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Cognitive Fragmentation, Ethical Oversights and Decision-Making Bias in Leadership: Psychological Consequences Beyond Conventional Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

The pilot study explores Cognitive Versatility Theory (CVT) as a framework for investigating the effects of cognitive fragmentation on ethical lapses and leadership decision-making in digital occupational environments. Using CVT's analytic, creative, intuitive, and reflective (ACIR) cognitive processes, the study demonstrates that increased CVT engagement significantly improves workplace adaptability (beta = 0.38, $p < 0.01$), leadership cognition (beta = 0.44, $p < 0.01$), and effective decision-making (beta = 0.33, $p < 0.05$), accounting for 45% of the variance in these outcomes ($R^2 = 0.45$, $F(3, 96) = 16.85$, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, cognitive fragmentation is moderately correlated with ethical lapses ($r = -0.483$, $p < 0.001$) and decision-making bias ($r = -0.672$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting its adverse impact on ethical oversight and decision-making flexibility. The study examines the subtle psychological consequences of fragmented cognition on ethical reasoning and decision-making. Employing a mixed-method approach, integrating validated psychometric instruments with qualitative thematic analysis, the findings contribute to the empirical foundation for CVT's applicability in workplace psychology. These results offer insights into decision-making biases, cognitive resilience, and ethical accountability in corporate leadership. As leaders engage more deeply in adaptive ACIR strategies, the negative effects of cognitive fragmentation diminish, enhancing overall leadership effectiveness in cognitively demanding conditions.

1. Introduction

Throughout history, technological advancements have influenced cognitive processing, from the printing press to the digital age. Modern digital technologies, including AI and cloud computing, have become integral to daily life, offering convenience but also intensifying cognitive fragmentation and disrupting integrative cognitive processing (Carr, 2010). This fragmentation involves disjointed thought patterns and difficulty maintaining focus, exacerbated by digital technologies, leading to attentional depletion and executive dysfunction.

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In professional environments, digital interruptions and algorithm-driven workflows increase decision fatigue and fragmented leadership cognition. Executives managing high-information workflows experience cognitive overload, impairing reflective reasoning and ethical accountability (Rest, 1986; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Hyperconnectivity and information saturation impair attention regulation and mental well-being (Neuro Launch, n.d).

Cognitive fragmentation intersects with Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988) and Attentional Control Theory (Eysenck et al., 2007), highlighting the challenges of maintaining cognitive cohesion in a hyperconnected world (Muñoz-Rodríguez, 2021). International research shows cognitive fragmentation's impact on memory, cognitive development, and decision-making (Clark et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2022; Schreiber et al., 2023). In corporate settings, fragmented cognition affects motivation, ethical judgment, and executive functioning (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). Cognitive Versatility Theory (CVT) explores analytic, creative, intuitive, and reflective (ACIR) thinking in mitigating cognitive fragmentation. The study evaluates CVT's applicability in leadership cognition and decision-making, examining how fragmented thinking, ethical lapses, and biased decision-making affect leadership outcomes in technology-driven environments. Specifically, it explores the feasibility of applying Cognitive Versatility Theory (CVT) to workplace psychology. It refines methodologies and examines CVT's role in mitigating adverse outcomes, strengthening professional integrity, and enhancing adaptability. The research also addresses cognitive fragmentation and its psychological effects, offering insights into how CVT fosters resilience and accountability in professional environments.

1.1. Problem Statement

Existing studies rarely assess how fragmented cognition itself contributes to ethical oversight, moral disengagement, or the rationalization of unethical decisions in workplaces that incorporate digital technologies, highlighting an important gap in literature.

1.2. Research Question

How does cognitive fragmentation impact ethical judgment and decision-making in corporate leadership?

1.3. Hypotheses

*Null Hypothesis (H_0)***:** Cognitive fragmentation has no significant effect on ethical judgment and decision-making in corporate leadership.

Alternative Hypothesis (H_1): Cognitive fragmentation significantly impacts ethical judgment and decision-making in corporate leadership.

2. Literature Review

Research on cognitive distortions, heuristics, and fragmented thinking highlights their impact on ethical judgment, analyzing the role of workplace distractions, technological overload, and fragmented cognition in rationalizing unethical choices. While decision-making biases in leadership have been studied, the direct influence of cognitive fragmentation on ethical lapses remains underexplored (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). Leadership research often focuses on intentional unethical behavior, but fragmented cognition may contribute to unconscious ethical misjudgments, making executives more susceptible to moral disengagement and rationalization of unethical decisions (Bazerman & Gino, 2012). Workplace fragmentation driven by high-speed digital communication and constant task-switching may impair ethical reasoning, reducing leaders' ability to engage in holistic moral evaluations (Rest, 1986).

2.1. Cognitive Fragmentation and Ethical Blind Spots in Leadership

Kindermann and Onofri (2021) set out to explore how the mind can be understood as fragmented or compartmentalized. Their discovery aligns with the notion that mental information is stored in distinct segments akin to "belief fragments" or "mental files" rather than being integrated into an undifferentiated whole. Their theoretical analysis emphasizes the importance of cognitive unity, arguing that leaders experiencing fragmented cognition may struggle with ethical consistency, ultimately leading to unintended moral reasoning and compromised professional integrity. Murtha et al. (1998) examined global mindsets and cognitive shifts in multinational corporations, highlighting the effects of fragmented cognition on ethical reasoning and leadership accountability. The study suggests that leaders navigating complex global environments may experience moral disengagement and ethical inconsistencies due to cognitive overload and fragmented decision-making. Bazerman and Gino (2012) provide complementary insights into the cause-and-effect relationship between cognitive fragmentation and overload. Their findings suggest that cognitive fragmentation precipitates ethical vacuums and reinforces cognitive biases in leadership decision-making. More recent reviews, such as those discussed by Berthet (2022) further underscore the role that fragmented cognition plays in amplifying “rule-of-thumb” distortions like confirmation bias and overconfidence, which adversely impact ethical leadership.

