



Internalised Feminine Norms and the Role of Assertiveness, Self-Silencing, and Self-Esteem in Emerging Adult Women

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Abstract: Women are often encouraged to be agreeable, emotionally accommodating and relationship-oriented; however, these expectations may come at the cost of their interpersonal voice and self-expression. When feminine norms become internalised, they may shape how women communicate, prioritise others' needs and regulate their own expression, potentially influencing assertiveness through self-silencing processes. Despite growing discussions around gender socialisation, the psychological pathways underlying this relationship remain insufficiently explored. Therefore, the present study examined the relationship between internalised feminine norms and assertiveness among emerging adult women with self-silencing as a mediator and self-esteem as a moderator. A quantitative cross-sectional design was employed involving 204 women aged 18–25 years recruited through online questionnaires. Data were collected using the Femininity Ideology Scale–Short Form (FIS–SF), Silencing the Self Scale (STSS), Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (RAS) and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES). Data were analysed using correlation, mediation and moderation analyses. The findings revealed that internalised feminine norms did not demonstrate a direct relationship with assertiveness. However, they were positively associated with self-silencing which significantly mediated the relationship between internalised feminine norms and assertiveness. Self-esteem was positively associated with assertiveness and significantly moderated the relationship between internalised feminine norms and assertiveness. The findings suggest that the influence of internalised feminine norms on assertiveness may operate indirectly through relational self-regulation processes, particularly self-silencing, while self-esteem shapes the strength of this association. The study highlights

the importance of interventions targeting self-silencing tendencies while strengthening self-worth and assertiveness skills among women in university and early-career contexts.

Keywords: *Internalised Feminine Norms, Assertiveness, Self-Silencing, Self-Esteem, Emerging Adult Women*

1. INTRODUCTION

Internalised feminine norms can shape how emerging adult women express their needs, opinions and boundaries in interpersonal, academic and professional contexts. The importance of this issue is increased in modern social and work situations. In higher education the early career and digitally mediated work environments young women are often required to present themselves as visible, decisive and self-advocacy as indicators of competence and work readiness. Meanwhile, the boundaries of agency through which women are allowed to perform are asymmetrical in the form of behavioural norms. Direct communication can be interpreted through a relational and normative lens that imposes greater interpersonal costs on women than on men. Contemporary accounts of gender bias emphasise that discrimination is maintained not only by descriptive stereotypes, meaning beliefs about what women are like, but also by prescriptive stereotypes, meaning beliefs about what women should be like. Prescriptive expectations can generate negative evaluation when women violate norms of warmth and accommodation (Heilman, 2024; Manzi et al., 2024). Consistent with this formulation, meta-analytic evidence indicates that women are more likely to face backlash in social evaluation when they display dominance related behaviour that overlaps with assertive self-expression (Williams & Tiedens, 2016).

In the larger context, internalised feminine norms should receive particular psychological attention since they shift the social control to the external environment and situate it within the self. Norms do not necessarily act by relying on external sanctions like criticism, rejection or social exclusion. They can also be internalised as standards that shape what feels appropriate to say, want or request. The current research takes a theoretically consistent operationalisation of internalised feminine norms in terms of Traditional Femininity Ideology which is a support of culturally traditional norms of women, including deference, relational prioritisation and purity associated norms. In the Gender Role Strain Paradigm, the traditional femininity ideology becomes an internalised set of beliefs which may induce strain in cases when they feel pressure to adhere to or expect social punishment in case of non-adherence (Levant et al., 2017).

The study examines the association between internalised feminine norms and assertiveness among emerging adult women. Emerging adulthood is characterised by identity exploration and role negotiation across education, work, intimate relationships and self-definition which are contexts in which self-advocacy becomes particularly consequential (Arnett, 2016). Assertiveness in this study refers to the capacity to express one's needs, boundaries and rights with clarity while maintaining respect for others. It is conceptually distinct from aggression and from passivity and is frequently treated as a protective interpersonal competence.

The study further examines whether this association operates through a specific psychological mechanism, namely self-silencing. Self-silencing is a tendency which tends to be persistent, to suppress self-expression, especially needs, dissatisfaction, conflict or disagreement most often in an attempt to conserve relationships, prevent conflict or sustain an image of relational acceptability. The latest studies still report silencing behaviours in young women in heterosexual relationships and the importance of relational issues and the expected outcomes on the decision to nondisclosed voice (Samardzic et al., 2025).

