

Impact of Moral Decision Making in Emerging Adults

Sapna Tatiwala^{1*}, Dr. Sankul Sethia²

ABSTRACT

Emerging adulthood, typically defined as the period between ages 18 and 25, represents a critical developmental stage marked by exploration, self-discovery, and identity formation. During this time, individuals face numerous moral dilemmas that significantly influence their personal and social lives. Decision making is a crucial aspect of this age as it has many long-term implications. This review focuses on "moral decision-making," encompassing judgments, evaluations, and choices made within the moral domain. By examining the complex relationship between moral decision-making and emerging adults, this paper explores how cognitive development, identity formation, and social influences intersect to shape moral reasoning and its outcomes. A systematic review of 34 studies (1983–2025) on decision-making and moral reasoning is presented, integrating various theoretical perspectives and empirical findings. The review aims to offer a nuanced understanding of how emerging adults' moral decisions are shaped by life experiences and connected to their sense of moral identity in real-life contexts. Additionally, the findings highlight the role of consequences in moral orientations and decision-making processes during this developmental period.

Keywords: *moral decision-making, emerging adults, dilemma, moral reasoning, identity formation, and social influences*

Moral decision-making is the process of evaluating choices based on ethical principles, values, and a consideration of what is right or wrong. It focuses on the potential impact of actions on others, society, and oneself, emphasizing fairness, justice, and respect for human dignity. Unlike other forms of decision-making, which may prioritize practical, financial, emotional, or strategic outcomes, moral decision-making is guided by ethical reasoning and often considers the long-term consequences of actions on the larger community. Moral decision-making prioritizes ethical considerations and the greater good, whereas other forms of decision-making may focus more on efficiency, profitability, or personal goals without addressing the ethical dimensions of a choice.

Moral decision-making is crucial in emerging adulthood as it helps shape identity, values, and a strong moral compass during a formative period of life. It fosters responsible choices, builds trust in relationships, and prepares individuals to navigate complex challenges with empathy and integrity. By considering the ethical implications of their actions, emerging

¹Research Scholar, IIS Deemed to be university

²Assistant Professor, IIS Deemed to be university

*Corresponding Author

Received: November 12, 2025; Revision Received: February 21, 2026; Accepted: February 25, 2026

Impact of Moral Decision Making in Emerging Adults

adults contribute positively to society and develop the foundation for principled living, benefiting both themselves and the broader community.

Foundational research those conducted by Lyons (1983) and Colby (1983), emphasized that justice and care orientations, gender roles, and self-concept significantly influence moral reasoning, with adolescence being a critical period for establishing enduring moral judgment patterns. Horan and Kaplan (1983) highlighted how judgments about criminal intent are influenced by the interplay between intent and consequence severity, showing how individuals balance these factors in moral evaluations. Leman (2002) further explored how gender roles and consequence severity impact moral orientation, with variations in justice or care priorities depending on context.

The concept of emerging adulthood was introduced by Arnett (2000) as a distinct developmental phase, marked by identity exploration and role experimentation, typically occurring between ages 18-25. This culturally specific phenomenon distinguishes itself from adolescence and young adulthood by allowing individuals to explore personal and social roles. This phase has profound implications for moral development and personal identity formation. Similarly, Herzog and Beadle (2018) explored the role of religiosity and spirituality, finding that exposure to diverse religious and spiritual orientations enhances moral awareness during emerging adulthood.

Contemporary research on moral development has placed growing emphasis on the role of moral identity and age-related changes in guiding ethical decision-making among emerging adults. Reynolds and Ceranic (2007) demonstrated that both moral identity and moral judgments independently influence moral behavior, particularly in low-consensus situations. Lapsley and Hardy (2017) emphasized the interconnectedness of moral reasoning, identity formation, and well-being, asserting that moral self-identity is critical during emerging adulthood. Han, Liauw, and Kuntz (2019) found that moral identity predicts the presence of meaning in life, underscoring its significance in personal and social decision-making contexts.

Some researchers found that as age increases, moral reasoning also increases. Hao (2016) observed that moral reasoning matures with age, with younger adults favoring deontological judgments while older individuals lean toward utilitarian perspectives. Krettenauer and Victor (2017) illustrated how internal moral motivations integrate with age, enhancing moral identity and ethical decision-making. Kaur (2020) noted that exposure to higher education and social issues enriches moral reasoning among college students, facilitating their ability to evaluate diverse alternatives. Craig et al. (2021) found that professional transitions significantly shape moral development, as emerging adults navigate ethical challenges in their roles. Taken together, these findings highlight that moral decision-making in emerging adulthood is a dynamic and evolving process shaped by identity development, life experiences, and social contexts.

