

**RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTIFICATION ON ASSERTIVENESS AND  
IDENTITY DIFFUSION AMONG FIRST BORN ADULTS**Manjushree M.H<sup>1</sup> and Saisathurmugan<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup>Assistant professor, Department of Psychology, Sri Krishna Arts and Science college<sup>2</sup>B. Sc Psychology, Sri Krishna Arts and Science college, Coimbatore**ABSTRACT**

Parentification, a family dynamic in which children assume developmentally inappropriate caregiving roles, has been associated with long-term psychological outcomes in adulthood (L.M. DeCoster J white, N & Voltz, M.L. Year 2011). First-born children are particularly vulnerable to parentification because of increased familial expectations and role responsibilities within the family system (Ying Lim, 2023). The present study examines the relationship between parentification, assertiveness, and identity diffusion among first-born adults. Using a correlational research design, data were collected from first-born adults (N=200) through Assertiveness self-report inventory (developed by Sharon D herzberger (1984), Adult-Adolescent parenting inventory (developed by Stephen J bavolek (1984), Erikson psychosocial stage inventory identity sub scale (developed by Erikson (1988). Statistical analyses were conducted to explore the associations among these variables and to determine whether assertiveness is related to identity diffusion in the context of parentification. Findings indicate that higher levels of parentification are associated with lower assertiveness and greater identity diffusion, consistent with prior research linking parentification to difficulties in self-boundaries and self-expression (Hooper, 2007). Additionally, assertiveness was found to be negatively related to identity diffusion, suggesting a potential protective role in identity development, as conceptualized within Erikson's theory of psychosocial development (Erikson, 1968). The study highlights the enduring impact of early family role reversals on adult psychosocial functioning and underscores the importance of fostering assertiveness to support identity consolidation in parentified individuals.

**Keywords:** Parentification, Assertiveness, Identity diffusion, Young adults



## INTRODUCTION

Family dynamics play a critical role in shaping individual development across the lifespan, influencing emotional, cognitive, and social functioning. As the primary socializing unit, the family provides the earliest environment in which individuals learn communication patterns, emotional regulation, interpersonal behavior, and value systems. Family functioning is dynamic rather than static, evolving in response to developmental transitions such as adolescence, parenthood, and broader socio-economic influences. Healthy family environments characterized by emotional support, adaptability, and effective communication promote psychological well-being and resilience, whereas dysfunctional patterns such as role confusion, conflict, and neglect may hinder developmental outcomes (Dariotis et al., 2023; Rana & Das, 2021). Understanding family dynamics is therefore essential for examining how early experiences shape long-term psychosocial adjustment.

An important construct within family functioning is parentification, defined as a role reversal in which a child assumes responsibilities typically expected of a parent (Hooper & Wallace, 2020; Jurkovic et al., 2021). This phenomenon may arise due to parental incapacity, economic hardship, illness, or emotional unavailability (McMahon & Luthar, 2020; Afifi et al., 2023). Parentification is commonly categorized into instrumental and emotional forms. Instrumental parentification involves practical caregiving responsibilities such as managing household tasks or caring for siblings, whereas emotional parentification occurs when a child provides psychological support to parents, often acting as a confidant or mediator (Peris et al., 2008; Anvar & Hasan, 2025). While moderate responsibility can foster competence and independence, excessive or prolonged parentification may disrupt normative developmental processes and place psychological strain on the child (Macfie et al., 2022; Van Loon et al., 2017).

The long-term outcomes of parentification vary depending on its intensity and context. Some individuals develop adaptive traits such as resilience, empathy, and strong problem-solving abilities (Połomski et al., 2021; Qayyum et al., 2021). However, chronic parentification has



been associated with maladaptive outcomes including anxiety, depressive symptoms, and difficulties in interpersonal relationships (Kwon et al., 2023; Pakenham & Cox, 2023). Individuals may exhibit over-responsibility, guilt, and challenges in boundary setting, often prioritizing others' needs over their own (Jurkovic et al., 2021; Schier et al., 2023). These findings highlight the importance of examining how early caregiving roles influence later psychosocial functioning.

