

## **Students' Decision-Making at the University Level: A Phenomenological Study**

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### **Abstract**

Students' decision making is a dynamic and complex process. A number of quantitative studies have identified the elements that play their role in this process, particularly in the contexts of the developed regions. However, in the developing countries, especially in the countries of South-Asian region where collectivist societies exist, such studies occur in a very negligible number. To fill this gap, the present study explored the elements that are perceived to affect undergraduate and graduate students' decision making on academic as well as non-academic contexts. Given that today's students are tomorrow's leaders, understanding their decision making may contribute in anticipating the nature of decisions they would make in the future. To understand this phenomenon, interpretive phenomenological analysis was used. The study found two major themes – personal elements, and external elements. The discussion on these themes and their sub-themes highlight that students make decisions centered on consequences such as loss of position and prestige, fear of individual punishments. Students decision making were also found to reiterate the theory of utilitarianism and relative truth theory.

*Keywords:* Decision making, university students, collectivist society, personal elements, external elements

### **Introduction**

Students' life is an ecosystem, involving a variety of activities not only during but also after their routine classes, i.e., while doing group-assignments, preparing for presentations, executing projects, doing researches, and participating in co-curricular programs as well as extra-curricular events. In a sense, a student's life contains numerous external elements, via live interaction as well as through social media use, influencing their decision making; some of which may not be defined as ethical (Beu, Buckley & Harvey, 2003; Casali & Perano, 2021). For such a fragile ecosystem to sustain so that the students can focus more on their education and not get swayed by outside stimulations, efforts are being made by the concerned stakeholders. One of such measures is the prescription of a few academic subjects on decision making in various programs of graduate and undergraduate level. Kathmandu University's School of Management (KUSOM), like many other universities such as Tribhuvan University, offer ethics as a compulsory course in the undergraduate level, and ethics in combination with the subject 'leadership and strategy marketing' in graduate level. The students take these courses and it is believed that the courses contribute positively to students' decision making (DM) not only during their college life but also after their graduation.

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Decision making (DM) is understood as a process to make a choice from differing alternatives to come to a desired result. According to Rest (1986), there are four stages to making decision: being aware of the issue, making ethical judgment, establishing an intent to act ethically, and proceeding to engage in ethical behavior. In this sense, it is the process of judging as well as selecting among ethical and unethical behavior, and finally selecting that which is consistent with the ethical principles.

Referring to the differences in individualistic and collectivist culture, it has been stated that four attributes differentiate the two cultures: independent or interdependent self-construal, importance given to personal or group goals, priority to individual attitudes or social norms for behaviors, and focus on exchange relationship or communal relationship. In individualist culture, people act according to self-interest, personal preferences, freedom, and self-reliance, whereas in the collectivist culture, groups are more important than individuals. And, thus, the emphasis is given to group members and thereby self-interest is sacrificed (Priestley & Taasobshirazi, 2020). According to Yates and De Oliveira (2016), collectivist culture provides assurance to the people belonging to a certain group to a course of action that is proposed to serve the interests and values of particular people affected by it. Given that collectivistic cultures view “self” as a part of a whole and encourage everyone to work with his/her in-group towards one goal, individual’s decision adheres to social context. Particularly in the eastern societies, family heads and senior members of the family decide on financial, educational and even personal matters.

Understanding decision making among students is now more relevant than ever before, in post Enron’s ethical downfall, with an ever-growing list of scandals in organizations. It is generally believed that business ethics and morals are being compromised. Leaders, educated in best business schools, are reported to be involved in scandals and causing collapsed businesses. In such context, it is vital to understand DM behavior of students today as it will help us predict the kind of leaders we will have in future.

In our attempt, we have aimed to understand, through students’ lived experiences, the aspects that contribute to students’ decision making (ethical or otherwise). Our focus here is to get answer to the question: “What elements play their role in decision making process (ethical /unethical) of graduate and undergraduate students?” Given that hardly any study on decision making in Nepali context exists, this one may fill the gap in understanding graduate and undergraduate students’ decision making in this context.