A growing body of research has highlighted the complex and multidimensional nature of moral decision-making, emphasizing the integration of cognitive, emotional, social, and contextual factors. Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger and Latzko (2020) underscored the importance of both cognitive reasoning and emotional processes in moral functioning, particularly through deontic judgment and self-constructed emotional attributions. Similarly, Peng (2023) demonstrated that both cognitive and affective empathy significantly shape moral reasoning and interpersonal decision-making. Extending this perspective, Koenig and Gao (2022) examined the role of peer attachment, interpersonal affect, and gender in sacrificial

Impact of Moral Decision Making in Emerging Adults

moral dilemmas, revealing the influence of relational and gender-based differences in ethical judgments. In addition to these interpersonal and emotional dimensions, contextual influences such as personality, family, and peer environments have also been found to play a crucial role in shaping responses to moral dilemmas (Bacchini et al., 2021; Briggs & Lumsdon, 2021). Recent scholarship has further broadened the scope of moral development by adopting interdisciplinary and neuroscientific perspectives. For instance, Eustice-Corwin et al. (2023) linked moral development with Aristotelian ethics and human flourishing, whereas Tanious et al. (2023) emphasized the cultivation of cognitive, personal, and interpersonal competencies during emerging adulthood. Complementing these views, Silvers and Peris (2023) highlighted the neurodevelopmental foundations of this phase, particularly the significance of reward sensitivity and social support. Collectively, these findings suggest that moral decision-making during emerging adulthood is shaped by an interaction of cognitive, emotional, relational, and neurodevelopmental processes.

Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger and Latzko (2021) investigated the "Happy Victimizer" phenomenon, where individuals justify harmful actions for perceived moral purposes, showing the complexity of moral decisions. Bollich et al. (2023) found that while moral decision-making remains stable over time, social dynamics greatly shape ethical judgments. Lapsley et al. (2023) noted advancements in prosocial reasoning and perspective-taking in emerging adulthood, while Davids (2023) explored decision-making styles influenced by Self-Determination Theory, linking them to well-being among South African youth.

Amin et al (2025), studied that strong clinical reasoning and decision-making abilities are key indicators of empathic care in nurse interns, emphasizing the importance of nurturing these skills for comprehensive, patient-focused care. To support this, nursing education should focus on enhancing these competencies through simulation training and updating competency frameworks to place greater emphasis on empathy. Similarly, another study explored how empathy and evidence-based practice influence newly graduated nurses' views on shared decision-making. The key finding is that these nurses are optimistic about implementing shared decision-making in clinical settings. The results suggest that developing empathy and evidence-based skills can enhance this attitude (An.X et al (2025)). Consequently, the findings offer valuable recommendations for nursing schools and healthcare institutions—promoting training programs in these areas can further support the integration of shared decision-making into everyday nursing practice.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The present study is a comprehensive systematic review that examines the evolving nature of decision-making and moral reasoning among emerging adults, specifically focusing on individuals under the age of 26. Spanning four decades from 1983 to 2025, this review incorporates findings from 34 studies, each selected for its focus on moral and ethical development within this age group. The rationale for selecting this age range lies in the unique developmental characteristics of emerging adulthood—a period often characterized by exploration, identity formation, and the gradual assumption of adult responsibilities.

RESULTS

The studies reviewed illustrated that moral decision-making in emerging adulthood is influenced by a variety of factors: cognitive and emotional development, social exposure, moral identity, the interplay of personal and cultural values. This period is marked by significant growth in moral reasoning and identity, which are essential for navigating the

Impact of Moral Decision Making in Emerging Adults

complexities of adult life. Moral Decision-Making is related to several positive outcomes such as shaping purpose, well-being, satisfaction. Moral Decision-Making Increase with age (adolescent to emerging adult). Moral Decision-Making is influenced by gender roles, males are more focused on justice and females are tending to emphasize on care.

