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FAMILY STRUCTURE AND FUTURE ANXIETY: THE ROLE OF BIRTH ORDER

Abstract

The aim of the present study was to explore the association of birth order and perceived social support with future anxiety in young adults in the Caucasian sociocultural context. To limit the effect of external stressors, e.g., unemployment and severe social isolation, the research was conducted among socially active people aged 18–29. Firstborn participants reported slightly higher future anxiety, and younger siblings reported somewhat stronger peer support, but the findings did not show statistically significant birth-order effects. The paper explores how modern social media culture promotes birth-order stereotypes such as “eldest daughter syndrome” and “middle child syndrome” with little empirical evidence. The findings suggest that future anxiety for Generation Z may be more influenced by social comparison culture, economic uncertainty, and shifting family dynamics than by just sibling position.

Keywords: birth order, future anxiety, social support, generation Z, psychology.

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Introduction

The present research aimed to examine the relationship between birth order and future anxiety among young adults and to examine the moderating role of perceived social support on this relationship. The research was particularly aimed at young adults in a Caucasian sociocultural context where family hierarchy, sibling responsibility, and interdependence are often more apparent than in many Western societies.

In recent years, future anxiety has become increasingly common for Generation Z [1]. In addition, young adults' emotional health has been affected by rapid social change, economic volatility, academic competition, uncertainty about career prospects, and changing social norms. Today's young people are expected to become financially independent and socially successful and to establish stable identities in a highly competitive environment. These expectations lead to chronic psychological pressure and emotional insecurity.

The uncertainty surrounding education, employment, and relationships was magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbating these emotional difficulties. The pandemic period and its aftermath have been marked by many young adults experiencing disruptions to academic plans, financial instability, and social isolation. Even when restrictions were relaxed, psychological effects of ongoing uncertainty were still apparent. Researchers suggest that prolonged exposure to uncertain social and economic conditions may lead to chronic anxiety about the future and personal development [1].

At the same time, digital culture and social media platforms expose young people to idealized lifestyles, productivity-oriented content, standards of luxury, and unrealistic expectations about appearance and success. Repeated exposure to these types of comparison-driven environments can result in increased feelings of inadequacy, emotional exhaustion, and fear of “falling behind.” peers [2]. Young people often compare their

academic success, financial status, social life, and physical looks to the highly edited online images of their friends and influencers.

In this digital environment, birth-order stereotypes have become more and more popular. Personality traits, perfectionism, burnout, or difficulties in the interpersonal domain are often described with expressions such as “eldest daughter syndrome,” “middle child syndrome,” or “the spoiled youngest sibling” [3,4]. Such stories are particularly prevalent among Gen-Z users, who are more likely to frame emotional experiences in terms of simplified identity categories that are tied to sibling position and family structure.

The notion that birth order may play a role in personality development has a long history in psychology. One of the first theorists to propose that sibling position could influence emotional development, social behavior, and personal identity formation was Alfred Adler [3]. In Adlerian theory, the first-born is often characterized as more responsible and perfectionistic due to parental expectations. Younger children may be more socially adaptable or dependent as a result of different family dynamics. Later researchers have extended these theories and have examined possible links between birth order and intelligence, leadership, emotional stability, and interpersonal relationships [4].

However, contemporary empirical work has yielded mixed results on the size and consistency of birth-order effects. Some studies indicate small differences between sibling groups, while others argue that birth order alone is not a good predictor of personality or emotional functioning [5]. The contemporary literature of psychology increasingly points out that emotional experiences are influenced by the multiple interacting variables, such as parenting styles, attachment quality, socio-economic conditions, peer relationships, and cultural expectations. This conversation is especially relevant to the families of collectivist and post-Soviet countries. In many Caucasian societies, older siblings are expected to show responsibility, caregiving behavior, and emotional maturity in the family structure.

Family hierarchy and interdependence are usually more apparent than in highly individualistic Western societies. Older children may face more pressure to perform well in school and socially, whereas younger siblings may receive different kinds of emotional attention or freedom [6].

Perceived social support is another important factor associated with emotional well-being among young adults. Social support is defined as perceived emotional, informational, and practical assistance from family members, friends, and significant others [7]. Research consistently shows that perceived emotional support may reduce stress, improve coping abilities, and protect against anxiety symptoms. Young adults who say they have more social support also tend to say they have more emotional resilience in times of uncertainty and social transition.

