

Original Research

Cognitive Flexibility and Decision-Making Style Among Young Adults

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Abstract:

This study explores the relationship between cognitive flexibility and decision-making styles among young adults. Cognitive flexibility refers to the mental ability to adjust thinking and behaviour in response to changing circumstances, while decision-making style denotes the characteristic manner in which individuals approach choices in different situations. Young adulthood is a critical phase marked by multiple important decisions related to education, career, and personal life. Developing cognitive flexibility during this period may enhance individuals' capacity to make rational and adaptive decisions. Based on existing theoretical frameworks and prior research, this study posits that individuals with higher cognitive flexibility are more likely to adopt rational and intuitive decision-making styles, whereas those with lower flexibility may demonstrate avoidant or dependent patterns. No primary data were collected; the analysis relies on synthesized findings from published studies. The findings suggest that fostering cognitive flexibility can improve decision-making abilities and provide guidance for educational programs, psychological counselling, and skill development interventions.

Keywords: Cognitive Flexibility, Decision-Making Style, Young Adults, Executive Function, Adaptability

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Introduction:

Cognitive flexibility is a crucial mental capacity of the human brain that empowers an individual to modify their thoughts, perspectives, and behaviours in response to changing circumstances. It constitutes a key component of Executive Functions, playing a pivotal role in problem-solving, learning processes, and decision-making. When an individual encounters a novel, complex, or uncertain situation, cognitive flexibility assists them in considering various options and adapting themselves to the prevailing circumstances.

Conversely, Decision-Making Style refers to the enduring and distinct manner in which an individual approaches and makes various decisions throughout their life. Each individual's decision-making style may vary, influenced by their personality, experiences, emotions, and social environment. Generally, the primary decision-making styles include Rational, Intuitive, Dependent, and Avoidant approaches. These styles reflect the extent to which an individual engages in analysis, relies on emotions, or demonstrates a tendency to defer decisions when faced with a choice.

Young Adulthood represents a profoundly significant and transitional phase of life, during which individuals are required to make numerous critical decisions regarding their education, career, personal relationships, and social identity. During this stage, individuals confront a multitude of options and challenges, thereby rendering the decision-making process inherently complex. In the contemporary era, driven by technological advancements, escalating competition, and societal expectations, the act of decision-making has become even more challenging

for the youth. In this context, cognitive flexibility emerges as an essential skill, enabling individuals to objectively evaluate various options and arrive at appropriate decisions.

However, cognitive flexibility is not present at an equal level across all individuals. Some individuals readily adjust their thoughts in accordance with changing circumstances and are receptive to new information, whereas others—due to rigid thinking patterns—experience difficulty in embracing change. Such rigidity impacts the decision-making process, potentially leading individuals to delay decisions, avoid making them altogether, or become excessively dependent on others. This can have a negative impact on their personal, academic, and professional lives.

The objective of the present study is to understand the relationship between cognitive flexibility and decision-making styles. Specifically, this study seeks to elucidate how cognitive flexibility influences various decision-making styles. This research is grounded in a theoretical model positing that individuals with high cognitive flexibility are capable of making more effective and adaptive decisions, whereas individuals with lower flexibility may exhibit less effective decision-making styles.

This study is significant not only from a theoretical perspective but also in terms of its practical relevance. Its findings could prove useful in the fields of education, career guidance, and psychological counselling. By fostering cognitive flexibility in young adults, their decision-making capabilities can be enhanced, thereby enabling them to make more successful and balanced decisions across various spheres of life.

Review of Literature (2019–2025)

In recent years, research has increasingly focused on the connection between cognitive flexibility and decision-making styles. The rapid social, technological, and psychological changes of the modern era have made adaptive decision-making a critical skill. Cognitive flexibility, defined as the ability to modify thinking and behaviour in response to new information or changing conditions, has been recognized as a key factor influencing effective decision-making ⁽¹⁾.