### **Literature Review**

Ethical decision making (EDM), which is commonly defined as “the principles, norms, and standards of conduct governing an individual or group” (Trevino & Nelson, 2021, p.17), has drawn “considerable attention from scholars and practitioners around the world” since the publication of two pioneering articles by Baumhart in 1969, and Bohr and Kaplan in 1971 (Casali & Perano, 2021, Pp. 1-2). See, for instance, the studies by Casali and Perano (2021), Dehghani (2019), and Brunton and Eweje (2010) to understand the extent of available literature. The quantity of available stand-alone review articles on ethical decision making – from 1978-1992 (Ford & Richardson, 1994), from 1992-1996 (Loe, Ferrell & Mansfield, 2000), from 1996-2003 (Butterfield & O’Fallon, 2005), and from 2004-2011 (Craft, 2013) – reveal that the scholars working on DM have studied the issue extensively.

Most of the available studies are individualistic-context focused and very few are collectivist-context concentrated (Bobbio & Sarrica, 2009). In a study conducted in an individualistic society, 82% of business students were found to confess their decision to cheating during examinations (McCabe, 1996). Similar higher figure was reported in U.S. Attorneys Annual Statistical Report provided by Department of Justice; 8766 white collar crimes were charged in 2000 (Ivancevich et al., 2003). These instances reveal abundant number of people resorting in unethical decision.

In the existing literature, students stand as one of the major respondent categories [See, for instance, the review by Loe, Ferrell and Mansfield (2004) and by Craft (2013)]. The fact that the number of articles related to the students' EDM that are included in 2013 review paper (Craft, 2013) was much higher than the number of papers included in 2005 review paper (Butterfield & O'Fallon, 2005) speak that this respondent category holds a strong importance in EDM research. Available studies have explored various dimensions of students' ethical decisions such as the prevalence of unethical practices (McCabe, 1996), the perception of the students themselves (Dehghani, 2019; Brunton & Eweje, 2010; Chan & Leung, 2006), the students' practices (Sweeney & Costello, 2009; Lester, 2022), and the causes (Bommer et al., 1987; Tang & Chiu, 2003; Giacalone, 2004; Ohreen, 2021). Other studies have reported about EDM of the students of particular sex category (Brunton & Eweje, 2010), particular stream (Harding et al., 2004; Chan & Leung, 2006; Sweeney & Costello, 2009), social identification (Zhong, Ku, Lount & Murnighan, 2017); or students taking particular course (Walker, 2011; Mladenovic, Martinov-Bennie & Bell, 2017). Regarding the cause, various factors are identified as the causes for or breach of EDM: internet has been identified as one of such prominent elements (Girard, 2004; Chapin & Byrne, 2013).

The concern – why people make unethical decision – has been addressed in theoretical postulations as well. According to the “Theory of Planned Behavior,” there is a correlation of unethical behavior and other factors, particularly attitudes, subjective norms, behavioral control, and intentions, only when these determinants contribute; then, unethical behavior is seen both in school and professional life (Beck & Ajzen, 1991). According to the Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), behavior is an outcome of intentions, which depends on the attitude towards the behavior and subjective norms like approval of the behavior by an important person or groups. It is further stated that attitude predicts behavior if there is a higher connection between attitude object and behavioral option either positive reward (behavior) or negative consequence (financial, social, and occupational). According to the theory of Utilitarianism, as stated by Kay (2018), most decisions are based on maximum good for majority of people or “ends justify the means”. Yet, another theory, Deontology states the method/ process should be ethical not the consequence (Hartman & DesJardins, 2010). This idea places emphasis on enforcing ethical means to reach conclusions. Similarly, Relative Truth is another theory, in which truth is not seen necessarily the same for all the people, in all religions, place and at all times (Nozick, 2001). This means truth necessarily does not have the same meaning for all people, all religions, all places, and all times.