There is extremely limited empirical psychological research on birth order in Caucasian and post-Soviet cultural settings, despite the growing popularity of discussions about birth order on social media. The majority of existing studies on birth order have been carried out on Western populations, and relatively little attention has been paid to the collectivist family systems of the Caucasus region. It is therefore not clear whether the popular stereotypes of birth order are markers of measurable psychological differences or are just symbolic identity stories in online culture.

The present study investigated the relationship between birth order, perceived social support, and future anxiety among young adults in a Caucasian sociocultural context. Specifically, the study looked at first-born and last-born people with regard to future anxiety and perceived social support, excluding middle-born participants, only children and twins to create clearer groups for comparison. The research also aimed to investigate how social comparison culture, online identity narratives and shifting family dynamics could be involved in the emotional experiences of Generation Z.

Methodology

A quantitative cross-sectional research design was used in the study. Data collected by standardized psychological questionnaires of future anxiety and perceived social support [5]. Statistical analysis was performed using the SPSS software.

The study began with 108 participants between the ages of 18 and 29. However, only children, middle-borns, and twins were excluded from the final analysis so that comparison groups would be clearer and confounding variables related to sibling structure would be lessened. The final sample comprised 90 participants (48 first-borns and 42 last-borns).

Socially active young adults were deliberately targeted to reduce the potential impact of exogenous factors that may independently increase future anxiety, such as long-term unemployment, severe social withdrawal, or chronic isolation. Most of the participants came from relatively similar socio-economic backgrounds and were either living with their families or had just recently become financially independent. This sampling strategy was employed to generate a more psychologically comparable group of participants and to minimize the impact of extreme environmental stressors on the findings. The sample was also relatively balanced by gender, which enabled the findings to be more generalizable to emotional tendencies among young adults rather than being restricted to one demographic subgroup. Descriptive statistical analysis showed small observable differences between sibling groups. First-borns reported slightly higher scores of future anxiety, and last-borns reported slightly higher perceived peer support. Nevertheless, the inferential statistical analyses showed that these differences were not statistically significant. The effect sizes found were small to moderate, suggesting birth order alone may not be a strong predictor of future-oriented anxiety or perceived emotional support.

Discussion

Although the current study did not identify statistically significant effects of birth

order, the results remain psychologically and socially relevant. Contemporary psychology research increasingly disputes deterministic interpretations of birth-order theory, and the current findings align with recent empirical investigations indicating that sibling position alone may not significantly influence emotional consequences [6]. The significance of the study lies not only in its results but also in its lack of findings. In contemporary digital culture, birth-order prejudices are frequently portrayed as logical rationales for emotional turmoil. Young adults often identify as “the eldest daughter,” “the neglected middle child,” or “the indulged youngest sibling.” These narratives are highly prevalent on social media platforms and are extensively employed to elucidate anxiety, perfectionism, burnout, or familial stress.

Nonetheless, the current findings indicate that these preconceptions may represent more of a symbolic identification narrative than an empirically quantifiable psychological reality. The absence of statistically significant differences aligns with an expanding corpus of evidence indicating that emotional experiences are shaped by numerous interacting variables rather than solely by sibling position [8]. Nonetheless, ordinal birth position may be of lesser significance than parenting style, emotional validation, economic instability, peer connections, societal expectations, and the culture of social media comparison in cultivating future worry. This is particularly significant in relation to Generation Z. Young adults nowadays are maturing in a volatile and constantly changing social environment affected by economic crises, post-pandemic uncertainty, insecure career markets, and constant digital comparison. No matter what situation siblings are in, extended exposure to idealized lifestyles and online success-oriented content can exacerbate the pervasive worry of the future.

At the same time, the findings could indicate changes in family structures in modern societies. The traditional duties of siblings appear to be less rigid than in earlier generations. Modern parents may have more

equal expectations for their children, regardless of birth order, especially in metropolitan and educated families. This could explain why large or consistent psychological differences related to birth order are no longer observed in many current studies on the subject.

The study is also significant because research on birth order in Caucasian and post-Soviet cultural contexts is severely sparse. The majority of the empirical literature on birth order has come from Western samples, with relatively little study on collectivist and hierarchy-oriented family structures, such as those seen in the Caucasus region.

