

THE ROLE OF FUTURE-DIRECTED UNCERTAINTY FOR WORK MOTIVATION AND VOLITION AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

Ezgi Yılmaz, & Andreas Zimmer

Business Psychology, University of Applied Management Studies (Germany)

Abstract

This exploratory qualitative study examines the motivational and volitional processes underlying goal-directed behaviors of young adults under conditions of uncertainty. Using the Rubicon Model and Expectancy-Value Theory as the primary frameworks, and drawing on PSI Theory as a complementary perspective, in-depth data was collected from four participants using uncertainty-based scenarios and open-ended questions. The findings emphasize that the subjective value attributed to the goal plays an important role in sustaining motivational commitment, while volitional strategies and social support facilitate the continuation of the action. Despite the limited number of participants, the study offers theory-based and application-oriented insights into motivation and volition processes under uncertainty. The findings expand motivation models by framing uncertainty not only as a risk factor but as an active factor shaping motivational and volitional dynamics, and offer practical implications for supporting goal-directed behaviors among young adults in the workplace.

Keywords: *Uncertainty, motivation, volition, Rubicon Model, goal-directed behavior.*

1. Introduction

The motivation and commitment of the younger generation play a critical role in companies' future workforce and productivity. Uncertainty has a significant impact on individuals' decision-making, goal planning, implementation, and maintenance. In the literature, Touré-Tillery & Fishbach (2011) and Şenol & Akdağ (2018) show that uncertainty has a negative effect on motivation, Anselme (2010) and Shen, Fishbach & Hsee (2015) emphasize that uncertainty can be transformed into a positive force through individuals' self-regulation mechanisms. Nevertheless, how uncertainty works in young adults, particularly in volitional processes, and at what point it strengthens or weakens motivational-volitional processes has not been sufficiently studied. On this basis, the aim of the study is to qualitatively reveal young individuals' decision-making, goal-setting, and self-regulation patterns in an uncertain environment. For this purpose, this study was designed as an exploratory qualitative research with a small group of participants (N = 4).

2. Design

This study is structured within the framework of Expectancy-Value Theory (Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2018) and the Rubicon Model (Heckhausen & Gollwitzer, 1987). Kuhl's (2001) Personality Systems Interaction (PSI) Theory, which offers a useful perspective for interpreting how individual differences affect motivational and volitional processes, is used as supporting evidence. Within this framework, the Rubicon Model distinguishes between the pre-action period, where individuals evaluate options under uncertainty, and the implementation stages, where they engage in action and sustain goal-directed behavior. This distinction provides a strong theoretical basis for understanding how uncertainty affects motivational and volitional processes. Expectancy-Value Theory explains how expectancy of success and the subjective value assigned to a goal affect individuals' decision-making processes and the processes of translating these decisions into action and sustaining that action. It also sheds light on the interpretation of volitional and motivational strategies that emerge in qualitative responses. Although personality variables are not directly measured in the qualitative phase, PSI Theory provides a complementary conceptual framework for understanding individual differences in self-regulation and volitional control processes. Taken together, these theoretical perspectives shape the creation of uncertainty-based open-ended scenarios used in the qualitative phase and the interpretation of the responses obtained.

3. Objectives

Objective 1: To qualitatively examine how young adults experience and navigate the phases of the Rubicon Model during decision-making, action initiation, and action maintenance under conditions of uncertainty.

Objective 2: To qualitatively investigate the effect of success expectancy and the subjective value assigned to the goal on decision-making, action initiation, and action maintenance under conditions of uncertainty within the Expectancy-Value Theory framework.

4. Methods

A qualitative research design was used to examine individuals' motivational and volitional processes in depth under conditions of uncertainty. This section describes the participants, materials, procedures, and data analysis.

4.1. Participants

The qualitative study was conducted with four young adults aged 18 to 30. The small sample size was purposefully chosen to enable an in-depth, exploratory examination of each participant's motivational and volitional processes under conditions of uncertainty. Although the sample is limited, these findings provide valuable insights for understanding the observed patterns discussed in the Discussion section. Participants volunteered to take part in the study. All participants responded to the same uncertainty-based scenarios and open-ended questions.

4.2. Materials

The data were collected using uncertainty-based scenarios designed to reveal participants' decision-making, action initiation, maintenance, and volitional strategies under uncertain conditions, encompassing the motivational and volitional phases of the Rubicon Model (pre-decisional, pre-actional, actional, post-actional) and the core components of Expectancy-Value Theory (expectation of success and subjective goal value). The scenarios include both work and everyday life situations; however, greater emphasis has been placed on the work context to ensure consistency with the abstract and conclusion. The open-ended questions probe individuals' feelings, thoughts, and planned actions. Participants' cultural backgrounds, vocational-educational statuses, and individual competence levels were not taken as variables; the questions were designed to be general and context-independent, focusing on participants' processes of decision-making and action under uncertainty.

4.3. Procedure

Interviews were conducted individually, and after each participant was read the scenario, they were asked to answer open-ended questions. Each interview lasted approximately 1.5-2 hours. The purpose of the study was explained to all participants, and participation was voluntary.