Table 1 summarizing the key findings and themes related to moral decision-making in emerging adulthood:

	Key Findings	Supporting Sources
Moral Decision-Making in Emerging Adulthood	Moral decisions involve both cognitive reasoning (deontic judgment) and emotional processing (empathy).	Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger & Latzko (2020); Peng (2023)
Education and Social Exposure	Higher education and exposure to diverse moral situations enhance critical thinking and moral reasoning.	Kaur (2020); Craig et al. (2021)
Developmental Trajectories	Moral identity matures with age; young adults shift from deontological to utilitarian reasoning, reflecting integrated moral motivations.	Hao (2016); Krettenauer & Victor (2017); Han et al. (2019)
Gender and Cultural Influences	Women often adopt care-oriented reasoning, men tend toward justice-oriented reasoning; culture and religiosity shape moral perspectives.	Takagi & Saltzstein (2022); Herzog & Beadle (2018); Eustice-Corwin et al. (2023)
Clinical Applications in Nursing	Empathy and clinical reasoning in nurse interns are associated with better patient care and openness to shared decision-making.	Amin et al. (2025); An.X et al. (2025)
Tailored Moral Development Program	Programs that include dilemma discussions, gender-sensitive tasks, mentorship, and reflection improve empathy, identity clarity, and principled decision-making.	Synthesis of programmatic recommendations

DISCUSSION

The paper provides a comprehensive exploration of moral decision-making during emerging adulthood, underscoring its importance as a developmental period marked by significant cognitive, emotional, and identity growth. Emerging adulthood, conceptualized by Arnett (2000) as a distinct phase between adolescence and adulthood, represents a critical window for moral development. This discussion synthesizes the key themes and findings presented in the paper, focusing on the interplay between cognitive and emotional processes, the influence of social and cultural contexts, and the implications for personal and societal well-being.

Moral Decision-Making in Emerging Adulthood: The complexity of moral decision-making during emerging adulthood lies in the integration of deontic judgment (rule-based thinking) and emotional attributions, as highlighted by Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger and Latzko (2020). This dual process reflects the need to navigate multifaceted moral landscapes, balancing rational evaluations with emotional responses. Such integration aligns with research emphasizing the role of empathy, as Peng (2023) notes, where cognitive and affective empathy shape moral choices, particularly in personal and social contexts.

Impact of Moral Decision Making in Emerging Adults

The Role of Education and Social Exposure: Exposure to higher education and social issues enhances moral reasoning by broadening perspectives and fostering critical thinking (Kaur, 2020). College environments often present diverse moral dilemmas, encouraging emerging adults to consider alternative viewpoints. Craig et al. (2021) further suggest that professional experiences during this period refine moral identity, as individuals face ethical challenges that require advanced reasoning and value-based decision-making.

Developmental Trajectories and Moral Identity: The paper underscores the evolution of moral identity and its relationship with decision-making styles, as seen in the works of Krettenauer and Victor (2017) and Lapsley and Hardy (2017). Younger adults, often guided by deontological principles, gradually incorporate utilitarian perspectives as they mature, reflecting a shift toward integrated moral motivations (Hao, 2016). This transition highlights the importance of moral identity in shaping ethical behavior and personal purpose, as noted by Han et al. (2019).

Gender and Cultural Influences: Gender differences in moral reasoning emerge as a nuanced factor, with women often emphasizing care and relational contexts, while men lean towards justice-oriented frameworks (Takagi & Saltzstein, 2022). Additionally, cultural and societal influences, such as religiosity and exposure to diverse moral paradigms, play pivotal roles in moral development (Herzog & Beadle, 2018; Eustice-Corwin et al., 2023).

Clinical Applications in Nursing Education: Recent studies in the field of healthcare underscore the practical relevance of moral decision-making. Amin et al. (2025) found that strong clinical reasoning and decision-making skills are linked to higher levels of empathic care among nurse interns. An.X et al. (2025) further demonstrate that newly graduated nurses who possess empathy and evidence-based competencies are more likely to adopt a positive attitude toward shared decision-making. These findings underscore the need for nursing education to integrate simulation-based training and revised competency frameworks that emphasize empathy and ethical reasoning.

A tailored moral development program for emerging adults can foster a well-rounded approach to ethical growth by offering a multifaceted exploration of moral reasoning and empathy. Workshops centered around moral dilemmas encourage participants to reflect deeply on principles of justice and empathy, allowing them to recognize the real-world complexities of ethical decision-making. Sessions on developmental stages further enrich understanding by illustrating how moral reasoning evolves with age, helping participants contextualize their own growth and anticipate future challenges. Gender-sensitive activities create a balanced perspective by incorporating both justice and care-based approaches in collaborative tasks, fostering inclusivity and mutual respect in moral reasoning. Reflective exercises that connect moral decisions to personal purpose and life satisfaction help young adults anchor their ethical choices to their core values, enhancing motivation and emotional resilience. Mentorship from experienced older mentors adds an invaluable layer, providing guidance and helping participants navigate the intricacies of moral situations they may encounter. The outcome of such a program includes a clearer sense of personal purpose, improved overall well-being, and a balanced moral perspective, equipping emerging adults to make thoughtful, compassionate, and principled decisions in their personal and professional lives.