As a result, even data revealing weak or non-significant effects are useful for advancing cross-cultural psychological understanding and questioning overly broad assumptions drawn from Western populations.

Conclusion

In the present study, we investigated the association between birth order, perceived social support [5], and future anxiety among Gen Z young adults within a Caucasian cultural context. First-borns exhibited a little more future anxiety and younger siblings a little more peer support. However, these differences were not statistically significant. However, the findings are important because they contribute to ongoing debates that question simplistic and deterministic views of birth-order theory. The study suggests that emotional experiences such as future anxiety may be more strongly influenced by broader social, cultural, and interpersonal influences than by sibling position alone. The study also underlines the increasing psychological impact of digital culture and online identity stories among Generation Z. Although birth-order stereotypes [3, 4] may provide emotional

validation and a sense of belonging, the results indicate that these narratives cannot be viewed as scientifically definitive explanations of personality or emotional functioning.

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**AİLƏDƏKİ DOĞUM SIRASININ TƏŞVİŞ POZUNTUSUNA TƏSİRİ: ÖVLADLAR
ARASINDA MÜQAYİSƏLİ TƏDQIQI**

Xülasə

Bu tədqiqatın məqsədi Qafqaz sosiomədəni kontekstində gənc yetkinlər arasında doğum sırası, qəbul edilən sosial dəstək və gələcək narahatlığı arasındakı əlaqəni araşdırmaq olmuşdur. Xarici stress faktorlarının, məsələn, işsizlik və ciddi sosial izolyasiyanın təsirini azaltmaq məqsədilə tədqiqat 18–29 yaş arası sosial aktiv şəxslər arasında aparılmışdır. İlk doğulan iştirakçılar bir qədər daha yüksək gələcək narahatlığı göstərmiş, kiçik bacı-qardaşlar isə daha güclü yaşd dəstəyi hiss etdiklərini bildirmişlər. Bununla belə, nəticələr doğum sırasına bağlı statistik olaraq əhəmiyyətli fərqlər göstərməmişdir. Məqalədə müasir sosial media mədəniyyətinin “ən böyük qız sindromu” və “orta uşaq sindromu” kimi doğum sırası stereotiplərini kifayət qədər empirik sübut olmadan necə yaydığı müzakirə olunur. Nəticələr göstərir ki, Z nəsində gələcək narahatlığı yalnız bacı-qardaş mövqeyi ilə deyil, daha çox sosial müqayisə mədəniyyəti, iqtisadi qeyri-müəyyənlik və dəyişən ailə dinamikaları ilə əlaqəlidir.

Açar sözlər: doğum sırası, gələcək narahatlıq, qəbul edilən sosial dəstək, Z nəsli, psixoloji rifah.

Сема СЕЙИДЗАДЕ

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**ВЛИЯНИЕ ПОРЯДКА РОЖДЕНИЯ В СЕМЬЕ НА УРОВЕНЬ ТРЕВОЖНОСТИ:
СРАВНИТЕЛЬНОЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ СРЕДИ ДЕТЕЙ**

Резюме

Целью данного исследования было изучение взаимосвязи между порядком рождения, воспринимаемой социальной поддержкой и тревожностью по поводу будущего среди молодых взрослых в кавказском социокультурном контексте. Для ограничения влияния внешних стрессоров, таких как безработица и серьезная социальная изоляция, исследование проводилось среди социально активных людей в возрасте от 18 до 29 лет. Первенцы продемонстрировали немного более высокий уровень тревожности относительно будущего, тогда как младшие дети сообщали о более сильной поддержке со стороны сверстников. Однако результаты не выявили статистически значимых эффектов порядка рождения. В статье рассматривается, как современная культура социальных сетей распространяет стереотипы, связанные с порядком рождения, такие как «синдром старшей дочери» и «синдром среднего ребенка», несмотря на недостаток эмпирических доказательств. Полученные результаты показывают, что тревожность по поводу будущего у поколения Z в большей степени определяется культурой социального сравнения, экономической нестабильностью и изменяющейся семейной динамикой, чем исключительно положением среди братьев и сестер.

Ключевые слова: порядок рождения, тревожность будущего, социальная поддержка, поколение Z, психология.

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