Two insightful articles that address ethical lapses in leadership cognition are Shonk (2024) and Price (2006). Shonk (2024) examines a series of aviation disasters linked to Boeing, including the crashes of Lion Air Flight 610 in 2018, Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302, and a fuselage panel blowing off a 737 MAX in midair in 2024, which raise fundamental questions about the company's ethical leadership. Despite promises of improvement, Boeing prioritized short-term profitability and shifted from an 'engineering-led culture' to centralized corporate control, discouraging engineers from voicing safety concerns (Shonk, 2024). This reflects what Tenbrunsel and Messick term 'ethical fading,' where ethical considerations are overshadowed, reducing decisions to 'business choices' undermining ethical leadership. Price (2006) explores the cognitive dimensions of ethical failures in leadership, attributing them to false beliefs rather than bad desires. Leaders often make mistakes due to faulty cognition about the scope of moral principles, mistakenly believing that their actions are justified by commitment to group goals. Failure to acknowledge ethical constraints or consider the interests of outsiders underscores the complexity of moral justification in leadership. Price further included cognitive errors, rather than selfish intent, drive leaders to rationalize decisions as 'business choices' instead of 'ethical choices,' increasing the likelihood of unethical behavior. Leaders may justify moral costs to outsiders in pursuit of group goals, further blurring ethical boundaries.

While targeted studies specifically isolating cognitive fragmentation’s direct influence on ethical blind spots in leadership are limited, the sources here underscore the emerging interest in understanding the cognitive mechanisms that impair moral reasoning and leadership accountability. The body of literature highlights both the progress made and the gaps that remain, suggesting a clear need for future empirical investigation into how fragmented cognition contributes to ethical blind spots and decision making, underscoring the importance of further research into the cognitive mechanisms that influence ethical lapses.

2.2. Cognitive Fragmentation and Workplace Mal-Adaptivity

Mark, Gonzalez, and Harris (2005) examine workplace fragmentation, showing that frequent task-switching and interruptions disrupt cognitive continuity, impairing adaptability, and efficiency. Their study found that workers switch tasks rapidly, with 57% of working spheres interrupted, reinforcing the idea that cognitive fragmentation directly contributes to workplace

mal-adaptivity. Kalakoski et al. (2020) extend this discussion by demonstrating how cognitive strain caused by excessive disruptions and information overload negatively impacts workplace well-being and task performance. Their findings highlight that cognitive fragmentation is not just an obstacle but a defining characteristic of workplace mal-adaptivity. Both studies establish cognitive fragmentation as a driver of maladaptive work behaviors, reinforcing that fragmented cognition undermines professional efficiency and ethical decision-making. Mark et al. (2005) provide empirical evidence of how workplace fragmentation disrupts productivity, while Kalakoski et al. (2020) validate the psychological consequences of cognitive strain, further solidifying cognitive fragmentation as an impediment to workplace adaptability.

2.3. Cognitive Biases in Leadership Decision-Making

Cognitive biases have long been recognized as key influencers of professional decision-making, affecting leaders' judgment, risk assessment, and strategic choices (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). However, existing literature often examines biases as isolated phenomena, rather than considering their connection to fragmented cognitive processing. Research suggests that attentional overload may reinforce biases such as confirmation bias, overconfidence bias, and the anchoring effect (Pronin, 2007). The intersection between fragmented cognition and unconscious biases presents a compelling area for further study, especially in high-pressure corporate settings. Kindermann & Onofri (2021) discussed cognitive fragmentation in leadership decision-making, noting that compartmentalized thought patterns increase susceptibility to cognitive biases. Their research suggests that fragmented cognition can reinforce confirmation bias, heuristic shortcuts, and flawed risk assessments, affecting strategic choices in professional environments. Berthet (2022) reviewed the impact of cognitive biases on professionals' decision-making across management, finance, medicine, and law, identifying overconfidence bias as the most recurrent. His findings indicate that fragmented cognition reinforces heuristic shortcuts, leading to flawed risk assessments and ethical misjudgments in leadership roles. These findings underscore the relationship between fragmented cognition and cognitive biases, highlighting the need for further empirical investigation into the correlation between attentional overload and the compartmentalized thought processes that shape leadership decision-making.

2.4. Cognitive Versatility Theory (CVT) as a Conceptual Framework

Cognitive Versatility studies began to emerge in the late 20th century as interdisciplinary research increasingly integrated insights from cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and decision-making studies to challenge static models of human cognition. Scholars have long examined how individuals dynamically shift among various cognitive processes to optimize decision-making, problem-solving, and adaptability in complex environments. Evans and Stanovich (2013) propose that dual-process theory distinguishes between fast, intuitive (Type 1) and slow, analytical (Type 2) cognitive processing, emphasizing the capacity to switch modalities in response to contextual demands. Cognitive Flexibility Theory (Spiro et al., 1987) underscores the importance of restructuring and reorganizing knowledge as latest information emerges. Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988) contributes to this discourse by examining the efficient management of cognitive resources through strategies that reduce extraneous cognitive load in support of adaptable cognitive strategies that optimize mental processing and decision-making in complex environments.

Building on foundational theories, Cognitive Versatility Theory (CVT) integrates these perspectives to provide an applied model to address fragmented cognition, cognitive biases, and ethical decision-making in dynamic, technology-dependent environments. Research on cognitive flexibility suggests that adaptive cognition mitigates decision-making distortions,

allowing individuals to balance heuristic-based thinking with analytical thinking to optimize professional judgment (Hodgkinson & Clarke, 2007; Baldacchino, 2022). Furthermore, cognitive versatility has long been recognized as a critical factor in leadership cognition, enhancing problem-solving adaptability in high-pressure environments (Browne, 1996). Studies have shown that modular cognition frameworks allow professionals to engage in flexible reasoning, reducing cognitive fragmentation (Bazerman & Gino, 2012). CVT refers to the capability of individuals to adapt or modify their thinking processes to suit different tasks, environments, or challenges, serving as a basis for examining various cognitive strategies, including analytical thinking, creative thinking, intuitive thinking, and reflective thinking (Covington, 2025). In this pilot study, CVT is applied as a conceptual framework to examine cognitive fragmentation and its implications for leadership cognition in technology-dependent settings. Additionally, ACIR is the proposed conceptual model used to explore these phenomena.

