning is when a sign shifts from one meaning to another, or when one word 'represents' another, as happens in metaphor and metonymy. Therefore, it is related to figurative language, where figurative language uses a sign, concept, word, etc. to represent another. There are several figurative languages, such as simile, metaphor, metonymy, and hyperbole. **Table 1.** presents the displacing of meaning of Neck Deep's *All Distortions Are Intentional* album.

Table 1. Displacing of Meaning of Neck Deep's *All Distortions Are Intentional* Album

No	Data	Song	Types of Displacing of Meaning
1.	<i>I call it home, call it hell</i>	Sonderland	Metaphor
2.	<i>Never had anything on a plate</i>	Telling Stories	Hyperbole
3.	<i>If life is some sick joke</i>	Sick Joke	Metaphor
4.	<i>And some day I'll find you Like an old key to a locked door</i>	Sick Joke	Simile

There are several figurative languages on the album that depict the quarterlife crisis phenomenon experienced by Jett. The figurative language that depicts the QLC phenomenon is only found in several songs, namely: Sonderland, Telling Stories, and Sick Joke. In the lyrics of Sonderland's song there is only one metaphor, specifically in the lyrics "I call it home, call it hell". The lyric is metaphor, directly compare one thing to another without using conjunctions such as "like" or "as". In the lyrics, Jett compares his place, referred to as "Sonderland", with home and hell. This suggests that he experiences confusion regarding the labelling of the place; he refers to it as home while simultaneously labelling it as hell. This confusion indicates that he is in the QLC phase, as individuals in this phase frequently experience uncertainty regarding various aspects. The previously discussed hermeneutic reading indicates that this confusion symbolises the transitional phase experienced by fresh graduates. After graduation, fresh graduates experience a sense of comfort and freedom, similar to the feeling of being at home, as they believe they can make their own life decisions. However, they simultaneously face the pressure to secure employment, establish relationships, and achieve success, which can be metaphorically described as a state of discomfort, similar of being in hell. This is in accordance with the statement of Robbins and Wilner (2001, p. 126) "On one hand, twentysomethings feel that, as independent adults, they finally have the freedom to be making their own decisions, and yet at the same time, they don't have to make their choices alone. On the other hand, she suggests that society encourages

individualistic thinking but also puts constraints on young people so that it is more difficult for them to operate on their own."

In contrast to the lyrics of *Sonderland* that have metaphor, the lyrics of *Telling Stories* only have one hyperbole, which is in the lyrics "Never had anything on a plate". Hyperbole is figurative language used to describe something in an exaggerated way and create a dramatic effect. The lyrics "Never had anything on a plate" suggest that Jett has never been provided any advantages or opportunities. It suggests that Jett has no employment, resulting in his inability to secure something to eat. This indicates that individuals in the QLC phase experience dissatisfaction due to unemployment, resulting in a lack of purpose. Furthermore, it demonstrates that to acquire necessities like food and clothing, individuals must secure employment. This is in accordance with the statement of Jen, a 1997 graduate of Duke University (Durham, North Carolina) in Robbins and Wilner's book (2001, p. 127) "It seemed everything was against me: not having the money to move here, not being able to find a job that would pay enough, not knowing where to live or who to live with."

The lyrics of the song "Sick Joke" contain one metaphor and one simile. The metaphor present in the song's lyrics can be seen in the lyric "If life is some sick joke." The lyrics suggest that Jett perceives his life as a sick joke. Individuals in the QLC phase often perceive their lives as painful due to societal pressures to secure employment, relationships, and success, frequently neglecting their emotional well-being. Conversely, they seek support from those around them rather than demands. The simile in the lyrics of the song illustrates this concept: "And some day I'll find you / Like an old key to a locked door." The lyrics express Jett's desire to find someone as a supportive partner. He compares that person to an old key, while he perceives himself as a locked door. This comparison suggests that Jett is trapped within the QLC phase, similar to a locked door, requiring external assistance to escape and support, similar to an old key that unlocks such a door. Robbins and Wilner (2001, p. 61) assert that "Other twentysomethings discover that while they thought they were moving in with their parents for the financial support, they subconsciously headed home for the emotional support." This quote aligns with the preceding lyrics, indicating that individuals undergoing the QLC phase require emotional support from the people around them.