Birth order represents another important dimension influencing developmental outcomes. Classical theoretical perspectives, particularly those proposed by Adler, suggest that ordinal position within the family contributes to variations in personality, responsibility, and relational dynamics. First-born children often occupy a unique position, receiving initial parental attention and internalizing expectations related to responsibility, leadership, and achievement. The arrival of younger siblings may alter family dynamics, reinforcing caregiving or supervisory roles (Gagné & Bry, 2024). While birth order alone does not determine personality outcomes, it interacts with contextual factors such as family environment and parenting practices to influence developmental trajectories.

Assertiveness plays an essential role in interpersonal functioning and self-development. It refers to the ability to express one's thoughts, feelings, and needs clearly and respectfully while maintaining awareness of others' rights (Speed & Goldfried, 2020). Positioned between passive and aggressive communication styles, assertiveness facilitates effective communication, boundary setting, and self-advocacy. Research indicates that assertiveness is associated with positive mental health outcomes, including higher self-esteem, reduced stress, and improved relationship quality (Alberti & Emmons, 2021; Çelik & Yılmaz, 2024). It is also linked to emotional regulation and adaptive coping strategies (Erozkan, 2020; Álvarez & Morales, 2024). Conversely, low assertiveness may lead to passivity, difficulty expressing needs, and increased susceptibility to external pressures (Chan & Wong, 2022).

The relationship between parentification and assertiveness is particularly significant. Children who experience parentification often develop heightened interpersonal sensitivity and responsibility, which may enhance certain communication skills. However, when their needs are consistently subordinated, they may struggle with assertive expression in adulthood



(Hooper & Wallace, 2020; Santos et al., 2024). This may manifest as difficulty setting boundaries, people-pleasing behaviours, and discomfort with self-advocacy (Van Parys & Rober, 2021). Emotional regulation has been identified as a key mediating factor in this relationship, influencing how parentified individuals express their needs and manage interpersonal interactions (Álvarez et al., 2024).

Identity formation represents a central developmental task, particularly during adolescence and emerging adulthood. According to Eriksonian theory, identity development involves integrating personal values, beliefs, and goals into a coherent sense of self. Identity diffusion, characterized by a lack of exploration and commitment, reflects an unstable or unclear self-concept (Becht et al., 2020; Crocetti et al., 2021). Individuals experiencing identity diffusion often demonstrate indecision, inconsistency, and susceptibility to external influence (Bouchey & Harter, 2023; Zimmermann & Iwanski, 2024). This condition has been associated with poorer mental health outcomes and difficulties in interpersonal functioning (Luyckx et al., 2022; Sharp et al., 2021).

Parentification can significantly influence identity development by shaping early role expectations and self-concept. When children assume adult-like responsibilities, their focus may shift away from self-exploration toward fulfilling family needs, potentially limiting opportunities for identity formation (Borchet et al., 2018; Demirtaş et al., 2025). This can lead to role confusion or identity diffusion, particularly when individuals struggle to differentiate their own needs from those of others (Goth et al., 2021; Maehler & Schwartz, 2025). However, the impact of parentification is not uniformly negative and may vary depending on contextual and relational factors.

Assertiveness also plays a crucial role in identity formation. The ability to express personal beliefs, establish boundaries, and make autonomous decisions supports the development of a stable identity (Burke & Cooper, 2023; Renger & MacGeorge, 2023). Individuals with higher levels of assertiveness are more likely to engage in exploration and commit to personal goals, facilitating identity achievement. In contrast, limited assertiveness may contribute to conformity, dependence, and uncertainty, increasing the likelihood of identity diffusion (Neff & Germer, 2023).

**AIM**

The Aim of the study is to examine the relationship between parentification, assertiveness, and identity diffusion among first-born adults.

**HYPOTHESES**

- ▶ **HI1:** There will be a significant relationship between parentification and assertiveness among first-born adults.
- ▶ **HI2:** There will be a significant relationship between parentification and identity diffusion among first-born adults.
- ▶ **HI3:** There will be a significant relationship between assertiveness and identity diffusion among first-born adults.
- ▶ **HI4:** There will be significance difference in parentification between male and female among first born young adults.
- ▶ **HI5:** There will be significance difference in Assertiveness between male and female among first born young adults
- ▶ **HI6:** There will be significance difference in Identity diffusion between male and female among first born young adults

**Sampling:**

The sample for the present study consisted of N = 200 first-born adults, including both male and female participants. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling method, and all participants met the criterion of being the first-born child in their family.