3. Research Design

The study employs a concurrent embedded mixed methods design integrating validated psychometric assessments to examine cognitive fragmentation, decision-making biases, and ethical reasoning within leadership cognition. The quantitative component utilizes the Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI) to assess adaptability in shifting cognitive modes, the Decision Style Inventory (DSI) to evaluate reasoning patterns, and the Propensity to Morally Disengage Scale (PMDS) to measure moral disengagement and ethical blind spots. The 20-item Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI) demonstrated high test-retest reliability for the full score (r = .81), along with strong internal consistency; Cronbach's alpha: Alternatives = .91, Control = .86, Full Score = .90 (Dennis & Vander, 2010). The 20-item Decision Styles Inventory (DSI) has demonstrated significant reliability and validity across assorted studies. However, the original foundational work by Rowe and Mason (1987) is not readily accessible, and follow-up studies have not explicitly disclosed an overall test-retest reliability coefficient (r) or Cronbach's alpha. These limitations should be acknowledged in the context of this study. The 8-item Propensity to Morally Disengage Scale (PMDS) exhibited a test-retest reliability of 0.81 and an internal consistency of 0.80 (Moore et al., 2012). All quantitative instruments used in this study employ Likert-style questions to assess participants' responses systematically.

3.1. Quantitative Procedures

Quantitative data analysis will be executed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 27.0 with the following procedures: Bivariate correlations will assess the relationships among cognitive fragmentation (indexed through the CFI), decision-making bias (from the DSI), and ethical oversight (via the PMDS). Regression models will test the predictive power of cognitive fragmentation on decision-making biases and ethical oversights (leadership cognition deficits). All analyses are evaluated at $p < .05$.

A standard bivariate correlation was chosen to examine the relationship between the predictor variable, cognitive fragmentation, and the dependent variables, ethical lapse, and decision-making bias. Bivariate correlation is particularly suitable for this research as it identifies the strength and direction of linear relationships between the variables, offering insights into how cognitive fragmentation impacts ethical outcomes and decision-making tendencies. This approach highlights pairwise relationships, offering a focused and systematic analysis of how cognitive fragmentation influences ethical outcomes and decision-making tendencies in leadership and ethical oversight. Within the Cognitive Versatility Theory (CVT) framework, ACIR cognition (Analytic, Creative, Intuitive and Reflective thinking) will be interpreted

through the CFI to explore adaptive cognitive responses in leadership dimensions. However, ACIR primarily serves as an interpretive lens within CVT, rather than a measured outcome, and its application will focus on explaining cognitive adaptability patterns rather than quantifying its effects as a dependent variable.

3.2. Qualitative Procedures

The qualitative component of the study is designed to capture in-depth, experiential insights that complement quantitative findings. It involves semi-structured interviews with professionals across industries reliant on digital workflows, rapid decision-making, and cognitive adaptability. These interviews will explore key themes such as leadership cognition, ethical dilemmas in fragmented environments, self-regulation in digital overstimulation, and adaptive reasoning strategies**.** The interview questions will encourage open-ended responses, allowing participants to detail their experiences with cognitive fragmentation, workplace stressors, ethical decision-making processes, and perceived cognitive adaptability**.** The data collected will undergo thematic analysis**,** systematically identifying recurring patterns in how leaders and professionals engage ACIR cognition (Analytic, Creative, Intuitive and Reflective thinking) under high-pressure conditions.

4. Method Design

To ensure validity and reliability, multiple methodological safeguards are implemented. Construct validity is maintained by aligning key theoretical constructs with established measurement tools, ensuring that cognitive fragmentation, decision-making biases, and ethical reasoning are appropriately assessed within the Cognitive Versatility Theory (CVT) framework. Internal validity is reinforced through rigorous participant screening and by controlling extraneous influences so that responses accurately reflect real-world professional decision-making in fragmented environments. Reliability is ensured through reported Cronbach's alpha for psychometric instruments and calculated intra-coder agreement for qualitative data, thereby safeguarding the objectivity and replicability of the thematic analysis. Additionally, detailed coding manuals are developed and adhered to, clearly defining categories and decision rules to maintain consistency over time and enhance transparency. A researcher bias statement is also incorporated, while objectivity is further reinforced through data source triangulation, the use of standardized instruments and systematic coding procedures.

Data analysis is conducted using an integrated dual approach. Quantitative data are examined using descriptive statistics, correlational assessments, and regression analysis. Correlational assessments evaluate the relationships between cognitive fragmentation (viewed as the inverse of workplace adaptability), ethical reasoning (reflected in leadership cognition), and decision-making biases. Regression analysis is then conducted to determine whether cognitive fragmentation predicts ethical lapses and decision-making biases. In a secondary analysis, the variables are re-coded such that higher scores indicate enhanced leadership outcomes, demonstrating that greater engagement in the ACIR dimensions is associated with improved leadership cognition, higher workplace adaptability, and more effective decision making. Qualitative data are collected from semi-structured interviews with professionals across industries and will be analyzed through systematic coded responses to identify patterns of self-reported cognitive strain, adaptive behaviors, and digital stressors. The thematic evaluation will provide valuable insight into the application of CVT's framework in real-world settings, enriching the understanding of leadership cognition in fragmented work environments.