Lastly, the model includes self-esteem as a moderator. Female gendered social influences can impair self-esteem when women are strained around femininity-based anticipations and self-worth is a theoretically defensible vulnerability factor or defensive resource in this area (Harrington et al., 2022).

While a great deal of research has gone into the study of gender stereotypes, backlash and women's agency, a vital factor appears to be under addressed. Many emerging adult women experience constraints on assertiveness that are not only externally imposed but also internally maintained through anticipatory self-regulation. When traditional femininity ideology is internalised behavioural inhibition may occur even in the absence of overt discrimination because anticipated relational costs may be sufficient to suppress voice.

Prior research has separately documented social penalties associated with women's dominance related behaviour (Williams & Tiedens, 2016), the role of prescriptive stereotypes in producing double bind conditions for women in achievement and leadership contexts (Heilman, 2024; Manzi et al., 2024) and the continuing relevance of silencing type relational strategies among young women (Samardzic et al., 2025). However, integrated models examining whether internalized feminine norms relate to assertive behavioral inhibition through self-silencing and whether self-esteem strengthens this path have yet to be examined in emerging adult women using a cohesive quantitative model.

The present study seeks to address these gaps by testing whether self-silencing mediates the relationship between internalized feminine norms and assertiveness and whether this relationship is conditional on self-esteem.

This research makes a theoretical contribution by bringing together theories of macro-level gendered social regulation (e.g., backlash and prescriptive stereotypes) and theories of micro-level psychological processes (e.g., internalization, self-silencing, and self-esteem). The proposed model builds on the concept of assertiveness as a relatively stable individual difference by moving towards a more contextual understanding of assertiveness as a psychologically processed construct.

This model is particularly relevant to the period of emerging adulthood, which is marked by the ongoing process of defining relational role and identity (Arnett, 2016). Traditionally defined femininity is seen as an entity which can be quantified and which can be internalized, an issue which is particularly relevant for theories which emphasize the stress-inducing potential of gender norms which are internalized and expressed through self-regulation (Levant et al., 2017).

The purpose of the present study is to examine emerging adult women by examining the relationship between internalized feminine norms, self-silencing, assertiveness and self-esteem and it is designed as a quantitative study.

1.1 Objectives

1. To assess the association between internalized feminine norms (customary femininity ideology) and assertiveness in emerging adult women.
2. To examine whether self-silencing mediates the relationship between internalised feminine norms and assertiveness.
3. To examine whether self-esteem moderates the relationship between internalised feminine norms and assertiveness

1.2 Hypotheses

H1. Internalised feminine norms will be significantly associated with assertiveness among emerging adult women.

H2. Self – Silencing will mediate the relationship between internalised feminine norms and assertiveness

H3. Self – esteem will moderate the relationship between internalised feminine norms and assertiveness.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Participants

The sample comprised of 204 young adult women aged 18 to 25 years from Delhi, India, recruited through convenience sampling.

2.2 Inclusion Criteria

The sample comprised of female participants aged 18-25 years willing to give consent to the study.

2.3 Exclusion Criteria

The study did not include the participants who were below the necessary age or unwilling to agree to participate in the research.

2.4 Measures

Femininity Ideology Scale – SF: The FIS SF is designed to measure the endorsement of traditional femininity ideology in the following areas: dependence and deference, purity and emotionality or traditional roles. The instrument consists of 12 items on 5-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Items are summed to obtain domain scale scores and a total traditional femininity ideology score. Higher total scale scores indicate more agreement with traditional femininity ideology. The instrument has demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency reliability in its validation research. Reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .82 for the Dependence/Deference subscale, .85 for the Purity subscale, .88 for the Emotionality/Traditional Roles subscale, and .85 for the total score (Levant et al., 2017)

Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (RAS): Developed by Spencer A. Rathus 1973. The Rathus Assertiveness Schedule is a self-report instrument designed to assess assertive behavioural tendencies across interpersonal situations. The instrument consists of 30 items rated on a six-point response scale ranging from very uncharacteristic of me to very characteristic of me. Items describe a variety of everyday social and interpersonal scenarios in which assertive responding may be required. Items are coded based on the recommended scoring key with items that have a negative wording being reverse scored as shown in the scoring book. The responses of the items are added together to calculate total scores. The higher the total scores, the more assertive is the person, the lower the scores, the lesser the assertive tendencies. The Rathus Assertiveness Schedule has demonstrated acceptable to strong psychometric properties across previous studies. Reported internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) typically range from .73 to .86, indicating good reliability. Test-retest reliability over approximately two months has been reported between .76 and .83, reflecting

score stability over time. Split half reliability estimates have ranged from .77 to .80, suggesting adequate item homogeneity. Evidence of concurrent validity has been established through correlations with other established measures of assertiveness.