**Measurements:****Assertiveness Self-Report Inventory (ASRI; Rathus, 1973)**

The ASRI is a self-report questionnaire measuring assertive behavior, including expressing needs, refusing requests, handling criticism, and communicating feelings. Items are rated on a Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater assertiveness. It shows good reliability



(Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.80\text{--}0.89$ ; test–retest  $\approx 0.80\text{--}0.90$ ) and is widely used to assess interpersonal competence and its relation to self-esteem and social effectiveness.

### **Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI; Bavolek, 1984)**

The AAPI assesses parenting attitudes such as developmental expectations, empathy, and discipline practices. Responses are rated on a Likert scale, with higher scores reflecting more positive parenting attitudes. It has acceptable reliability ( $\alpha = 0.70\text{--}0.85$ ) and is commonly used to study the impact of parenting on psychosocial development.

### **Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory – Identity Subscale (EPSI; Rosenthal et al., 1981)**

The EPSI Identity subscale measures identity development, including clarity of values, goals, and role commitments. Items are rated on a Likert scale, with higher scores indicating stronger identity formation. It demonstrates good reliability ( $\alpha = 0.75\text{--}0.85$ ) and is widely used in research on identity and psychosocial adjustment.

### **Statistical analysis:**

The data collected were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 27). Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the demographic details and main study variables. Pearson's correlation was used to examine the relationships between Parentification, Assertiveness, and Identity

## **RESULTS**

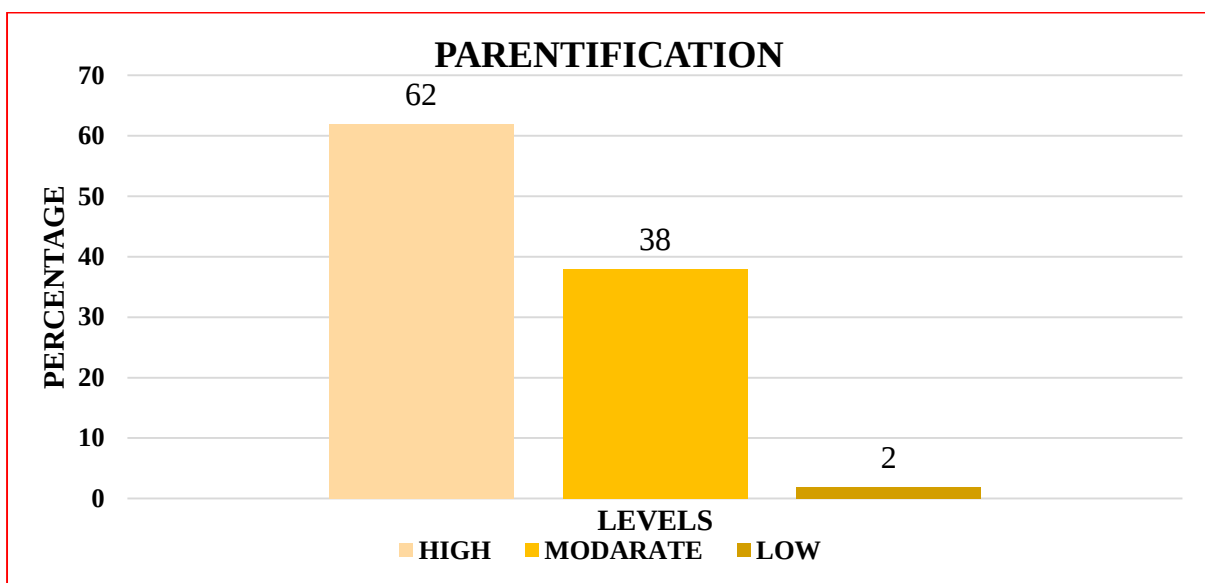
**Table 1: Level of Parentification among first born young adults**

| LEVEL    | PERCENTAGE |
|----------|------------|
| HIGH     | 62         |
| MODERATE | 36         |
| LOW      | 2          |



The results show that 62% of participants fall in the high level, while 36% demonstrate moderate levels. Only 2% report low levels of the Parentification. This indicates an overall higher prevalence of Parentification among first-born adults.