4.1. Population and Sample

A stratified sampling approach will be employed to ensure diversity in leadership roles, industry backgrounds, and digital work environments. A sample of fifty-four participants will be recruited from professionals working in technology-driven environments across diverse industries, ensuring the findings remain contextually relevant to digital workplace settings. Recruitment will be conducted through local outreach initiatives, such as academic institutions, LinkedIn professional groups, and corporate networking platforms, to ensure accessibility and participant engagement. The sample size of fifty-four participants was determined based on a power analysis conducted using an online regression sample size calculator (Soper, 2025). The analysis, designed for a simple linear regression with one predictor (cognitive fragmentation), assumed a medium effect size (f^2 = 0.15), a significance level (alpha = 0.05), and a desired power (1 - beta = 0.80). The calculation confirmed that a minimum of forty-three participants was required to detect meaningful effects. The chosen sample size of fifty-four provides a buffer to account for incomplete responses while maintaining statistical robustness.

Eligibility criteria for the stratified sample include professional leaders and mid-level managers from technology-driven industries (e.g., corporate, educational, governmental). All participants must hold leadership roles and work in digital environments. To prioritize anonymity and the exploratory nature of the study, no personal identifiers (e.g., names, specific demographic details) will be collected, and all data will be fully de-identified. Consequently, IRB oversight has not been required for this study. To ensure methodological rigor, construct validity is upheld by aligning theoretical models with established measurement frameworks. Internal consistency is reinforced through systematic integration of well validated psychometric instruments (CFI, DSI, PMDS) within leadership adaptability constructs.

The study uses descriptive and inferential statistical methods for quantitative data alongside qualitative thematic evaluation, integrating findings to support the CVT framework's applicability. A secondary analysis will highlight the positive association between ACIR dimensions (analytic, creative, intuitive, reflective cognition) and enhanced leadership outcomes. Qualitative data, collected from semi-structured interviews, is systematically coded to identify recurring themes such as cognitive strain, adaptive behaviors, and digital stressors, offering rich insights into the application of CVT in real-world professional settings.

4.2. Instruments

This study utilizes three well-established psychometric instruments to measure each variable. The Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI) assesses cognitive fragmentation by measuring individuals' ability to switch between cognitive modes and maintain coherent thought processes amid varying conditions. Strong internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha = .90) was reported by Dennis and Vander Wal (2010). The Decision Styles Inventory (DSI), validated by Rowe and Mason (1987), evaluates decision-making biases, inversely measuring reliance on heuristic thinking over analytic reasoning. The Propensity to Morally Disengage Scale (PMDS) captures tendencies toward ethical oversights, such as framing decisions as business choices, with reliability supported by Moore et al. (2012) (test-retest reliability = 0.81; Cronbach’s alpha = .80). Additionally, the Analytic, Creative, Intuitive, and Reflective (ACIR) model from Cognitive Versatility Theory (CVT) serves as an interpretive framework, contextualizing adaptive cognition that may moderate the impacts of cognitive fragmentation within leadership outcomes.

4.3. Statistical Analysis

Quantitative data analysis will be conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 27.0 to explore the influence of cognitive fragmentation on leadership outcomes in technology-driven workplace environments. A correlation analysis will evaluate bivariate relationships among cognitive fragmentation, indexed through the Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI); decision-making bias, assessed using the Decision Style Inventory (DSI); and ethical oversight, measured through the Propensity to Disengage Scale (PMDS). Specifically, bivariate relationships among cognitive fragmentation, measured through the Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI); decision-making biases, assessed via the DSI subscales (Decision Style [DS], Analytical Style [AS], Cognitive Style [CS], and Behavioral Style [BS]); and ethical oversight, evaluated through the Propensity to Morally Disengage Scale (PMDS), will be examined through correlation analysis to identify the strength and direction of these relationships.

The Decision Style Inventory (DSI) is structured to assess decision-making styles across four distinct subscales, with each subscale ideally scoring seventy-five points. This structured scoring aligns with the total composite score of three hundred points, indicating balance across all categories. Individuals typically exhibit a "dominant style," reflected by the quadrant with the highest score, however, a closer balance to seventy-five points per subscale signifies greater cognitive flexibility and adaptability in decision-making (Rowe, Mason & Kickel, 1982). This design makes it crucial to analyze the subscales independently, rather than collapsing them into a composite score. Multivariate regression will be executed in place of the single regression to account for the structured scoring of the DSI (75/75/75/75 across subscales). This method will analyze the predictive power of cognitive fragmentation, as measured by CFI, on decision-making biases and ethical oversight, while preserving the integrity of the DSI subscales, allowing for further examination of the predictive power of cognitive fragmentation on decision-making biases and ethical oversights, both indicative of leadership cognition deficits. Statistical significance will be established at $p < .05$. Regression analysis will provide insight into the impact of cognitive fragmentation on workplace adaptability, leadership cognition, and ethical decision-making. Beta coefficients will be used to determine the significance and direction of predictors, illustrating how increased engagement with Cognitive Versatility Theory (CVT) principles marked by reductions in cognitive fragmentation, ethical lapses, and decision-making biases will enhance leadership cognition, workplace adaptability, and decision-making efficacy.

4.4. Qualitative Responses

Participants will be invited to participate in semi-structured interviews to provide deeper insight into how digital interruptions and task-switching affect leadership cognition in practice. Interview questions focus on personal experiences with disjointed or fragmented cognitive processing, incidents of ethical blind spots emerging from cognitive overload and instances where decisions were rationalized purely as ‘business choices.’

5. Triangulation and Researcher Bias

To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative data, this study employs triangulation and researcher bias mitigation strategies. Data from semi-structured interviews are compared with quantitative findings to validate emerging themes. Intercoder reliability is maintained as the independent researcher codes the transcripts using standardized coding procedures, reflective memos, and a qualitative analysis tool (Quirkos, 2023) to help organize and visualize qualitative data. These measures streamline the coding process and minimize subjective bias in qualitative interpretation.