Silencing the Self Scale (STSS): Dana Crowley Jack and Diana Dill 1992. Silencing the Self Scale is a self-report scale, which was constructed to measure the habits of not expressing oneself in intimate relations. The instrument has 31 items which are rated on 5-point Likert type scale between strongly disagree and strongly agree. The scale quantifies the trends of the dismissal of individual needs, withholding opposition, giving preference to affiliative harmony and managing the expression of emotion to maintain attachment. Item responses are summed according to the prescribed scoring procedure to yield a total self-silencing score. Higher scores indicate greater tendencies toward self-silencing, including inhibition of voice and prioritisation of relational maintenance over self-expression. The Silencing the Self Scale has demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency in its original validation research, with a reported Cronbach's alpha of .86 for the total scale. Subscale reliability coefficients reported in the validation study ranged from approximately .70 to .89, indicating acceptable to strong internal consistency across dimensions. Construct validity has been supported through theoretically consistent associations with depressive symptoms, relational distress, and gendered relational dynamics, providing empirical support for the scale's conceptual framework.

Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (RSES): Morris Rosenberg 1965 The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale is a widely used self-report instrument designed to assess global self-worth. The instrument consists of 10 items rated on a 4-point Likert type scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The items reflect overall positive and negative evaluations of the self and capture a general sense of personal value and self-acceptance. The scale is scored by summing the individual item responses after reverse scoring the negatively worded items. Higher total scores indicate higher levels of global self-esteem. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale has demonstrated strong psychometric properties. The Guttman coefficient of reproducibility has been reported as .92, indicating excellent internal consistency. Test-retest reliability over a two-week period has yielded correlations between .85 and .88, demonstrating strong temporal stability. Evidence of concurrent, predictive, and construct validity has been established through significant associations with other measures of self-esteem as well as theoretically consistent correlations with measures of depression and anxiety.

2.5 Variables

Independent Variable: Internalized feminine norms, also known as Traditional Femininity Ideology, was used through the use of the Femininity Ideology Scale Short Form tool.

Dependent Variable: Rathus assertiveness scale (RAS) was used to measure assertiveness.

Mediating Variable: Self silencing was utilized with the Silencing the Self Scale (STSS) tool.

Moderating Variable: The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) was employed for the measurement of self-esteem.

2.6 Procedure

The data was collected through a structured Google Form survey. The form started with an information statement where the participants were given information on the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of the research, confidentiality and the eligibility criteria. This was then followed by an informed consent statement. The data collection process was completed over a period of 1 month. Subsequent to this, participants were administered the demographic questionnaire and the four standardized scales of FIS SF, STSS, RAS, and RSES.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

The participants were informed and given informed consent prior to the commencement of the research. The participants had the freedom of terminating at any level by closing the form; therefore, the participation was voluntary. The results were not displayed individually because the research did not involve any questions which would identify the participants because this would have compromised confidentiality and anonymity. Research questions applied in this specific study were not in invasive kind; however the subjects were indirectly safeguarded through the voluntary participation requirement.

2.8 Statistical Analysis

The data analysis was performed by using the JASP statistical software. The level of significance was established to be at 0.05.

- Descriptive statistics
- Descriptive statistics were calculated for all scales' total scores.

Pearson correlations were calculated between FIS SF, STSS, RAS, and RSES total scores to examine zero-order relationships relevant to the model. A mediation model examined if self-silencing (STSS) statistically mediated the relationship between internalized feminine

norms (FIS SF) and assertiveness (RAS). This indirect effect was assessed using confidence intervals and significance tests, which are offered in JASP. Moderation was assessed using a linear regression model that included an interaction term between FIS SF and RSES, which predicted RAS. This model tests if the relationship between internalized feminine norms and assertiveness varies at different levels of self-esteem.