As revealed in the above-presented literature review, empirical studies as well as theoretical postulations have shed lights on students' EDM. A major blind-spot in these literatures is the lack of inquiry into this issue in the eastern context. Nepal, the area of this study, follows a culture of collectivism as people live in communities that follow the diktats of eastern custom and religion. Subsequently, individuals' learning of DM takes place in a continuum and they make decisions in due course based on their individual characteristics, and situational factors. The first author as a faculty of Ethics has also observed many students curtailing and toeing the line when strict measures are put in place. Even in such context, where unethical behavior is supposed to be curtailed, students making unethical decisions are seen.

## **Methodology**

This study deployed Phenomenological Analysis to describe people's lived experiences. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is deemed useful since this method is appropriate in studying lived experiences of the research participants to understand the 'what' and the 'how' of their behavior. The methodology assumes that only those that have experienced the phenomenon have the capacity to communicate it to the world.

There are at least two schools of phenomenology, Husserl's – transcendental phenomenology – and Heidegger's – interpretative phenomenology (IPA) (Moustakas, 1994; LeVasseur, 2003; Lopez & Willis, 2004). Discussing about Heidegger's assumptions (Heidegger, 1962), Benner (1994) stated that human beings are social dialogical beings; therefore, understanding such phenomena is always before us in the shared background practices of the human community within societies and cultures through languages. Heidegger's interpretive method is circular, moving back-and-forth between the whole and its parts between the investigator's fore-structure of understanding and what was learned through the investigation. Grounding on these assumptions, Heidegger's interpretative phenomenology is used in this study. Our beliefs and assumptions are also congruent to this methodology. We believe that social reality is shaped by human experiences and social contexts; and an individual's attempt to understand such phenomenon should occur within the socio- historic context by reconciling the subjective interpretations of its various participants.

### *Study Area and Participants*

The study area for this research was a management school in Nepal. We purposively selected one management school in Kathmandu because this is the school that offers ethics course both at undergraduate and graduate level; and the first author has closely observed these students in terms of their ethical decision making. The participants were undergraduate (UGS) and graduate students (GS): UGS students were of the age group 18- 22, and GS students were above 23. Altogether six students who showed willingness to partake in the research were chosen. The main criteria for participant recruitment was that the students must have taken a 3 credit Ethics course in UG or GS level. In total, three males (1 UG, 2 GS) and three females (3 UG) were selected. This decision was based on the recommendation of scholars who have suggested the recruitment of 3 to 10 participants (Sim et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2009) in phenomenological study.

### *Data Collection*

Data was collected through in-depth interview from the participants having experienced DM process. As interview guide was prepared, having the questions related to the participants' perception and feeling of DM. Interview protocol, prepared on the basis of the reviewed literature, was discussed with the second co-author and finalized after some amendments in the draft version. Major questions in the protocol were "Have you taken decision in relation to your life decision?", "Who decides about major issues in your life?", "Will you recall any instance when you had to make ethical decision in your life?", and "How important is Ethics course to students?"

### *Data Credence*

Each participant was asked to provide verbal consent for the interview. It was clearly stated that none of the personal information would be used in research, and their names would be anonymized. At the very

start of each interview, the participants were informed about recording. The recording was placed near them so they could switch it off as and when required. During the interview, any participant having hesitation were facilitated, and questions were explained when they expressed inability to comprehend them. Thick data was obtained through “what” and “how” follow-up questions.

### *Data Analysis*

To analyze the interview data, we used the process of phenomenological analysis outlined by Benner (1994). The process contains four steps “transcription, coding, thematic analysis, and search for paradigmatic cases and examples” (Santos, Neves & Carnevale, 2016). All the interviews were conducted, following which reading and rereading of the manuscript was done to get the feel of what the participants were saying. Then, the first interview was transcribed entirely, paying attention to the major ideas related to DM. Then, significant statements from the remaining interview data were extracted and treated with denaturalized transcription. These transcripts were coded deductively, and the codes were thematized. For coding and theme generation, MAXQDA free trial version was used. After the themes were identified, exemplary quotes to illustrate the themes were selected from within and between the cases, i.e., the interview data. In some, examples and cases immediately stood out; and in other cases, we drew from our attention to the unique experience of the individuals. While some cases were of typical importance because of their similarities and others for their contrasts.