**Graph 1: Pictorial representation of levels of Parentification among first born young adults**



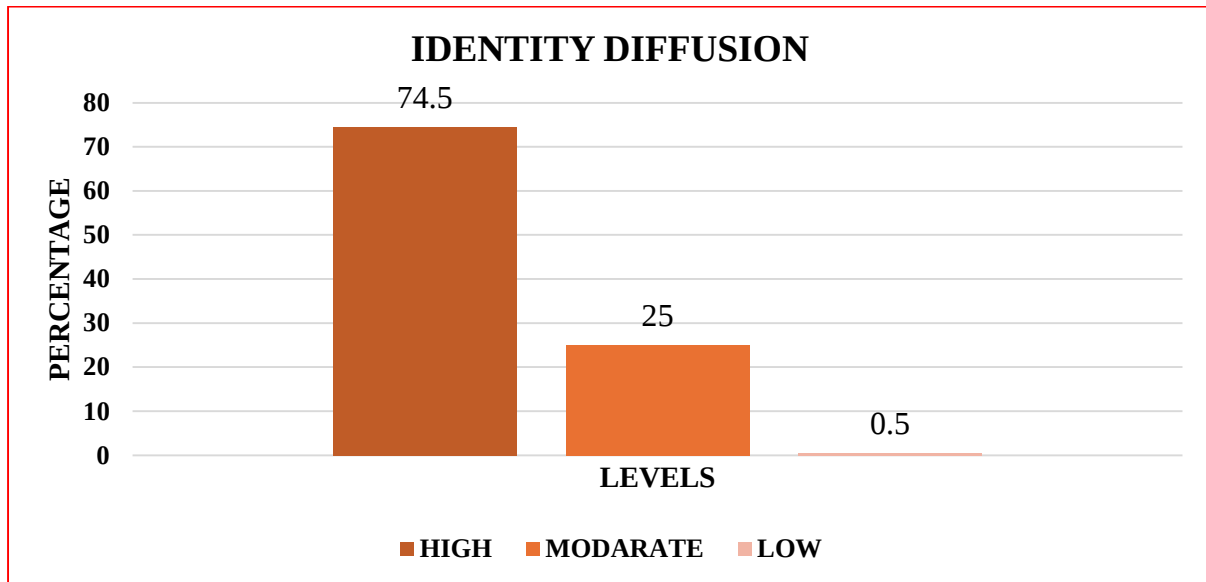
**Table 2: Level of Identity Diffusion among first born young adults**

| LEVEL    | PERCENTAGE |
|----------|------------|
| HIGH     | 74.5       |
| MODERATE | 25         |
| LOW      | 0.5        |

The results indicate that majority of participants has high level identity diffusion (74.5%), while 25% demonstrate moderate levels and only 0.5% report low levels. This distribution reflects a strong predominance of identity diffusion among first-born adults. The findings suggest that this characteristic is widely experienced within the sample and may play a role in their psychosocial functioning.