### *Distorting of Meaning*

The next theory of indirect expression to analyse the meaning contained in song lyrics is distorting of meaning. Distorting of meaning refers to the ways in which language in a literary text, in this case song lyrics, deviates from its conventional or intended meaning. This deviation does not occur randomly or accidentally; it is a deliberate strategy by the songwriter to create layers of interpretation and engage the reader in a deeper meaning-making process. According to Riffaterre (1978, p. 2), distorting of meaning is when a meaning is ambiguous, called ambiguity, when a meaning is contradictory to what it should be, called contradiction, and when a meaning does not make sense, called nonsense. **Table 2.** presents distorting of meaning from Neck Deep's *All Distortions Are Intentional* album.

Table 2. Distorting of Meaning of Neck Deep's *All Distortions Are Intentional* Album

No	Data	Song	Types of Distorting of Meaning
1.	<i>These strange times that we live in Will slowly eat you alive if you don't fit in</i>	Sonderland	Nonsense
2.	"happily dead"	Sick Joke	Contradiction
3.	<i>I saw you in the mirror And switched up my rhythm</i>	Sick Joke	Ambiguity

The album *All Distortions Are Intentional* presents three data of distorting of meaning that depict the phenomenon of quarterlife crisis as experienced by Jett. The three data of distorting of meaning are derived from the songs "Sonderland" and "Sick Joke." The lyrics of *Sonderland* contain one instance of nonsense, whereas *Sick Joke* presents one contradiction and one ambiguity.

The nonsense in Sonderland's song lyrics can be seen in the lyrics "These strange times that we live in / Will slowly eat you alive if you don't fit in." The lyrics are grammatically correct. However, the meaning might seem unnatural or nonsensical, as the lyrics indicate the place can eat him if he does not fit in or fails to adapt. A deeper analysis of the lyrics reveals a depiction of the QLC phenomenon as experienced by Jett. It indicates that if Jett fails to adapt or does not pursue employment, relationships, and success comparable to his peers, he risks being left behind or forgotten. It's like Maura, who shares her experience in the book Robbins and Wilner (2001, p. 102) "I get these moments when I feel like I'm completely far behind, like everyone else is ahead of me, like I'm not where I should be in terms of relationships, friends, jobs. It's like a continuing cycle of doubts."

The phrase "happily dead" in Sick Joke's song lyrics represents a contradiction. Death is typically linked to emotions such as sadness, loss, or fear, rather than happiness. This contradiction depicts the extent of Jett's despair or dissatisfaction with life. Jett demonstrates indifference towards death and believes that a state of being "happily dead" surpasses his current life. Robbins and Wilner (2001, p. 4) assert that the quarterlife crisis, characterised by fragility and uncertainty, can lead to enormous negative impacts. This occurs during a vulnerable phase in development that can lead to fatal consequences.

The next data from the song lyrics of "Sick Joke" is the lyrics "I saw you in the mirror / And switched up my rhythm." The lyrics contain two ambiguous terms: "you" and "rhythm". The lyrics "I saw you in the mirror" introduces ambiguity regarding the identity of "you". The identity of "you" in the lyrics can be categorised into three possibilities: 1) Jett sees someone else, 2) Jett reflects upon himself, indicating self-examination or confrontation with his true self, or 3) Jett imagines an imagined or desirable version of himself in the mirror, symbolising aspiration or projected identity. This follows with the lyrics "And switched up my rhythm." The term "rhythm" in the lyrics introduces ambiguity, referring either to the rhythm of a musical instrument or to Jett's lifestyle rhythm. Jett can observe individuals he admires or those who provide him support, triggering him to change his lifestyle and push for improvement. On the contrary, Jett sees himself, prompting a realisation of the need for self-improvement, or he imagines a desirable version of himself, motivating him to push towards that goal.