3. Results

Data Screening and Preparation

The online questionnaire resulted in 204 full responses. There were no missing values in the composite scores used for analysis (missing = 0 across Internalised Feminine Norms, Self Silencing, Assertiveness, and Self Esteem). Univariate outliers were screened using standardized z scores ($|z| > 3.29$). One outlier was detected for Internalised Feminine Norms; no outliers were detected for the remaining study variables. Normality was assessed using the Shapiro–Wilk test. Internalised Feminine Norms deviated significantly from normality ($p < .001$). Assertiveness was borderline ($p = .051$). Self-Silencing and Self Esteem did not significantly deviate from normality ($ps > .05$). Screening results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Data Screening: Outliers and Normality Tests for Study Variables (N=204)*

Variable	Outliers ($ z > 3.29$)	Shapiro – Wilk W	<i>p</i>
Internalised Feminine Norms	1	0.923	< .001
Assertiveness	0	0.987	.051
Self-Silencing	0	0.996	.867
Self-Esteem	0	0.989	.120

Note. FIS = Femininity Ideology Scale–Short Form total score; RAS = Rathus Assertiveness Schedule total score; STSS = Silencing the Self Scale total score; RSES = Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale total score.

Reliability Analysis

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha. Reliability coefficients are reported in Table 2.

Table 2. *Internal Consistency Reliability of Study Measures (N = 204)*

Scale	k (items)	Cronbach’s alpha
Femininity Ideology Scale	12	.82

Rathus Assertiveness Schedule	30	.78
Silencing the Self Scale	31	.89
Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale	10	.84

Note. α values are Cronbach's alpha coefficients computed from item - level responses in the present sample

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

The study was carried on 204 young adult females who were between the age of 18-25 years. The fact that all subjects were women meant that there was no gender distribution heterogeneity. Demographic Details are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. *Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N=204)*

Variable	Description
Gender	Women
Age Range	18 –25 yrs
Total Sample size	204

Note. N = 204

Descriptive Statistics

Table 4. *Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables*

Variable	Valid	Missing	M	SD	Min	Max
Internalised Feminine Norms	204	0	16.35	6.35	9.00	40.00
Assertiveness	204	0	6.44	16.78	-41.00	59.00
Self-Silencing	204	0	80.91	17.49	36.00	131.00
Self-Esteem	204	0	17.61	5.29	3.00	30.00

Note. FIS = Femininity Ideology Scale–Short Form total score; RAS = Rathus Assertiveness Schedule total score; STSS = Silencing the Self Scale total score; RSES = Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale total score.

Assumption Testing

Assumptions relevant to correlational and regression analyses were examined. Normality screening results are reported in Table1. For the moderation regression

multicollinearity was assessed and did not indicate problematic overlap among predictors. Therefore, analyses proceeded using standard parametric procedures.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis showed that internalised feminine norms were not significantly associated with assertiveness, $r = -.015$, $p = .835$. Internalised feminine norms were positively associated with self-silencing, $r = .310$, $p < .001$. Assertiveness was negatively associated with self-silencing, $r = -.337$, $p < .001$, and positively associated with self-esteem, $r = .318$, $p < .001$. Self-silencing was negatively associated with self-esteem, $r = -.464$, $p < .001$. Correlation coefficients are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. *Pearson Correlations Among Study Variables (N=204)*

Variable	1	2	3	4
Internalised Feminine Norms	—			
Assertiveness	-.015	—		
Self - Silencing	.310***	-.337***	—	
Self- Esteem	-.089	.318***	-.464***	—

Note. *** $p < .001$.

Regression Analysis

Simple linear regression was conducted to examine whether internalised feminine norms predicted assertiveness. Internalised feminine norms did not significantly predict assertiveness, $b = -0.039$, $SE = 0.186$, $t = -0.21$, $p = .835$. The model was not significant, $R^2 < .001$, $F(1, 202) = 0.004$, $p = .835$. Regression results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. *Simple Linear Regression Predicting Assertiveness from Internalised Feminine Norms (N = 204)*