Gabrys, Tabri, Anisman, and Matheson ⁽²⁾ found that individuals with higher cognitive flexibility are better able to cope with stress and make balanced decisions in challenging situations. Flexible thinkers tend to consider multiple alternatives and adjust their strategies according to situational demands. Similarly, Dajani and Uddin ⁽¹⁾ emphasized that cognitive flexibility, as an essential executive function, allows individuals to shift mental sets and integrate new information, directly affecting decision-making quality.

Studies conducted in 2020 explored decision-making under uncertainty. Kalia, Knauff, and Hayatbini ⁽³⁾ reported that individuals with higher cognitive flexibility can evaluate options logically and maintain balanced judgment even in risky or unpredictable scenarios. Genet and Siemer ⁽⁴⁾ demonstrated that cognitive flexibility is positively associated with emotional regulation, which in turn improves decision-making clarity and effectiveness.

Research in 2021 further highlighted these relationships. Deng, Li, and Tang ⁽⁵⁾ observed that young adults with high cognitive flexibility carefully analyze multiple options before making decisions, resulting in more realistic and adaptive outcomes. In contrast, Zhang and Feng ⁽⁶⁾ found that lower flexibility often leads to indecision, procrastination, and reliance on others, suggesting that cognitive flexibility affects both the style and quality of decisions.

In 2022, studies examined risk assessment and learning processes. Yu, Chen, and Wang ⁽⁷⁾ noted that individuals with higher flexibility assess risks more rationally, whereas those with lower flexibility may either avoid decisions or take excessive risks. Additional research indicated that cognitive flexibility enhances learning adaptability, further supporting effective decision-making in complex environments.

The impact of the digital age was emphasized in 2023. Li and Fang ⁽⁸⁾ reported that, despite the challenges of information overload, cognitively flexible individuals can filter relevant information and apply it effectively, leading to more accurate decisions. Similarly, Kim and Lee ⁽⁹⁾ highlighted that the combination of cognitive flexibility and self-regulation significantly improves decision-making quality among young adults.

Recent studies in 2024 reinforced the predictive role of cognitive flexibility. Wang, Liu, and Zhao ⁽¹⁰⁾ found that higher cognitive flexibility fosters rational and intuitive decision-making styles, while lower flexibility correlates with avoidant and dependent styles. Sharma and Gupta ⁽¹¹⁾, in their study on Indian youth, also concluded that cognitive flexibility enhances

confidence and clarity in decisions related to career and education.

Preliminary studies in 2025 by Singh and Verma ⁽¹²⁾ suggested that cognitive flexibility has become a key determinant of effective decision-making. They emphasized the importance of educational and psychological interventions to cultivate this capacity among young adults.

Research Gap:

An analysis of the available literature clearly indicates that both Cognitive Flexibility and Decision-Making Style are significant domains within psychology, which have been studied by various researchers across diverse contexts. Although efforts have been made to understand the relationship between these two concepts, several significant research gaps persist within the current literature.

First, in most studies, cognitive flexibility and decision-making have been examined as distinct concepts, while attempts to explicitly establish a direct and structured relationship between them have been limited. Specifically, there is a scarcity of systematic analyses examining the impact of cognitive flexibility on decision-making styles by utilizing it as a predictor.

Second, the majority of available research has adopted a correlational approach, measuring only the association between these two variables without adequately elucidating the causal or predictive relationships between them. Consequently, there remains a gap in understanding precisely how cognitive flexibility influences various decision-making styles.

Third, while research conducted since 2019 has highlighted the significance of cognitive flexibility within the contexts of uncertainty, risk, and digital environments, these studies still lack an integrated analysis of its interplay with decision-making styles. There is a particular need to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between these two concepts, especially within the context of young adults.

Fourth, research conducted on this subject within the Indian context remains extremely limited. Most studies have been conducted in Western nations, and their findings cannot be directly applied to Indian youth due to cultural and social disparities. Therefore, it becomes imperative to investigate this relationship specifically within the context of young Indian adults. Fifthly, current literature reveals a lack of a comprehensive and theoretical model capable of clearly delineating the relationship between cognitive flexibility and decision-making styles. Such a model could serve as a foundation for future empirical research.