### Creating of Meaning

The last theory of indirect expression is creation of meaning. Three elements play a part in the creation of meaning: 1) symmetry, 2) rhyme, and 3) homologue. Symmetry denotes the balance and coherence among the lyrics within the text that contribute to a coherent structure. Rhyme denotes the repetition of sounds at the end of lyrics on different lines. Homologue denotes the relationship or similarity among elements within the text that facilitates meaning construction.

Table 3. Creating of Meaning of Neck Deep's *All Distortions Are Intentional* Album

No	Data	Song	Types of Creating of Meaning
1.	The stanza that begins with the lyrics "Welcome to my dark despair"	Sonderland	Symmetry and Homologues
2.	The stanzas about Emily and Jack	Telling Stories	Symmetry and Homologues
3.	The stanzas that contain lyrics "Happily Dead or Asleep" and "Still Here and I'm Not Dead"	Sick Joke	Homologues

There are three data that constitute the creation of meaning on *All Distortions Are Intentional* album which depicts the QLC phenomenon. The data is obtained from three songs: Sonderland, Telling Stories, and Sick Joke. The first data is found in the song Sonderland which is symmetry and homologues.

#### Data 1:

Welcome to my dark despair  
Everyone here is a nightmare  
As they all keep talking in their sleep  
I am wondering

*If it surely gets better than this* (Neck Deep, Sonderland, 2020)

The stanza demonstrates symmetry and homologues, as it is repeated three times, contributing to the coherence and balance of the song lyrics in both structural and thematic aspects. The songwriter aims to convey Jett's emotions for a deeper understanding by the listener or reader. The terms "dark despair" and "nightmare" convey Jett's profound sense of despair, uncertainty, and fear regarding his environment and its citizens. The lyrics "As they all keep talking in their sleep" indicates a society that is disconnected, unconscious, or potentially delusional. The lyrics "If it surely gets better than this" convey a sense of hope while simultaneously emphasising Jett's uncertainty, thereby enhancing the tension and emphasising his despair. Individuals experiencing the QLC phase may experience feelings of hopelessness regarding their lives, as illustrated by Jett. This aligns with the assertion made by Robbins and Wilner (2001, p. 113), which states several people in their twenties reported that the most accurate description of their experience is one of feeling lost, hopeless, and uncertain, which may initiate or extend a vulnerable emotional phase. The next data more depicts Jett's despair, focussing on two side characters: Emily and Jack.

#### Data 2:

*Emily loves her job, she loves her health, care  
She says it feels good to love just a little bit of yourself  
I know she's right but it's hard to tell  
'Cause I wouldn't know how it feels  
Do you cry yourself to sleep sometimes?  
You can't win* (Neck Deep, Telling Stories, 2020)

*And Jack didn't know shit  
He got far but he didn't know when to quit  
Showing off but he's gotta get a grip, yeah (Grip, yeah)  
Jack just can't live without it  
Don't be a man about it now  
If you hold it in, you gotta let it out  
You gotta help yourself, put the bottle down  
If you try, you might like what you find  
Just saying* (Neck Deep, Telling Stories, 2020)

Both stanzas demonstrate symmetry and homology, contributing to the coherence and balance of the lyrics. The stanza discussing Emily appears at the beginning of the song, whereas the stanza discussing Jack is in the middle of the song, resulting in coherence and structural balance (symmetry). Both stanzas discuss the same topic, focussing on Emily and Jack, who have achieved employment and success, thereby demonstrating coherence and balance in the ideas (homologues). Both stanzas depict Jett's jealousy, as he contrasts himself with Emily and Jack. In contrast to the two individuals mentioned, Jett has yet to attain the success he aspires to and remains unemployed. This further depicts the QLC experienced by Jett, as he perceives himself as being left behind by peers who have secured employment and attained success. It was as Victoria felt that she expressed her feelings by questioning, "Why did everyone else around me seemingly know what they wanted to do with their lives? Why did it feel like I was two steps behind everyone else?" in Robbins and Wilner (2001, p. 178). The last data shows how Jett is getting worse and more desperate, which comes from the lyrics of Sick Joke's song.