Predictor	b	SE	t	p
Internalised Feminine Norms	-0.039	0.186	-0.21	.835

Note. Model Statistics: $R^2 < .001$, $F(1, 202) = 0.004$, $p = .835$

Mediation Analysis

A mediation analysis was conducted with internalised feminine norms as the predictor, self-silencing as the mediator, and assertiveness as the outcome variable. Internalised feminine norms significantly predicted self-silencing, $b = 0.853$, $SE = 0.184$, $t = 4.63$, $p < .001$. Self-silencing also significantly predicted assertiveness while controlling for internalised feminine

norms, $b = -0.353$, $SE = 0.067$, $t = -5.30$, $p < .001$. The direct effect of internalised feminine norms on assertiveness was not significant, $b = 0.263$, $SE = 0.184$, $t = 1.43$, $p = .150$, and the total effect was also not significant, $b = -0.039$, $SE = 0.186$, $t = -0.21$, $p = .835$. However, the indirect effect through self-silencing was significant, $b = -0.301$, 95% bootstrap CI $[-0.470, -0.133]$. Mediation results are presented in Table 7 and Figure 1.

Table 7. Mediation Analysis: Self Silencing as a Mediator Between Internalised Feminine Norms and Assertiveness ($N = 204$)

Effect	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Path a: Internalized Feminine Norms → Self-Silencing	0.853	0.184	4.63	< .001
Path b: Self-Silencing → Assertiveness (Controlling Internalized Feminine Norms)	-0.353	0.067	-5.30	< .001
Direct effect <i>c'</i> : Internalized Feminine Norms → Assertiveness (Controlling Self - Silencing)	0.263	0.184	1.43	.150
Total effect <i>c</i> : Internalized Feminine Norms → Assertiveness	-0.039	0.186	-0.21	.835

Note. Indirect effect ($a \times b$) = -0.301 , 95% bootstrap CI $[-0.470, -0.133]$

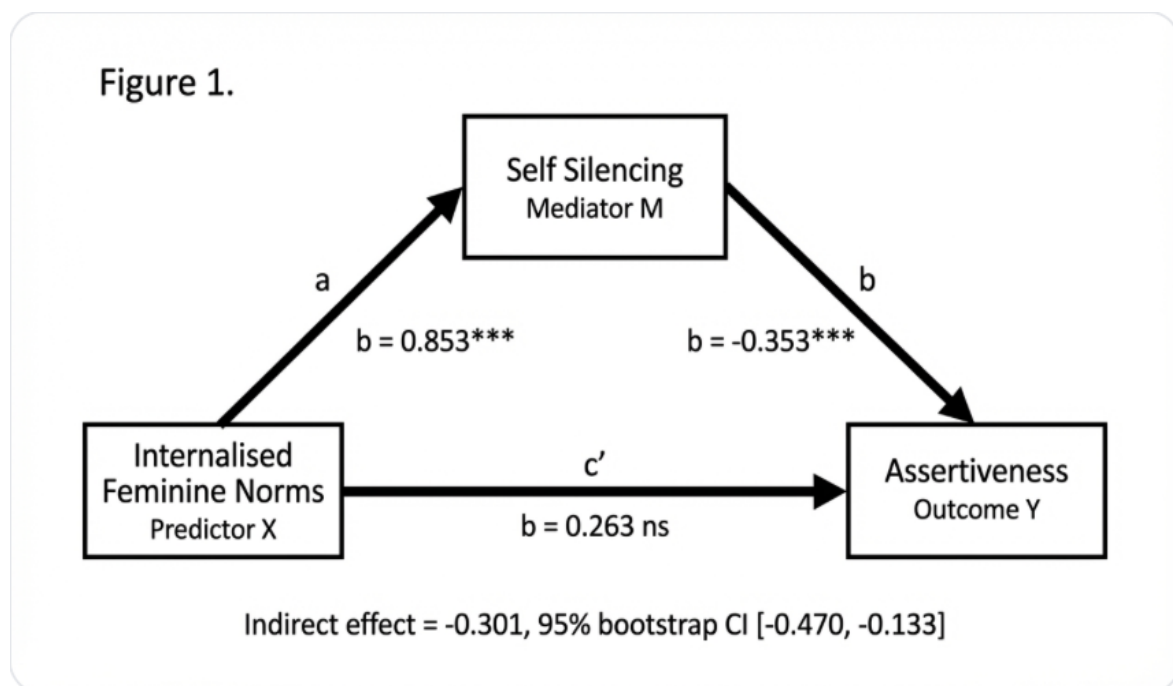


Figure 1. Self- Silencing as the Mediator Between Internalized Feminine Norms and Assertiveness

Note. Unstandardized coefficients (*b*) are shown. * $p < .001$.