4.4. Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted within the framework of qualitative content analysis. Both deductive and inductive categorization were used in the analysis process. In the deductive analysis phase, the responses were coded according to predefined theoretical categories based on Expectancy-Value Theory and the Rubicon Model. Within this framework, each response was evaluated in terms of success expectation, subjective value, perceived uncertainty, volitional control processes, and which Rubicon phase it corresponded to. In the inductive analysis phase, the responses were analyzed according to recurring patterns of meaning, and the cognitive, motivational, and emotional strategies contained in the responses were identified, and categories corresponding to these strategies were created. This two-stage analytical approach enabled the systematic testing of the theoretical framework and facilitated the observation of the contextual and subjective dimensions of participants' experiences under uncertainty.

5. Discussion

In this study, the motivational and volitional processes underlying goal-directed behavior under conditions of uncertainty were examined in different Rubicon Model phases. In the discussion section below, the findings are interpreted in light of theoretical frameworks, emphasizing how value, expectation, and volitional strategies shape motivation and volition.

Pre-decisional Phase: At this phase, participants typically focus on decision-making, cost-benefit analysis, perception of uncertainty and risk assessment, social support and influence, and values. Findings indicate that the sense of value outweighs expectations, particularly under conditions of uncertainty. This pattern is consistent with previous research highlighting internally focused job values among young adults (Dwivedula, 2025; Loughlin & Barling, 2001). However, findings of this study extend these studies by showing that subjective value can compensate for fluctuating expectations before crossing the Rubicon. Nevertheless, in one case, high perceived risk prevented action despite the opportunity being recognized, demonstrating that crossing the Rubicon is not inevitable when perceived risk exceeds subjective value. Based on the overall results, these findings contribute to the literature by confirming the central role of subjective value in the decision-making process. Furthermore, they demonstrate that even when expectations are unstable in situations of uncertainty, high subjective value can stabilize motivational commitment and delay crossing the Rubicon, though it cannot necessarily prevent it.

Pre-actional Phase: In this phase, individuals generally engage in planning in order to reduce uncertainty. Factors such as social support and influence, having a backup plan, and clarity of information indicate that intention is sensitive to situational conditions. In other words, the findings show that crossing the Rubicon is not a single moment, but rather a process of preparation for action that emerges under uncertainty depending on the circumstances. These results are consistent with the findings of Sun (2006), which suggest that when risk-threat perception is combined with opportunity perception, motivation can be enhanced. Extending this perspective, the present findings suggest that individuals' perception of uncertainty, combined with opportunity perception such as social support, may facilitate motivational engagement and support the continuation of goal-oriented planning in the pre-actional phase.

Actional Phase: In this phase, despite uncertainty and drops in motivation, the goal is generally not abandoned. Self-regulation, problem-focused coping, social support, work- or education-related support, reframing the value of the goal, and providing flexibility are observed as the most frequently used volitional control strategies. However, maintaining goal-directed action does not always result in a smooth transition. Individuals evaluate the action contextually. The conflict between pleasure and responsibility leads to adjusting the action according to these values or, depending on the sense of obligation, may result in the action being performed involuntarily. However, ultimately, these conditions did not prevent adherence to the action. Furthermore, it has been observed both that social support (e.g., family and friends) and work- or education-related support in the actional phase plays a very important role in maintaining individuals' motivation and commitment to the goal. From the perspective of PSI theory, emotional regulation and social support can be understood as mechanisms that support the sustainability of action. This is consistent with previous research findings that uncertainty can be transformed into a motivating force through self-regulation processes (Anselme, 2010; Shen et al., 2015).

Post-actional Phase: Evaluations at this phase show that they are not a one-dimensional assessment of success or failure, but rather that individuals evaluate the outcome in terms of maintaining psychological balance, learning lessons, and reorganizing their motivational frameworks for future goals. In evaluations of success, the outcome is assessed not only within the "I succeeded" framework, but also within the "Was it worth it?" framework. This questioning in the evaluation is consistent with the work by Seo, Bartunek & Barrett (2010), which shows that individuals may not be satisfied even if they achieve their goals due to the mismatch between their expectations and the results they obtain. In the case of failure, the initial emotional responses are sadness, regret, and self-criticism. However, these emotional responses do not cause individuals to completely abandon their goals. Individuals reframe the experience with thoughts such as "I did my best" or "I learned a lesson from this." Ultimately, these findings contribute to PSI theory by showing how post-action evaluations under uncertainty facilitate personal growth through meaning-making and internalization rather than abandoning the goal.

Table 1. Key Findings: Phases of the Rubicon Model.

Rubicon Phase	Key Findings	Example Quotes
Pre-decisional Phase	Value > Expectation	"I would take this task because it can improve me."
Pre-actional Phase	Planning, back-up plan, social support	"I wouldn't be in panic. I would make a backup plan."
Actional Phase	Volitional strategies, social support	"I would deal with uncertainty, difficulties with support of my family."
Post-actional Phase	Reflection, reframe, learning	"If I were unsuccessful, I would be disappointed but I would know that I had tried and would try to find another solution."

6. Conclusion

Overall, this study makes three important contributions. First, it shows that subjective value supports motivational commitment prior to action by compensating for fluctuating expectations under uncertainty. Second, it redefines crossing the Rubicon as a context-sensitive process rather than a single moment. Third, it demonstrates how volitional and self-regulatory processes sustain goal-directed action despite motivational fluctuations. These findings expand existing motivation models by integrating uncertainty not merely as a risk factor but as an active component of motivational and volitional processes. Furthermore, it supports the applicability of motivation and volition theories in real work contexts and provides important insights for practical interventions that can be implemented to increase goal commitment among young adults. Organizations can increase the motivation and goal commitment of young employees in uncertain environments by emphasizing the value of goals and providing social support mechanisms.

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