**Graph 2: Pictorial representation of levels of Identity Diffusion among first born young adults**



**Table 3: Level of Assertiveness among first born young adults**

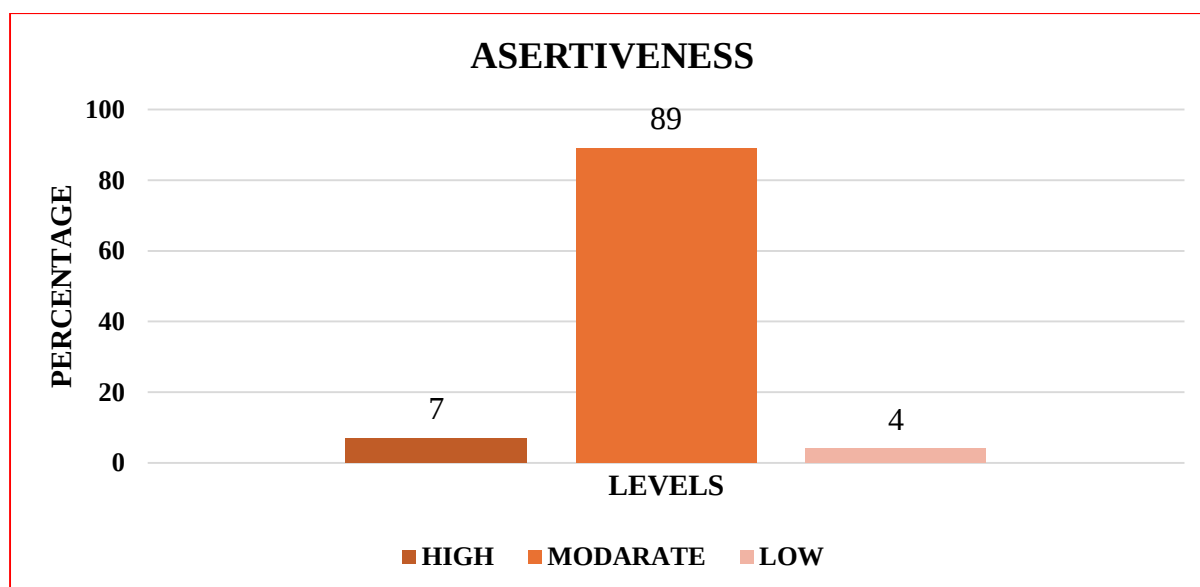
| LEVEL    | PERCENTAGE |
|----------|------------|
| HIGH     | 7          |
| MODERATE | 89         |
| LOW      | 4          |

The findings show that the majority of participants fall within the moderate level of assertiveness (89%), while a small proportion exhibit high (7%) and low (4%) levels. This



distribution suggests that Assertiveness is generally experienced at a moderate level among first-born adults. Such results indicate relative balance in this characteristic within the sample, with limited extreme responses

**Graph 3: Pictorial representation of levels of Assertiveness among first born young adults**



**Table 4: Results of Correlation Analysis**

| Correlations  |                     |                   |                       |                     |
|---------------|---------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
|               |                     | ASSERTIVE<br>NESS | IDENTITY<br>DIFFUSION | PARENTIFICA<br>TION |
| ASSERTIVENESS | Pearson Correlation | 1                 | -.039                 | -.049               |



|                 |                     |       |      |      |
|-----------------|---------------------|-------|------|------|
|                 | Sig. (2-tailed)     |       | .579 | .490 |
|                 | N                   | 200   | 200  | 200  |
| IDENTITY        | Pearson Correlation | -.039 | 1    | .784 |
| DIFFUSION       | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .579  |      | .000 |
|                 | N                   | 200   | 200  | 200  |
| PARENTIFICATION | Pearson Correlation | -.049 | .784 | 1    |
|                 | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .490  | .000 |      |
|                 | N                   | 200   | 200  | 200  |

The findings indicate a statistically significant relationship among Parentification and Identity Diffusion.

**Table 5: Results of Independent Sample t- test**

|                   | GENDER | N   | Mean   | Std. Deviation |
|-------------------|--------|-----|--------|----------------|
| ASSERTIVENESS     | MALE   | 99  | 12.68  | 2.432          |
|                   | FEMALE | 101 | 12.89  | 2.701          |
| PARENTIFICATION   | MALE   | 99  | 113.20 | 18.091         |
|                   | FEMALE | 101 | 118.32 | 18.524         |
| IDENTITYDIFFUSION | MALE   | 99  | 33.71  | 4.862          |
|                   | FEMALE | 101 | 33.07  | 4.087          |

**Independent Samples Test**

|  | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. |
|--|---|------|---|----|------|
|--|---|------|---|----|------|



(2-tailed)

|                    |                             |       |      |        |         |      |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|-------|------|--------|---------|------|
| ASSERTIVENESS      | Equal variances assumed     | .243  | .622 | -.589  | 198     | .556 |
|                    | Equal variances not assumed |       |      | -.590  | 196.590 | .556 |
| PARENTIFICATION    | Equal variances assumed     | .867  | .353 | -1.975 | 198     | .050 |
|                    | Equal variances not assumed |       |      | -1.976 | 197.998 | .050 |
| IDENTITY DIFFUSION | Equal variances assumed     | 4.230 | .041 | 1.005  | 198     | .316 |
|                    | Equal variances not assumed |       |      | 1.003  | 190.986 | .317 |