## **Results**

The participants of this study were three male and three female students. Among them, three were from the capital city and adjoining areas, whereas others were from outside the capital city. In terms of ethnic identity, two each were from Newar and Marwardi Brahmin community. The following table (Table 1) summarizes the demographic aspects of the research participants.

Table 1  
*The Demographic Characteristics of the Study Participants*

Participant	Gender	Education Level	Residence	Identity
1	Male	UGS	Tarai	Marwardi Bhramin
2	Female	UGS	Kathmandu	Newar
3	Female	UGS	Kathmandu	Newar
4	Female	UGS	Tarai	Brahmin
5	Male	GS	Tarai/Bhaktapur	Thakuri
6	Male	GS	Tarai	Marwardi Bhrahmin

Through the analysis of the interview data, we discovered two main themes: personal elements, and external elements. The first theme contains three subthemes, and the second theme comprises two subthemes. In the first theme, we found personal elements, with three sub-themes individual motivation, self-perception, and interpersonal interaction as its subtheme. The second theme included the role and function of teachers, and the environmental elements. These major themes and their subthemes are discussed below.

### *Personal Elements*

Personal elements mean the factors that relate to the concepts such as the concerned students' responsibility in the university, prestige and reputation, importance of trust, understanding about lying, manipulation for the benefit of larger group, intra-group interaction, sense of right and wrong, individuals' background, and pragmatics of telling lies. The first sub-theme – individual motivation – includes tendencies to maintain respect for self-esteem. The second sub-theme – self-perception – is more personal in nature and relates to the cognitive dimension of an individual: impulse propensity, bias or habit. The third sub-theme – interpersonal interaction – is concerned about the interaction in school, interaction with colleagues, faculties (visiting and permanent teachers), faculty coordinators, and the Dean.

The students were found to be influenced by elements such as the position they held in class or in the representative bodies like Student Welfare Council (SWC), or other students' clubs. Their positions were reported to represent prestige, fulfil their ego and hence contribute to retaining the trust of the different members, thereby impacting their decision making. The following two excerpts, one from male participant and another from a female participant, reveal this theme:

Male student #1: *If trust is broken then it is difficult to build that trust again it is irreparable.*

Female student #1: *The positions are prestigious, isn't it? Everyone looks up and we have direct interaction with coordinators and faculties, since it is conducted through voting process. To compete and win is good.*

The first excerpt, which comes from a class representative and a member of SWC, points to the importance levied on trust by the student; it is regarded as something which should not be compromised at any cost. The importance levied on trust is hence a perceived determinant of an individual's decision making. The second statement, which is from class representative (CR), places emphasis on the position held by the person in decision making. Position-holders are regarded as people who are always scrutinized, responsible, accountable and thus having obligation to maintain trust. Both these accounts reveal that the students' conscious conviction of trust and prestige are the main factors that affects their DM.

The sub-theme of 'self-perception' points to an individual's awareness of personal feeling and its impact in decision making. Presented below is an excerpt, representing a female student's understanding of her being 'achievement focused,' which is the cause of her decision to tell white lie:

Female student# 1: *There are numerous social loafers who will not complete tasks on time and in group work everyone's grades are affected so I prepone the deadline and push all the group members to complete the task earlier, so it can be submitted on time. If they do not do so even then I let them be and remove their names, but before doing so I inform them, about the deletion of their names from group work.*

This excerpt points to the fact that any class comprises people of various nature, and an individual's self-perception is formed by contrasting him/her with the people of certain nature. The female, who is not a 'social loafer(s) but a student focused on 'good grades', considers the people having 'no sense of responsibility' as the factor causing low achievement for the entire class. In such condition, the decision to tell white lie is not only for the benefit of larger group but also for maintaining the standard set by self-perception.