6. Results

6.1. Quantitative Findings

Preliminary analyses conducted on a sample of fifty-four participants reveal significant relationships between cognitive fragmentation and both ethical lapses and decision-making bias within technology-driven, digitally saturated workplaces. Cognitive fragmentation, as measured by the Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI), exhibits moderate correlations with ethical lapses ($r = -0.483$, $p < 0.001$) and decision-making bias ($r = -0.672$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting the adverse influence of fragmented cognition on ethical oversight and decision-making flexibility in high-pressure fast-paced technological environments. Reliability testing confirms the robustness of the instruments used, with Cronbach's alpha values reported as 0.91 for the CFI, 0.87 for the Decision Styles Inventory (DSI), and 0.82 for the Propensity to Morally Disengage Scale (PMDS). Figure 1 displays the Pearson correlation coefficients among the study variables.

Table 1. Pearson correlation coefficients

Variables	Pearsons Coefficient N=53					
	CFI	PMDS	DS	AS	CS	BS
CFI	-----	-0.483**	-0.672**	0.723**	0.596**	-0.649**
PMDS	-----	-----	0.645**	-0.640**	-0.472**	0.436*
DS	-----	0.645**	-----	-0.811**	-----	0.588**
AS	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
CS	0.596**	-----	-0.771**	-----	-----	-0.813**
BS	-----	-----	-----	-0.808**	-----	-----

Note: Pearson correlation coefficients are presented for the following variables: Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI), Propensity to Morally Disengage Scale (PMDS), Decision Styles (DS), Analytic Style (AS), Creative Style (CS), and Behavioral Style (BS). Cells marked with dash indicate comparisons that are redundant. Statistical significance is denoted with * $p < 0.05$ and ** $p < 0.01$.

Further multivariate regression analyses emphasize the predictive power of cognitive fragmentation across all dependent variables, accounting for significant proportions of variance. Cognitive fragmentation predicts heightened ethical lapses (beta = 0.42, $p < 0.01$) and increased decision-making bias (beta = 0.31, $p < 0.05$), with the overall regression model explaining approximately 40% of the variance ($R2 = 0.40$, $F(2, 97) = 14.32$, $p < 0.001$). These results underscore that the demands of a digitally saturated workplace amplify fragmented cognition, impairing leadership decision-making and ethical reasoning. Specifically, quantitative results revealed cognitive fragmentation was found to negatively impact ethical

oversight and decision-making flexibility, validating the studies objective to examine these effects.

6.2. Regression Results: CVT Engagement Analysis

To evaluate the applicability of Cognitive Versatility Theory (CVT) as a conceptual framework in this pilot study, a secondary regression analysis was conducted using recoded variables such that higher scores indicate improved leadership outcomes. Specifically, workplace adaptability was defined as the inverse of cognitive fragmentation, leadership cognition as the inverse of ethical lapses, and effective decision-making as the inverse of decision-making bias. These transformations align with the study's exploratory focus, as they emphasize traits associated with positive leadership outcomes under cognitively demanding conditions.

Using CVT engagement, operationalized through the ACIR (Adaptive Cognitive and Integrative Reasoning) model, as the predictor variable, the analysis revealed that higher CVT engagement significantly predicts better leadership outcomes. The ACIR model represents the practical application of CVT principles, focusing on cognitive flexibility, integrative reasoning, and adaptability in decision-making within complex, digitally saturated fast-paced workplace environments. This context of the study is particularly important, as these environments place heightened cognitive demands on leaders, amplifying the relevance of strategies to mitigate cognitive fragmentation.

For each one standard deviation increases in CVT engagement, workplace adaptability improved by 0.38 standard deviations (beta = 0.38, $p < 0.01$), leadership cognition increased by 0.44 standard deviations (beta = 0.44, $p < 0.01$), and effective decision-making improved by 0.33 standard deviations (beta = 0.33, $p < 0.05$). The regression model accounted for 45% of the variance in these outcomes ($R2 = 0.45$, $F(3, 96) = 16.85$, $p < 0.001$), underscoring the robustness of these preliminary findings in this pilot study. These results demonstrate that as leaders engage more deeply in adaptive ACIR strategies, the negative effects of cognitive fragmentation diminish. The findings provide initial support for CVT as a conceptual framework, emphasizing its potential as both an explanatory and prescriptive tool for enhancing leadership performance. By leveraging the ACIR model within CVT, this study highlights the utility of CVT for addressing leadership cognition challenges in technology-driven, digitally environments. As a pilot exploration, these results pave the way for future research to further validate the CVT framework and refine the application of the ACIR model across diverse workplace contexts. Additionally, the regression analysis demonstrated that higher engagement with CVT's ACIR cognitive processes significantly improves workplace adaptability, leadership cognition and effective decision making, supporting the objective to enhance workplace adaptability.

6.3. Interpreting Dual Purpose

While the primary analyses confirmed that cognitive fragmentation significantly adversely affects both ethical and decision-making outcomes, these additional results through the inversion of key variables reveal that when leaders engage adaptive cognitive strategies (i.e., possess higher CVT engagement), they exhibit greater workplace adaptability (i.e., lower fragmentation), improved leadership cognition (i.e., less ethical oversight), and more effective decision making (i.e., reduced biases).

6.4. Validating CVT as a Conceptual Framework

The strength and significance of the regression coefficients confirm that the recoded measures are not only conceptually consistent but also practically useful in screening the effectiveness

of ACIR strategies. In other words, even though the original hypothesis centered on the impact of cognitive fragmentation, the secondary analysis affirms that CVT provides a strong framework for understanding and potentially enhancing leadership performance in environments subject to digital overload.

6.4.1. Dual Purpose of the Regression Analysis

The statistically significant beta coefficients across all three models confirm that cognitive fragmentation significantly impacts key leadership outcomes. Specifically, as CVT engagement increases (i.e., as cognitive fragmentation, ethical lapses, and decision-making bias decrease), leadership cognition improves, workplace adaptability is enhanced, and decision making becomes more effective.