Moderation Analysis

Hierarchical multiple regression was conducted to examine whether self-esteem moderated the relationship between internalised feminine norms and assertiveness. Internalised feminine norms and self-esteem were entered as main effects, followed by the interaction term between internalised feminine norms and self-esteem. The interaction term was significant, $b = -0.077$, $SE = 0.037$, $t = -2.047$, $p = .042$, indicating a significant moderation effect. The final model was significant, $R^2 = .120$, $F(3, 200) = 9.084$, $p < .001$. Moderation results are presented in Table 8 and Figure 2.

Table 8. Moderation Analysis: Hierarchical Regression Testing Self – Esteem as a Moderator of The Relationship Between Internalized Feminine Norms and Assertiveness ($N=204$)

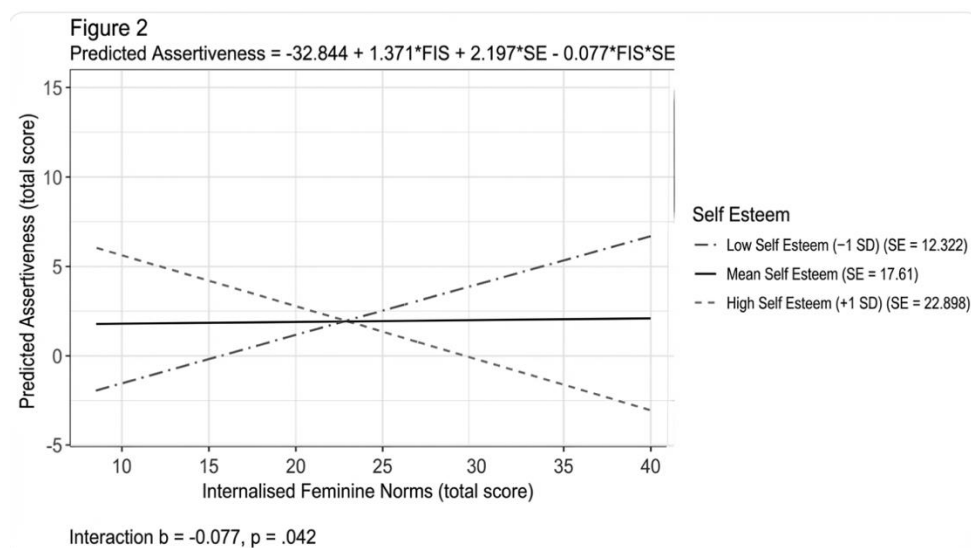
Step	Predictors	R^2	ΔR^2	ΔF	$p(\Delta F)$
1	Internalized Feminine Norms	< .001	—	—	—
2	Internalized Feminine Norms Self-Esteem	.101	0.101	23.01	< .001
3	Internalized Feminine Norms, Self-Esteem, Norms x Self -Esteem	.120	.018	4.19	.042

Note. ΔF tests the change in model fit from the previous step. R^2 values are unadjusted

Final Model Coefficients (Step 3)

Predictor	b	SE	t	p
Internalized Feminine Norms	1.371	0.675	2.030	.044
Self -Esteem	2.197	0.615	3.571	< .001
Norms x Self – Esteem	-0.077	0.037	-2.047	.042

Note. b = unstandardized regression coefficient



4. Discussion

The present study examined whether internalised feminine norms were associated with assertiveness directly, indirectly through self-silencing, and conditionally through self-esteem among emerging adult women. The findings showed that internalised feminine norms were not directly associated with assertiveness in this sample. Both the bivariate correlation and the simple linear regression were non-significant. In contrast, self-silencing significantly mediated the relationship between internalised feminine norms and assertiveness. Greater endorsement of internalised feminine norms was associated with higher self-silencing, and higher self-silencing was associated with lower assertiveness. In addition, self-esteem was positively associated with assertiveness and significantly moderated the relationship between internalised feminine norms and assertiveness. Overall, the findings suggest that internalised feminine norms are better understood as influencing assertiveness indirectly through self-silencing, with self-esteem conditionally shaping the relationship.