Besides this narrative, two students from GS and two from UGS (Male student #1, # 2, #3, and Female student #1) emphasized the practice of manipulation during decision making for the benefit of a larger group. It was stated that the decision to telling white lie is not bad if it helps everyone and has no bad repercussions.

Perception of self as being independent/dependent to family was also pointed as the determinant of decision making. Some students pointed to the role of their interaction and dependence with family in decision making. Particularly, the students coming from outside the capital city reported that their perception of family values were instrumental in their decision making. The following lines from two students elucidates the role of family's presence in decision making:

*Male student #1: I come from a very strict culture and even as a boy had a very strict upbringing, where I was never allowed to decide anything, everything the family said, I had to follow, it was the same in the community and school too. The culture was very constrictive and it enforced just following what has been told, no logic, no questions even when things were not right. I finally found freedom and here I had to unlearn and relearn values to adjust. I made decisions on a daily basis and found I could make right decisions as everything was going great. It really boosted my confidence in DM.*

*Female student #3: I ask my parents or older siblings to make decisions. I have never made any till now and so every time I make decision and I discuss it with my parents or siblings even buying my daily need, they tell me if I had gone some other place I would have gotten it cheaper and they are all taking advantage of you, and I feel bad, that I cannot make the distinction, so I just ask them before I take all decisions. Morning and evening, every day before buying anything even vegetables and after I buy too I call them.*

These statements, which were reiterated by other students coming from outside Kathmandu valley, speaks to the fact that these students' decision making was dictated by the tradition of the family. The confession, 'I was never allowed to decide anything' reveals the nature of independence given to the student. Following the student's departure from the home town, however, the student started enjoying 'freedom' in decisions making.

The sub-theme of interpersonal interactions relates to the interaction of students in the school they studied. Students reported forming cohorts or comrades-in-arms and mobilize the class to pressure the academic administration, Dean, coordinators, and faculties to change their decisions. The following lines present this idea:

*Male student #1: Whenever the decisions are made that are not to our liking, we sit in class and include everyone to discuss and come to one conclusion by stating the pros and cons of the decision and then finally convince everyone to follow the decision. This way we go to discuss with the faculties or Dean and try to change the decision. We look at it from the perspective of how it serves us better.*

As presented in the above vignette, some of the students tend to make decisions to create a forced-unity among the class so as to pressurize the authority to change the decision. In decision making, many students were forced to participate in the 'made-up unity,' and which obliged them to adhere to the decision. Although they knew that this approach would not work and is inappropriate, they still resorted to this decision as many others believed that 'group' pressure has potential to impact work much better than individual's efforts.

This idea of 'made-up unity' was not accepted by some students; it is stated in the account of a female participant:

Female student #2: *I would not go that length if I was in-charge, I would just think for myself and let others think for themselves. If they want to try change the decision its ok with me but I would not join them; I did not think it was right.*

This student appears to oppose the practice of decision making that is championed by a male student quoted above. She is not against the notion of group formation but is more independent in decision making.

The third sub-theme also pointed to the importance given to the benefit that the students expected to get from their decision making. Most of the students' decisions were based on what they anticipated to get from their decisions. The reward, be it higher grades, or appreciation in class, or certificate of appreciation, or recommendation, or better internship, or scholarships and others were emphasized. The following lines carry this sub-theme:

Female student #1: *I work hard to manage the class as class representative or club coordinators and in the end the main question is what will I get out of it? Will it be internship, better grades or can I use it in my CV and will it help to get scholarship? Why do it if I do not get anything out of it.*

Male Student #1: *I hold important position in SWC and also coordinate Finance Club but what will I get out of it. For sure we gain lot of confidence and learning and managing skills but what else? Can it help in enhancing CV, make impact on internship or job search, is always the question for do I want to take on the positions and the pressure that comes along with it, if I do not get anything in return.*

The above excerpts, which render the students' decision to work as their representatives, points to the underlying reasons for their undertaking. It is pointed that they assumed the roles due to their anticipation to get 'something' in return.