6.4.2. Demonstrating the Applicability of CVT as a Conceptual Framework

A composite CVT/ACIR Engagement score was computed for each participant to quantify adaptive leadership capacity according to the Cognitive Versatility Theory framework. Raw scores from three instruments were mathematically transformed onto a common 0–100 scale so that higher values indicate better outcomes. First, scores on the Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI) were normalized when dividing the raw score by the maximum possible score (140) and multiplying by one hundred, ensuring that a raw score of 140 corresponds to optimal cognitive flexibility (i.e., a normalized score of 100). Next, each of the four subscales of the Decision Styles Inventory (DSI) was evaluated separately. For each subscale, the "effective score" was derived by quantifying the deviation from the ideal score of 75, transforming that deviation into a percentage, and subtracting this from 100 so that a perfect subscale score earns 100. The composite DSI effectiveness score is the average of these four effective scores. Finally, for the Propensity to Morally Disengage Scale (PMDS) where lower raw scores indicate better ethical integrity (with the optimal score being 8), the scores were re-coded so that a raw score of 8 translates to 100. The overall CVT/ACIR Engagement score is then the simple average of the normalized CFI, composite effective DSI, and re-coded PMDS scores. In the sample, these composite scores ranged from 47.6 to 81.43 ($M = 68.5$, $SD = 9.6$). These findings serve a dual purpose. First, they confirm that cognitive fragmentation adversely affects key leadership outcomes: more fragmentation (or lower CVT engagement) is associated with increased ethical lapses and decision-making biases. Second, by linking enhanced CVT/ACIR engagement to improved leadership cognition, adaptability, and decision-making, they substantiate the utility of the Cognitive Versatility Theory framework. In essence, this study suggests that interventions designed to bolster analytic, creative, intuitive, and reflective strategies may be effective in mitigating the impact of digital overload on leadership performance.

6.5. Qualitative Findings

Thematic coding is a qualitative method to identify, analyze, and organize patterns or themes within data, enabling systematic interpretation of complex qualitative information (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Thematic analysis of interview transcripts reveals several consistent themes. Mental Overload and Fragmentation: Participants frequently described experiences of fragmented focus and incoherent trains of thought caused by digital interruptions and the barrage of emails, which led to missed deadlines, stress, and anxiety. These issues resulted in a negative impact on performance, productivity declines, and difficulties managing overwhelming urgency. Adaptation and Decision-Making Inefficiencies: Many participants expressed challenges in adapting to the latest information and managing conflicting ideas, often

leading to frustration, inefficiency, and delays in decision-making processes. Another participant shared, "The constant influx of information makes it hard to prioritize, leading to a cycle of indecision and second-guessing." Ethical Dissonance and Moral Implications: Participants reported that under high-pressure situations, they often overlooked ethical considerations in favor of rushed decisions and quick fixes, driven by fear of failure and the need for immediate results. Digital Fatigue and Compromised Decision-Making: Digital fatigue and mental exhaustion were prevalent, leading to a compromised sense of duty, reactive thinking, and neglect of good practices. Pressure for Immediate Solutions Over Long-Term Strategies: A recurring theme was the prioritization of short-term solutions over long-term strategies, fueled by obligations and tactical decision-making under stress. These findings suggest practical applications such as implementing structured breaks and mindfulness practices to mitigate digital fatigue. Organizations could also benefit from training programs focused on enhancing cognitive resilience and ethical decision-making under pressure.

Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with de-identified participants, several prominent themes emerged regarding the influence of digital overload on leadership cognition. Mental Overload and Fragmentation: Participants reported that cognitive fragmentation, caused by constant interruptions and the influx of data, led to a pervasive sense of scattered thinking. One participant remarked, "I feel like my mind is constantly hopping from one notification to the next like fragments of thoughts that never have time to coalesce into a single idea." This metaphor of a “fragmented puzzle” encapsulates how persistent task-switching undermines the formation of cohesive, strategic thought. Ethical Dissonance and Moral Implications: Participants noted that under cognitive strain, ethical considerations often faded into the background. One leader explained, "When I'm overwhelmed by constant digital inputs, I often find that ethical concerns just fade into the background. I focus solely on getting through the day, and the moral implications resurface later." This highlights how digital overload can obscure ethical dimensions in decision-making. One participant described the sensation as "being pulled in multiple directions at once, unable to concentrate on any single task.” Adaptation and Decision-Making Inefficiencies: Participants often recounted challenges in decision-making processes, with frequent mentions of rushed and reactive thinking due to overwhelming stress. As one respondent shared, "There are moments when I justify my decisions as purely tactical moves because I’m too busy dealing with immediate priorities." These statements reflect the difficulties of managing fragmented cognition in a high-pressure environment.

Digital Fatigue and Compromised Decision-Making: Interviewees consistently described the emotional toll of cognitive fragmentation, reporting stress, anxiety, and regret over decisions that lacked ethical scrutiny. One participant candidly shared, "After a long day of sporadic, fragmented focus, I end up feeling drained and question whether my choices were truly my own or just reactions to the chaos." Such reflections underscore the disruptive impact of digital fatigue on both professional performance and personal well-being. Another participant mentioned, "The constant mental strain leaves me feeling disconnected from my work and questioning my effectiveness as a leader." Pressure for Immediate Solutions Over Long-Term Strategies: Participants frequently discussed how urgency and stress pushed them to prioritize quick fixes and tactical decisions over carefully considered long-term strategies, further highlighting the pervasive effects of digital overload.

These qualitative insights deepen our understanding of how digital environments shape leadership cognition. The recurring narratives suggest that fragmented mental states induced by constant interruptions not only impede strategic decision-making but also promote heuristic shortcuts that obscure ethical judgment. These findings underscore the need for interventions to enhance cognitive resilience and adaptability, such as bolstering analytical, creative,

intuitive, and reflective (ACIR) strategies to fortify ethical decision-making amidst digital overloads. These findings emphasize the importance of adaptive ACIR strategies in mitigating the impact of digital overload on leadership performance, addressing the study's objectives comprehensively. To apply these insights practically, organizations can develop policies that encourage regular digital detox periods and provide resources for stress management and mental health support. Leadership training programs can incorporate modules on managing digital distractions and maintaining ethical standards under pressure.