4.1 Interpretation of Findings

Internalised Feminine Norms and Assertiveness

The absence of a significant direct relationship suggests that internalised feminine norms do not translate into assertiveness outcomes through a simple direct pathway. This is an important finding because it indicates that endorsement of traditional femininity ideology, by itself, may not be sufficient to predict lower assertiveness at the level of broad self-report scores. One possible explanation is that assertiveness in emerging adulthood is context dependent. Women may continue to endorse relationally oriented feminine norms while also developing socially acceptable and situationally adaptive ways of expressing their needs, boundaries, and preferences. In academic, early-career, and peer contexts, assertive behaviour may therefore coexist with relational caution rather than being uniformly reduced by femininity ideology. This interpretation is consistent with the present study's broader argument that assertiveness should not be understood only as a stable trait, but also as a socially calibrated behaviour shaped by interpersonal expectations and role demands.

A second explanation concerns measurement. The Rathus Assertiveness Schedule includes items that can reflect direct, forceful, or socially confrontational forms of self-expression. In gender-norm contexts, women may avoid behaviours that appear dominant or abrasive while still engaging in more adaptive forms of self-advocacy. As a result, internalised feminine norms may not show a strong direct association with total assertiveness scores, even when they remain psychologically relevant to how voice is regulated in everyday life. This

helps explain why the direct effect was non-significant, while the indirect pathway through self-silencing was significant.

Self-Silencing as a Mediator

The mediation findings provide the clearest psychological explanation for the relationship between internalised feminine norms and assertiveness. Internalised feminine norms significantly predicted self-silencing, and self-silencing significantly predicted lower assertiveness. At the same time, the indirect effect through self-silencing was significant, whereas the direct and total effects of internalised feminine norms on assertiveness were not significant. This pattern indicates that internalised feminine norms may become behaviourally relevant primarily when they operate through a relational self-regulation process. In other words, the key mechanism is not merely endorsement of traditional feminine beliefs, but the extent to which those beliefs are translated into inhibition of self-expression in order to preserve relational harmony, avoid disapproval, or reduce anticipated interpersonal cost.

This interpretation is theoretically consistent with the Gender Role Strain framework cited in the study, which suggests that internalised gender norms can create strain when deviation is perceived as socially costly. It is also consistent with prior work on prescriptive stereotypes and backlash, which indicates that women's agency is often evaluated against expectations of warmth, agreeableness, and accommodation. The present findings extend that literature by identifying a plausible internal mechanism: anticipated relational cost may be managed through self-silencing, and this in turn may reduce assertive expression. Thus, the study supports a more process-based account of women's assertiveness in which internalised feminine norms affect behaviour not directly, but through the regulation of voice.

Self-Esteem as a Moderator

Self-esteem showed a positive relationship with assertiveness and significantly moderated the relationship between internalised feminine norms and assertiveness. The moderation model indicated that the interaction between internalised feminine norms and self-esteem was statistically significant, and the final model accounted for a meaningful proportion of the variance in assertiveness. This suggests that the relationship between internalised feminine norms and assertiveness is conditional rather than uniform. In psychological terms, self-esteem may function as a personal resource that changes how strongly internalised norms are reflected in behavioural expression. Women with stronger global self-worth may be better able to negotiate interpersonal demands, tolerate evaluation, and maintain self-expression even in the presence of gendered expectations.

At the same time, this moderation effect should be interpreted cautiously. Although the interaction was statistically significant, the increment in explained variance was modest. Therefore, self-esteem should not be treated as a complete explanation of assertiveness outcomes. Instead, the present findings suggest that self-esteem is one important conditional factor within a broader social-psychological process. This interpretation is consistent with research showing that self-esteem is generally beneficial across life domains, while also remaining vulnerable to gendered social pressures and discrepancy strain. The current study therefore supports the view that self-esteem contributes both to assertive functioning generally and to the way internalised gender norms are translated into behaviour.

4.2 Theoretical Implications

The study has three main theoretical implications. First, it supports a mechanism-based understanding of the relationship between internalised femininity ideology and behavioural outcomes. The findings indicate that internalised feminine norms are not best understood as directly suppressing assertiveness; rather, their influence appears to operate through self-silencing. Second, the findings strengthen the argument that assertiveness among women should be understood in relation to gendered social regulation, prescriptive stereotypes, and anticipated interpersonal consequences. Third, the moderation findings suggest that models of women's assertiveness may benefit from integrating both socialised norms and internal resources. Taken together, the results support a contextual and process-oriented account of assertiveness in emerging adult women rather than a purely trait-based explanation.