#### *External Elements*

The theme – external elements – points to the role of various facets such as an exposure to ethics course, the role of social media, social identification, and opportunities and constraints. This theme contains two sub-themes: the role and functions of academic institutions/teachers, and the influence of environmental agents.

All the students agreed that academic institutions in general and teachers in particular impact their decision at varying degrees. They felt the courses taught in social science helped most as they learned about ethics and other positive and negative decision making and its impact in society. It was agreed that a course in ethics was important as it helped conceptualize ethics, morals and virtue, and philosophy and theories. According to one participant, which represents the idea of many other respondents, the subject must also be taught in lower schools as well.

Male student #1: *As I was lacking in DM skills and had to take help from friends in school in the valley, from social media and influencers and peers to learn. If it had been taught at a lower level, I would not have trouble making decisions.*



This account presents not only a sense of regret for not being exposed to the courses related to decision making, but also the realization of its importance. A course in ethics education, it is believed, should have been incorporated in school level education. Given the lack of the student's exposure to ethics course, he had to resort to taking help from different sources. This shows exposure to 'academic programs' as a perceived decision making enhancer.

This idea finds its reiteration in the narrative of other students as well. Two students' views are presented below:

Male student #2: *Coming to Kathmandu for the first time we had to forget what we had learned in our community and quickly unlearn, learn new and apply. .... Ethics course really helped me to learn the theory and make right decision. Absolutely, the course must be taught in every level. It's really helpful.*

Female student #1: *There was no problem as we were taught in school and at home to make our own decisions so we made them. But yes, the course was very informative and helped us to understand the theory that was the basis of us making the decision.*

Both these accounts lend support to the idea of prescribing ethics course; it is believed that this course helped the students make informed decision.

Many of the participants' decision making was reported to be influenced by various environmental factors. One of them was social media. It was found that while two male students from outside the valley were hugely influenced by the social media, the rest stated lesser influence of the same. The only difference was the nature and degree of influence.

Male student #1: *I watched their videos and podcast making decisions, then I tried to analyze it and see if it was right or wrong. This helped me gain confidence when what I predicted came out right.*

The word 'their' in the student's narration refers to 'social media influencers.' Watching their social media messages is accepted as an instrumental influencer in the student's decision making.

Pointing to the role of peers in decision making, two males from outside the valley felt high degree of peers' effect. This was seen to be due to their understanding of the importance of peers.

Male student #1: *I had to ask the earlier CR about how to go about becoming a CR and managing the process once you are the CR. I joined the SWC as a normal member first and then when I learned who had been earlier coordinators and the process I then took help from them to become the coordinators of the club and they really helped us as they told us everything needed to make right decisions.*

Female student # 1: *I took help from the earlier coordinators when I was in doubt. They were very helpful and told us everything, though I had been a class monitor in school too so I was sure I could do it but it is not the same in college. The earlier CR's helped when needed.*

Both these responses are from class representative (CR), and they acknowledge that they resorted to their seniors' help in their decision and execution.

Other factors contributing to decision making included social identification. The students' sense of belonging to particular culture/ethnicity, and family was found to have impact on decision making. This was mostly stated by students having particular ethnic identity; the values they learned via their

identification changed in varying degree due to their situated-ness in new location and the difference of culture they faced in the migrated location. Such transformation was reported to oblige them to change their decision to suit the culture of the capital city, Kathmandu.