Therefore, taking these research gaps into consideration, the present study posits cognitive flexibility as a key predictor and endeavours to understand how it influences various decision-making styles. This study is not only theoretically significant but also provides a crucial foundation for future research and practical applications.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine cognitive flexibility among young adults.
2. To identify different decision-making styles.

3. To analyze the relationship between cognitive flexibility and decision-making styles.
4. To assess the impact of cognitive flexibility on decision-making styles.

Methodology

Research Design

The present study adopts a theoretical and model-based research design, aiming to examine the relationship between cognitive flexibility and decision-making styles among young adults. The study is grounded in a conceptual framework that positions cognitive flexibility as a predictive factor influencing various decision-making styles.

Nature of the Study

This research is descriptive and analytical in nature, as it systematically reviews existing literature and synthesizes theoretical perspectives to understand the association between the variables. The study does not involve empirical data collection and instead focuses on conceptual analysis.

Research Approach

The study follows a deductive approach, wherein established theories and prior empirical findings are utilized to develop a structured model and derive expected relationships between cognitive flexibility and decision-making styles.

Population and Scope

The study conceptually focuses on young adults aged 18–25 years, as this developmental stage involves critical life decisions related to education, career, and personal identity. The scope of the study is limited to understanding psychological processes influencing decision-making within this age group.

Variables of the Study

Independent Variable: Cognitive Flexibility

Dependent Variable: Decision-Making Styles

Rational

Intuitive

Dependent

Avoidant

Sources of Data

The study is based on secondary data sources, including:

Peer-reviewed journal articles

Academic books

Published research papers

Relevant psychological theories and models

Conceptual Frameworks

The study proposes a conceptual model in which cognitive flexibility acts as a predictor of decision-making styles. It is expected to positively influence adaptive styles (rational and intuitive) and negatively influence maladaptive styles (dependent and avoidant).

Proposed Analytical Techniques(Future study)

Although the present study is theoretical in nature, future empirical research may validate the proposed model using statistical techniques such as:

Correlation analysis

Multiple regression analysis

Ethical Considerations

Since the study is based on secondary data and does not involve human participants, no ethical issues related to data collection arise. However, proper

citation and acknowledgment of all sources have been maintained to ensure academic integrity.

Conceptual Model

High Cognitive Flexibility → **Rational & Intuitive decision-making**

Low Cognitive Flexibility → **Dependent & Avoidant decision-making**

This model illustrates that cognitive flexibility influences thinking, evaluation of alternatives, and final decision-making.

Conclusion:

The primary objective of the present study was to understand the relationship between cognitive flexibility and decision-making styles among young adults. Based on an analysis of the available literature, it becomes evident that cognitive flexibility is a crucial mental capacity that assists individuals in adapting their thoughts and behaviours to changing circumstances.

The study concludes that individuals possessing a high level of cognitive flexibility are capable of making more effective, balanced, and rational decisions. They analyze various alternatives, adjust their decisions according to the prevailing circumstances, and make choices with greater confidence. Conversely, individuals with low cognitive flexibility tend to exhibit indecisiveness, procrastination, and a reliance on others when making decisions.

This study also underscores the fact that cognitive flexibility is not merely a cognitive ability, but rather the cornerstone of effective decision-making. In the current era where complexity and uncertainty are on the rise across various spheres of life the significance of this capacity becomes even more pronounced.

Therefore, it can be asserted that fostering cognitive flexibility among young adults is absolutely essential for strengthening their decision-making skills. This study provides a foundation for future empirical research and also underscores the need for further investigation in this field.

Implications:

Educational: Programs can enhance students' cognitive flexibility for better career decisions.

Psychological: Counselling can focus on improving flexibility to support decision-making.

Practical: Workplaces can train employees in adaptive decision skills.

Research: Provides a framework for empirical testing of the model.

Social: Enhances responsible and balanced decision-making among youth.

Source of Support: Nil

Conflict of interest: Nil

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