4.3 Practical Implications

The present findings have practical relevance for counselling, psychoeducation, and university-based support programmes. Traditional assertiveness training often focuses on behavioural skills such as saying no, making requests, and setting boundaries clearly. The current results suggest that these interventions may be more effective when they also address self-silencing processes and the relational fears that maintain them. Women may not simply lack skill; they may be regulating their voice in anticipation of criticism, disapproval, or relational disruption. Accordingly, interventions should help individuals identify self-silencing patterns, distinguish relational sensitivity from chronic self-suppression, and develop ways of expressing needs without construing voice as disrespectful or morally wrong.

The moderation findings also suggest that assertiveness-focused interventions may benefit from including self-worth components. Programmes that combine assertiveness skills with self-compassion, cognitive restructuring of gendered self-judgments, and confidence-building exercises may be especially useful. In educational and early-career settings, these

findings also support mentoring, supervision, and communication environments that reduce the interpersonal cost of women's self-advocacy. Clearer expectations, constructive responses to boundary-setting, and support for direct communication may reduce the need for self-silencing and promote more sustainable assertive functioning.

4.4 Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study used a cross-sectional design, which limits causal inference. Although the mediation model was statistically supported, temporal ordering cannot be established from cross-sectional data alone. Second, all variables were assessed through self-report, which introduces the possibility of shared method variance, response bias, and social desirability effects. Third, the sample consisted only of emerging adult women recruited through convenience sampling in a specific context, which limits generalisability. Fourth, the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule may capture relatively direct or confrontational aspects of assertiveness, which may not fully reflect socially adaptive or context-sensitive self-advocacy. Finally, the moderation effect, although statistically significant, was modest and should therefore be interpreted with caution until replicated.

4.5 Future Research Directions

Future research should use longitudinal designs to test whether internalised feminine norms predict later increases in self-silencing and subsequent reductions in assertiveness over time. Studies could also examine moderated mediation models more explicitly, particularly whether self-esteem changes the strength of the indirect pathway through self-silencing. Multi-method designs using behavioural tasks, observer ratings, peer reports, or interaction-based assessments would strengthen confidence in the findings beyond self-report alone. Future work may also benefit from examining specific dimensions of femininity ideology, such as deference, relational prioritisation, or conflict avoidance, to identify which aspects are most strongly linked to self-silencing. Finally, replication with larger and more diverse samples would improve the generalisability of the present findings and clarify how these processes operate across different educational, relational, and cultural settings.

5. Conclusions

The present research contributes to a more precise understanding of women's assertiveness in emerging adulthood: the key limitation is not a lack of confidence or ability per se, but rather a psychologically organized process of self-regulation based on internalized femininity ideology. The results suggest that internalized feminine norms were not supported as a predictor of assertiveness via a direct pathway, which undermines the assumption that

traditional femininity inevitably promotes assertiveness. Rather, the results support a more defensible claim that internalized femininity ideology is behaviorally significant to the extent that it operates via self-silencing. Indeed, in this study, traditional femininity ideology was associated with self-silencing, and self-silencing was associated with lower assertiveness via a statistically supported indirect pathway. These findings suggest that the key process is not that women lack needs or views to express, but rather that they are systematically inhibited from doing so in anticipation of relational consequences. These findings provide further support for the contention that understanding voice among women requires the consideration of both internal resources and socialised norms. In addition, self-esteem was found to be a robust positive predictor of assertiveness, supporting the contention that global self-worth facilitates interpersonal assertiveness. At the same time, however, the interaction also supports the contention that the relationship between femininity ideology and assertiveness varies depending upon self-esteem, such that the relationship between the two constructs is at least partially dependent upon self-esteem. Overall, the current findings support a model of assertiveness that conceptualises assertiveness as a socially calibrated behaviour influenced by both internalised norms and interpersonal threat appraisal, rather than a trait-based construct. In terms of the broader research literature, the current study contributes by identifying self-silencing as a promising means by which the relationship between internalised femininity ideology and assertiveness can be understood among emerging adult women. The implication is that if we are to improve women's assertiveness in any given situation, we should not simply concentrate on "being more confident" without considering the underlying calculus in relationships that makes this act costly in the first place. By emphasizing this particular mechanism of self-silencing and the contingency of self-esteem, this particular study provides better understanding and a more targeted approach to intervention in university and early career settings where self-advocacy among women really matters.

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Conflict of Interests

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