Male student #1: *I come from a very strict Marwari family, no meat and other stuff and all decisions taken by the elders about even the clothes we wear, forget about the financials. The community was important. Every decision was made with "what will the community say," "we will be boycotted". The school was the same. I told my family I just wanted to visit Kathmandu for few weeks but decided to stay. I was shocked by what I saw in Kathmandu and the difference in our hometown. The people here are so free, no care, everyone doing what they like. Even young children make their own decisions. I felt so uncomfortable, we had such backward thinking about most issues. I was really glad to be in Kathmandu and did not want to return, so I tried my best to get in KUSOM and then now I am free and have made strides in my career. Everyone is helpful, and easygoing, with no hassles, even when we went to take interviews with bank CEO's they told us all the important things and were very helpful. There is unnecessary fear in my community. I only take help on big financial decision from family as they have to pay for it otherwise I do not ask for any advice.*

Male student #3: *I was amazed when I came to Kathmandu, I am from strict Marwari family so it was really fun to be here and not return I completed UGS and GS from here so I really had time to change and enjoy the freedom except when I return for holidays. I do try to change them but I guess it is hard now as they grow older. I stopped taking any help in decision making from my parents once I came to Kathmandu.*

In these excerpts, the respondents are from Marwari community, which is generally perceived as 'strict'. These students' decisions were in accordance to the tradition of their society when the students were living with the family. Being away from the family and living in town resulted in another identity, which then impacted their decision making.

Students having strong ethnic identification faced huge difficulty in making decisions. They were pulled in two different directions: retaining their identity and adjusting in the new culture. Though the participants said they have changed due to the influence of the new location, they could not assert that their take on major decisions like marriage would be self-made decision.

Male student #3: *I love my parents and understand the need for them to change their conventional ways of looking at things.*

Male student #1: *Though religion is not important to me right now as it does not make sense to me as it has no logic but I know parents follow it so at home when they put "tika" I just accept it and do as told to, since they will not change. I have tried. It is impossible. Therefore, later for marriage I will follow their advice and marry in the same community. Otherwise who will look after them later? I have to. Even when I go to Pashupati, I go for peace in the evenings, not for religious pretext. It just doesn't come from the inside.*

In both these excerpts, the students' sense of identification with family, particularly with parents, appears strong. Consequently, their decision would not contradict the family expectations.

The sub-theme of environmental factors also foregrounds the role of opportunities and constraints in decision making. It was stated that opportunities are available prominently due to the nature of the present society being advanced and liberal. The students felt encouraged to make decisions, shifting from

being conservative to more liberal. Similar was the role of constraints. One male student of GS, who was also working, found his unethical decisions grounded on the pressure created by organizational requirements.

*Male student #3: I was in finance and hence had to follow what my supervisor told me to, I did for some time but later I decided this didn't work for me, so I looked for other opportunities and left the job. There is great pressure in organizations to do unethical work sadly to say.*

As presented here, this student's decision to leave the job was due to the pressure that he could not withstand.

Some students' decision making appeared to have been influenced also by the external factors such as the 'the financial condition of family' or 'the working condition'. The students as experienter of these conditions regarded them as 'stressful' and 'frustrating' and their decision either to 'start their own venture' or 'leave the country' was described as the consequence. We present two excerpts below:

*Male student #2: If I had enough money I would leave the job. Parents have lots of loan so have to first take care of them first. Once that is done I will leave this organization. It is very stressful staying in such company.*

*Male student #3: I will go abroad and make money and only return when I have enough or when things change here. Some experiences were good but the last experience was very frustrating. I was hoping to work here but it seems I have to go abroad.*

Both these participants were working in private companies. The decision of the male respondent to remain in the company despite his experience of being in 'very stressful' condition points to the role of the family not being affluent, in his decision. Similar idea is expressed in the account of male respondent #3. His decision to 'go abroad' is ascribed to 'not having money.'

## Discussion

The present study, which examined university students' decision making through interpretative phenomenological analysis, revealed two themes: personal elements and external elements. The theme – personal elements – comprises of three sub-themes, namely respect for an individual's self-esteem, awareness of self as being independent/ dependent to family, and interaction in school with colleagues and faculties. Another theme – external elements – contains two subthemes: the role and functions of academic institutions/teachers, and the influence of environmental agents. These themes and sub-themes are comparable with many other prior studies and theories.