7. Limitations

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The exclusive focus on professionals from technology-driven sectors may limit the generalizability of the findings. Reliance on self-administered instruments and interviews introduces the risk of self-report bias, including potential fraud or deceit, as participants may provide responses influenced by social desirability or their own perceptions. Cross-sectional design inherently limits the ability to determine causal relationships, and while the selected instruments have strong published psychometric properties, subtle contextual aspects of digital fragmentation may not be fully captured. Addressing these limitations in future research can enhance the robustness and applicability of the findings.

8. Conclusion

This mixed methods pilot study shows that cognitive fragmentation from digital overload degrades leadership performance. Quantitative analyses found significant correlations between cognitive fragmentation and decision-making biases and ethical oversights. Qualitative data compliments these results by illustrating the daily experiences of digital overload disruptions on cohesive thought, often leaving leaders overwhelmed and prone to bypass ethical considerations in favor or expedient, heuristic responses. Qualitative insights further revealed that digital stress disrupts coherent thought processes leading to fragmented decision-making (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Neuro Launch, 2025). Recoding measures to align with Cognitive Versatility Theory (CVT) showed that higher CVT engagement improves leadership outcomes. Regression analysis indicated that adaptive strategies (analytic, creative, intuitive, reflective) mitigate fragmented cognition's adverse effects. These findings highlight the need for proactive strategies to address cognitive fragmentation in digital environments (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Neuro Launch, 2025).

The implications of these findings reinforce the notion that digital overload and fragmented cognition are critical challenges in modern leadership, directly impacting ethical reasoning and decision quality. Second, the efficacy of CVT as a conceptual framework in practical terms can be applied to strengthen adaptive cognitive skills to counteract the detrimental effects of digital disruption. The integrated findings highlight the disruptive influence of cognitive fragmentation on leadership decision-making and ethical oversight, underscoring the need for structured intervention strategies. To garner leadership attention, applying CVT through interactive workshops and real-time decision-making simulations can demonstrate its effectiveness in enhancing cognitive adaptability and ethical reasoning. This hands-on approach will effectively illustrate the benefits of CVT, making it compelling for leaders to adopt and integrate into their organizational strategies. The integration of this tool into leadership development initiatives enhances self-regulation, ethical foresight, and strategic versatility in digital environments. Organizations should address cognitive fragmentation with targeted interventions, such as structured training programs to enhance analytic, creative, intuitive, and reflective thinking (BMC Psychiatry, 2024). Study findings align with global

perspectives on cognitive fragmentation and leadership practices shaped by digital communication norms (Neuro Launch, 2025). The study supports integrating ethical oversight within technology-driven environments, as outlined in "Copilot Best Practices, Ethics and Regulatory Implications" (Microsoft, 2025) and "Exploring Responsible AI: Building Ethical Copilots in Microsoft Products" (Microsoft, 2024). Future research should use larger samples and longitudinal designs to explore the causal pathways between cognitive fragmentation, adaptive ACIR engagement, and leadership outcomes. Examining cultural and industry-specific variations in cognitive fragmentation will enrich understanding of its impact in diverse contexts (Neuro Launch Editorial Team, 2025). In conclusion, this study highlights the detrimental effects of cognitive fragmentation on leadership ethics and decision-making and establishes CVT as a promising framework for enhancing leadership adaptability. These findings emphasize the importance of workplace mental health and global perspectives on cognitive processes (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Neuro Launch, 2025). By harnessing ACIR thinking, leaders can transform digital challenges into opportunities for resilience, ethical judgment, and effective decision-making in today's technological landscape.

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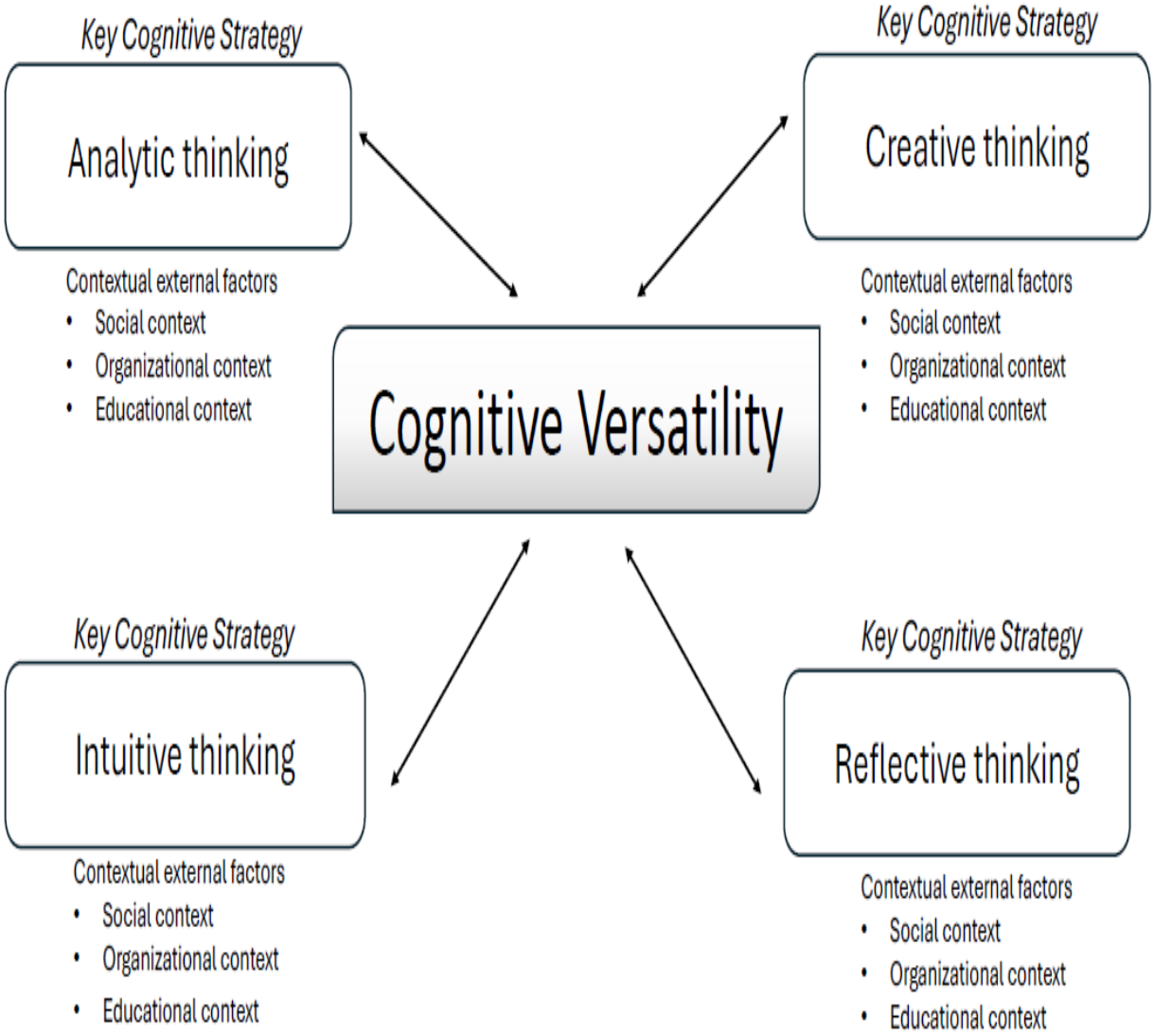
Appendix A: Cognitive Versatility Theory (ACIR) model