#### Data 3:

*Don't wake me up  
It's the best that I've felt in weeks  
And to be completely honest  
I'd rather be happily dead or asleep* (Neck Deep, Sick Joke, 2020)

*Sometimes I wonder  
If life is some sick joke  
Will I wake up and it's over?  
No, I'm still here and I'm not dead*



*And I'll hold on to a moment*

*Like a sad kid to a blanket*

*Would you tell me that I'm okay?*

*That I'm still here and I'm not dead?* (Neck Deep, *Sick Joke*, 2020)

The two stanzas serve as the opening and ending of *Sick Joke*. The two stanzas appear to be contradictory, the first expresses a desire for nothingness, while the second expresses a statement and question regarding existence. Both are homologous, since discuss the same existential issue. The desire to be “happily dead or asleep” depicts Jett's profound desperation regarding his life, demonstrating his indifference towards happily dead or asleep. It also demonstrates that Jett seeks to escape from the challenges in his life. Conversely, he consistently asserts his existence by stating, “I'm still here and I'm not dead.” In addition to statements, he also poses the question, “Would you tell me that I'm okay? That I'm still here and I'm not dead?” The statement and question demonstrate that Jett desires to continue in his life and seeks support from others. Both stanzas depict a condition in which individuals recognise their existence while simultaneously questioning the value of continuing to live. This depicts the emotions individuals experience during difficult times when they find themselves in the QLC phase, as they are unprepared for the transition to a new reality. According to Robbins and Wilner “The world is new, and frightening, and hard, and unrelenting, and not at all what they had expected. They question themselves and their ability to handle these new challenges.” (2001, p. 87)

Analysis through the theory of indirect expression reveals that certain lyrics in Neck Deep's *All Distortions Are Intentional* album indirectly depict the quarterlife crisis phenomenon. The QLC phenomenon is represented in the song lyrics which can only be found in three songs: *Sonderland*, *Telling Stories*, and *Sick Joke*. This reveals parallels with heuristic and hermeneutic reading theories, as only three songs depict the QLC phenomenon. The QLC phenomenon is experienced by the main character on the album, Jett. Jett experiences a challenging period characterised by unemployment. Despite successfully forming a relationship with a woman named Alice, in the end he must part ways with her. Certain lyrics effectively convey Jett's emotions and situation during the QLC phase.

## CONCLUSIONS

The quarterlife crisis (QLC) is a social phenomenon commonly experienced by individuals in their twenties to thirties, characterized by feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and alienation due to a perceived lack of success, stable employment, or romantic partnership. This phenomenon has become a widely discussed topic across social media, community platforms, forums, and even popular literature and music. One such artistic representation is found in *All Distortions Are Intentional*, an album by Welsh pop punk band Neck Deep, which illustrates the QLC phenomenon. This research analyzes the QLC representation in the album through Michael Riffaterre's semiotic theory, specifically utilizing heuristic and hermeneutic readings as well as the concept of indirect expression. The study identifies three songs – *Sonderland*, *Telling Stories*, and *Sick Joke* – as key in depicting the QLC through various symbolic devices. Displacing of meaning is found in four instances: metaphors from *Sonderland* and *Sick Joke*, a hyperbole from *Telling Stories*, and a simile from *Sick Joke*. In the distorting of meaning, three elements are identified: a nonsense from *Sonderland*, and both a contradiction and an ambiguity from *Sick Joke*. The creation of meaning involves three data points: symmetry and homology in *Sonderland* and *Telling Stories*, and homology in *Sick Joke*. Other tracks on the album, such as *Fall*, *Lowlife*, *When You Know*, *Quarry*, *What Took You So Long?*, *Empty House*, *Little Dove*, *I Revolve (Around You)*, and *Pushing Daisies*, explore themes like romance and other social issues but do not represent the QLC phenomenon. Thus, *All Distortions Are Intentional* conveys the quarterlife crisis indirectly through selected songs using layered semiotic expressions.

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