The sub-theme of respect for an individual's self-esteem resembles the idea of Cheng et al. (2013) who argued that an individual's decision making depends on the social rank and the consequent esteem of the person. Self-awareness as a driving force of decision making aligns with the finding of Morgan III (2019). These similarities acknowledge that certain elements play their role in identical way in students' decision making.

The sub-theme of interaction with family having its role in decision making reiterates that Nepali society is collectivist. Parents in collective society tend to be overprotective and this seems to stunt their wards' growth into mature human being. If children are taught at home and school to face consequence

of actions and act independently, they would clearly stand independently and make decision that serves them best and this aligns well with the study by Bobbio & Sarrica (2009) regarding vertical collectivism.

Among the external factors playing their role in decision making, a very prominent one is social media (Chapin & Byrne, 2013). Other factors contributing to decision making included exposure to ethics course and ability to differentiate between what is right and wrong; these findings resemble with various earlier studies (Bommer et al., 1987; Mladenovic, Martinov-Bennie & Bell, 2017; Lester, 2022) and social identification (Zhong, Ku, Lount & Murnighan, 2017). Some students' decision making appeared to have been influenced also by the external factors such as the 'the financial condition of family' or 'the working condition' (Walker, 2011).

One finding – the difference in the decision making between local students and migrated students – is interesting. Migrated students stated minimal influence of family in their decisions in the new place whereas the local students stated their family having a major role in their decision. The distinction is clear as migrated students come from constrictive, confined and strict cultures where biases are high. Landing in the capital, they seem amazed by the transformed society. Strict rules and enforcement of punishment seems to make them toe the line and use EDM process since it means following collectivism instead of having to face consequences alone.

A common sounding but an alarming finding was that lying was accepted by all the students as commonly practiced phenomenon. They were found to resort to white lies to whitewash the situation and shy away from individual punishment. Their decision to telling lie as 'natural act' is understandably a serious concern.

The students' confession to decide based on the 'benefit of larger group' also requires discussion. It was seen that students formed comrades-in-arms as a power group to get leeway in negotiation. This indicates the effect of collectivism, where personal ideas, opinions and voice are suppressed to think like a group. This finding aligns with the theory of utilitarianism.

Many students felt anxious in decision making due to lack of training and experience after migrating to the valley. Since they come from the cultures with strict adherence to old norms that seem out of place, they are in turmoil about what to believe and follow. They felt it must be taught in graduate school and even at lower schools.

Unless an appropriate intervention such as imparting knowledge of ethics through an introduction of ethics course is done (Giacalone, 2004; Lester, 2022), organizations where they would work after their graduation may face serious consequences. Such possibilities point to a huge importance of ethics courses.

## **Conclusions**

The present research studied a broad spectrum of students' decision making, indicating the process to be dynamic and complex. A major conclusion from this study can be the importance of giving opportunities to students to make decisions at home. Their exposure to decision making at home will provide them time to look reflexively at their act.

Students' report of doing everything based on the consequence drove us to a tentative conclusion that there are intermittent chances of compromising ethics when there are possibilities of bad outcomes. In groups, they looked for betterment of the whole group also suggests that the students' sense of

collectivism is a great influencer in decision making. The finding also implies the importance of ethics course and appropriate trainings to the students. Further, rules and regulations need to be enforced, and informed to the students, as it will help them make ED.

Further study is also possible from the finding of this study. Given that the finding of this study aligns with a couple of existing theories, any researcher working on this issue may broach into the question, “do students in developing countries make decisions in the same way as those in developed countries?”

### Limitations

The present study identified the elements that are perceived to play crucial role in undergraduate and graduate level students’ decision making. All the participants were from one Management School in Kathmandu, which resulted into the study’s limitation of not including the students from other universities. Conducting more rigorous study with particular category of participants such as male from Kathmandu, female from outside the valley would provide more nuanced understanding.

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