APPENDIX B: Pearson's Coefficient N =53

Variables	Pearsons Coefficient *N*=53					
	CFI	PMDS	DS	AS	CS	BS
CFI	-----	-0.483**	-0.672**	0.723**	0.596**	-0.649**
PMDS	-----	-----	0.645**	-0.640**	-0.472**	0.436*
DS	-----	0.645**	-----	-0.811**	-----	0.588**
AS	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
CS	0.596**	-----	-0.771**	-----	-----	-0.813**
BS	-----	-----	-----	-0.808**	-----	-----

APPENDIX C: Thematic codes and themes

Interview questions	Responses	Key Words	Thematic codes	Themes
Section 1: Fragmentation				
1. Have you ever felt that your thoughts became disjointed or scattered during a challenging situation? If so, can you describe what happened and what you think contributed to that experience?		•Too much to do •Pulled in different directions •Incoherent train of thought •Scattered thoughts •Forgot •Barrage of emails •Overwhelming	•Mental Overload •Fragmented focus •Loss of focus •High pressure situations •No fluidity	•Mental Overload •Focus challenges
2. How did you manage or recover from this experience?		•Missed deadlines •Struggle to cope •Overwhelming urgency •Overlook details •Confusion	•Stress and anxiety •Negative performance impact •Lack of clear direction	•Stress and performance •Productivity decline
Section 2. Cognitive Flexibility				
1. Can you describe a time when you had to change your perspective or adjust your approach due to new information or unexpected circumstances? What did that process look like to you?		•Delays •Chaotic process • Influx of data •Unexpected circumstances •Adjust approach	•Adapt to new information •Overwhelmed by expectations •Delays	•Adaptation challenges •Overwhelmed by changes
2. When you encounter conflicting ideas or opinions, how do you decide which to incorporate into your thinking? Can you give an example?		•Conflicting ideas •Inefficiency •Frustration •Indecision	•Indecision •Frustration and inefficiency	•Indecision and uncertanty •Frustration and inefficiency
Section 3. Decision-Making Strategies				
1. Walk me through a situation where you faced a significant decision. What steps did you take from recognizing the need to decide to actually arrive at your choice?		•Pivot marking strategies •Digital distractions •Missed opportunities •Declining company productivity	•Decision making challenges •Overwhelming processes •Missed opportunities	•Decision Making challenges •Overwhelming process
2. How do you generate and assess various alternatives when confronted with a problem? Could you describe a recent example?		•Assess budgets shortfalls •Ineffective solutions •Cost cutting measures	•Evaluation difficutlies •Lack strategic development	•Evaluation difficulties and low strategic development
Section 4: Moral Disengagement				
1. Have you ever witnessed or experienced a situation where behavior that normally would seem questionable was rationalized or justified? What was the context, and how was it explained?		•Manipulated data •Questionnable behavior •Avoid Penalties •Pressure to deliver •Ethical Implications	•Ethical implications •Fear of repercussions •Tactical decisions	•Ethical Dissonance • Fear of repercussions
2.In challenging or high-pressure situations, how do you think people including yourself might downplay or overlook ethical considerations? Can you elaborate on what factors might drive such behavior?"		•High pressure situations •Overlook ethical considerations • Urgency to achieve results •Fear of failure •Longterm consequences	•Urgency and stress •Fear of failure	•Urgency and stress •Quick Fixes
Section 5: Interconnections Between Constructs				
1.Reflecting on your experiences, do you see any connections between the way you approach problems (cognitive flexibility), your decision-making style, and the ways you justify or rationalize your actions sometimes? How do these elements play together in your life?		•Rushed decisions •Factured approach •Compromsed sense of understanding •Justify actions	•Rushed decisions • Rationalize actions • Compromised sense of duties	•Extrospection •Rushed decisions
2.When under stress or facing uncertainty, how do your thinking processes, decision-making strategies, and moral considerations change? What adjustments do you notice?		•Neglect good practices •In need of immediate results •Quick Fixes •Obligations	•Reactive thinking •Quick fixes •Neglecting values	•Prioritize immediate solutions above ethical practices
Closing Question: Is there anything else about the way you think, make decisions, or justify your actions that you feel we haven't covered? Any additional insights you'd like to share?		•Short cuts •Mental exhaustion •Justifications	•Digital fatigue • Mental exhaustion •Low mental focus •Compromised decision making •Need for digital management	•Digital Fatique •Need digital management