An independent samples t-test is conducted to examine gender differences in assertiveness, parentification, and identity diffusion. The results show that there is no significant difference between males ( $M = 12.68$ ,  $SD = 2.43$ ) and females ( $M = 12.89$ ,  $SD = 2.70$ ) in assertiveness,  $t(198) = -0.589$ ,  $p = .556$ . Similarly, no significant gender difference is found in identity diffusion, where males ( $M = 33.71$ ,  $SD = 4.86$ ) and females ( $M = 33.07$ ,  $SD = 4.09$ ) report comparable scores,  $t(198) = 1.005$ ,  $p = .316$ . For parentification, females ( $M = 118.32$ ,  $SD = 18.52$ ) report slightly higher scores than males ( $M = 113.20$ ,  $SD = 18.09$ ), and the result approaches the level of significance,  $t(198) = -1.975$ ,  $p = .050$ . Overall, the findings indicate that gender does not significantly influence assertiveness, parentification, or identity diffusion among the participants.

## DISCUSSION:

The results presented in Table 1 indicate that a majority of the participants (62%) experience a high level of parentification, while 36% has moderate level, and only 2% report low levels. This suggests that parentification is highly prevalent among first-born young adults in the sample. First-born children are often expected to take on additional responsibilities within the family, such as caring for younger siblings, assisting parents, or managing household tasks. These expectations may lead them to assume roles that are typically associated with parental figures. The high percentage of parentification observed in this study may therefore reflect the traditional family dynamics where first-born children are given greater responsibilities



compared to their younger siblings. Such experiences may shape the psychological development of first-born individuals by increasing their sense of responsibility and maturity. However, excessive parentification may also place emotional or psychological burdens on young adults, potentially influencing other aspects of their development such as identity formation and interpersonal functioning.

Table 2 shows that 74.5% of participants has high level of identity diffusion, while 25% demonstrate moderate levels, and only 0.5% report low levels. These results indicate that identity diffusion is relatively prominent among first-born young adults in the sample. Identity diffusion refers to difficulties in forming a stable and coherent sense of self, including uncertainty about personal values, goals, and roles. The high level of identity diffusion observed in this study may be associated with the increased responsibilities and expectations placed on first-born individuals. When young people assume adult-like roles early in life, they may have fewer opportunities to explore different aspects of their identity, which is a critical developmental task during adolescence and early adulthood.

The findings in Table 3 reveal that most participants (89%) have moderate level of assertiveness, while 7% demonstrate high levels and 4% exhibit low levels. This suggests that assertiveness among first-born young adults is generally balanced, with most individuals displaying a moderate ability to express their thoughts, feelings, and needs. Moderate levels of assertiveness may indicate that first-born young adults possess a reasonable level of confidence in interpersonal interactions while still maintaining sensitivity toward others. Their family roles and responsibilities may contribute to the development of communication and decision-making skills, which can support assertive behaviour.

Table 4 presents the results of the Pearson correlation analysis conducted to examine the relationships among parentification, identity diffusion, and assertiveness among first-born young adults (N = 200). The results indicate that parentification and identity diffusion have a strong positive correlation ( $r = .784$ ,  $p = .000$ ). This relationship is statistically significant, suggesting that higher levels of parentification are associated with higher levels of identity diffusion among first-born young adults. This finding implies that individuals who assume greater parental responsibilities within the family at an early age may experience difficulties in



forming a stable and coherent sense of identity. Early role reversal and increased responsibility may limit opportunities for self-exploration, which is an essential aspect of identity development during adolescence and young adulthood. The correlation between assertiveness and identity diffusion ( $r = -0.039$ ,  $p = .579$ ) was found to be negative but not statistically significant. This suggests that there is no meaningful relationship between these two variables within the sample. The relationship between assertiveness and parentification ( $r = -0.049$ ,  $p = .490$ ) was also negative and not statistically significant. This indicates that the level of parentification experienced by first-born young adults does not appear to significantly influence their level of assertiveness. The findings highlight that parentification is strongly related to identity diffusion, while assertiveness does not show a significant relationship with either parentification or identity diffusion in this sample. These results emphasize the potential psychological impact of early family role responsibilities on identity development among first-born young adults.

Table 5 presents the gender differences in assertiveness, parentification, and identity diffusion using an independent samples *t*-test. The findings indicate that there are no statistically significant gender differences across the examined variables. Although minor variations in mean scores are observed between male and female participants, these differences do not reach statistical significance, suggesting that gender does not substantially influence the levels of assertiveness, parentification, or identity diffusion within the present sample.

On assertiveness, the results demonstrate that females ( $M = 12.89$ ,  $SD = 2.70$ ) report slightly higher mean scores than males ( $M = 12.68$ ,  $SD = 2.43$ ); however, this difference is not statistically significant ( $t(198) = -0.589$ ,  $p = .556$ ). This finding suggests that both male and female participants exhibit comparable levels of assertive behavior. Assertiveness, defined as the ability to express one's thoughts, feelings, and needs in a direct and appropriate manner, appears to be similarly distributed across genders in the present sample. These results may reflect evolving societal norms that increasingly encourage both males and females to develop effective communication and interpersonal skills. In contemporary educational and social contexts, assertiveness is often emphasized as an important psychological and social competency irrespective of gender, which may explain the absence of significant gender differences in this variable.



In parentification, the findings indicate that female participants ( $M = 118.32$ ,  $SD = 18.52$ ) report somewhat higher levels of parentification compared to male participants ( $M = 113.20$ ,  $SD = 18.09$ ). Although the  $p$ -value ( $p = .050$ ) approaches the conventional threshold for statistical significance, the difference remains marginal and should be interpreted with caution. The slightly elevated scores among females may reflect traditional familial and cultural expectations in which daughters are more frequently involved in caregiving responsibilities and emotional support within the family system. Previous literature has suggested that gender role socialization can influence the distribution of caregiving tasks among siblings, potentially placing greater emotional and instrumental responsibilities on female children. The absence of a statistically significant difference in the current findings suggests that experiences of parentification may not be exclusively gender-dependent and may instead be influenced by broader contextual factors such as family dynamics, parenting practices, and household responsibilities.

On identity diffusion, the results reveal no significant gender differences between male ( $M = 33.71$ ,  $SD = 4.86$ ) and female ( $M = 33.07$ ,  $SD = 4.09$ ) participants ( $t(198) = 1.005$ ,  $p = .316$ ). Identity diffusion refers to a lack of clarity or stability in an individual's sense of self, including uncertainty regarding personal goals, values, and roles. The comparable scores across genders suggest that both male and female participants experience similar levels of identity-related uncertainty. Identity development is widely recognized as a complex and multifaceted process shaped by various psychosocial influences, including developmental stage, social environment, family relationships, and personal experiences. The absence of significant gender differences may indicate that identity formation processes operate similarly across male and female individuals within this population.

The results of the independent sample  $t$ -test analysis suggest that gender does not serve as a significant determinant of assertiveness, parentification, or identity diffusion among the participants.

## **LIMITATIONS**

### **Sample size:**



The study was conducted with a sample of 200 participants, which may not fully represent the entire population of first-born young adults.

**Restricted sample group:**

The study focused only on first-born young adults, so the findings cannot be generalized to individuals who are middle-born, last-born, or only children.

**Self-report measures:**

The data were collected using self-report questionnaires, which may be influenced by response bias, social desirability, or participants' subjective perceptions.

**CONCLUSION**

- The majority of first-born young adults in the study experienced a high level of parentification, indicating that they often take on significant responsibilities within the family from an early age.
- A large proportion of participants reported high levels of identity diffusion, suggesting that many first-born young adults experience challenges in forming a stable and clear sense of identity.
- Most participants demonstrated a moderate level of assertiveness, indicating a balanced ability to express their thoughts, feelings, and needs in interpersonal situations.
- The study found a strong and statistically significant positive correlation between parentification and identity diffusion. This suggests that increased parental responsibilities during childhood may be associated with greater difficulties in identity formation among first-born young adults.
- The results indicate that parentification and identity diffusion does not significantly related to assertiveness among first-born young adult
- The study also presents that there is no statistically significant difference based on gender.

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