CONCLUSION

Moral decision-making is key to personal growth in emerging adulthood, a time when individuals shape their identity and sense of purpose. As they mature, their ability to navigate moral dilemmas becomes more complex, influenced by cognitive development and cultural expectations. Gender roles also play a role, guiding individuals toward justice or care-based reasoning. Balancing these perspectives fosters moral integrity, helping emerging adults build meaningful relationships and become responsible, empathetic members of society. This growth strengthens their well-being by aligning actions with values and building resilience.

REFERENCES

- Amin, S. M., El-Sayed, A. A. I., Alsenany, S. A., Atta, M. H. R., Morsy, O. M. I., & Asal, M. G. R. (2025). How Clinical Reasoning and Decision-Making Competences Influence the Provision of Empathic Care Among Nursing Students?. *Teaching and Learning in Nursing*.
- An, X., Zhang, D., Wang, Q., Shi, X., Wang, M., Wang, Y., & Ma, J. (2025). The role of evidence-based practice and empathy in shared decision-making attitudes among newly graduated nurses: A cross-sectional study. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *81*(2), 777-786.
- Bacchini, D., De Angelis, G., Dragone, M., Esposito, C., & Affuso, G. (2021). Individual and environmental correlates of adolescents' moral decision-making in moral dilemmas. *Frontiers in psychology*, *12*, 770891.
- Bollich, K. L., Hill, P. L., Harms, P. D., & Jackson, J. J. (2016). When friends' and society's expectations collide: A longitudinal study of moral decision-making and personality across college. *PloS one*, *11*(1), e0146716.
- Bucciarelli, M., Khemlani, S., & Johnson-Laird, P. N. (2008). The psychology of moral reasoning. *Judgment and Decision making*, *3*(2), 121-139.
- Carpendale, J. I. (2000). Kohlberg and Piaget on stages and moral reasoning. *Developmental Review*, *20*(2), 181-205.
- Craig, D. A., Plaisance, P. L., Schauster, E., Roberts, C., Place, K. R., Yetter, C., & Chen, J. (2024). Moral Identity Development Among Emerging Adults in Media: A Longitudinal Analysis. *Journal of Media Ethics*, *39*(3), 170-189.
- Elm, D. R. (2019). Cognitive moral development in ethical decision-making. In *Business Ethics* (pp. 155-177). Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Garrigan, B., Adlam, A. L., & Langdon, P. E. (2018). Moral decision-making and moral development: Toward an integrative framework. *Developmental review*, *49*, 80-100.
- Gerson, M. W., & Neilson, L. (2014). The importance of identity development, principled moral reasoning, and empathy as predictors of openness to diversity in emerging adults. *Sage Open*, *4*(4), 2158244014553584.
- Ghous, R. (2003). *Relationship between moral judgment and religious orientation of adolescents, young adults and adults* (Doctoral dissertation, Quaid I Azam University).
- Gregg, G. S. (2017). *Social Values and Moral Intuitions: The World-views of "millennial" Young Adults*. Routledge.
- Hardy, S. A., Nadal, A. R., & Schwartz, S. J. (2017). The integration of personal identity, religious identity, and moral identity in emerging adulthood. *Identity*, *17*(2), 96-107.
- Hartman, D. (2015). Moral Orientation and Meaning: Morality and Life Satisfaction in Emerging Adults. *Counseling et spiritualité/Counselling and Spirituality*, *34*(1), 13-30.

Impact of Moral Decision Making in Emerging Adults

- Haviv, S., & Leman, P. J. (2002). Moral decision-making in real life: factors affecting moral orientation and behaviour justification. *Journal of moral education*, 31(2), 121-140.
- Herzog, P. S., Beadle, D. A. T., Harris, D. E., Hood, T. E., & Venugopal, S. (2016). Moral and cultural awareness in emerging adulthood: Preparing for multi-faith workplaces. *Religions*, 7(4), 40.
- Horan, H. D., & Kaplan, M. F. (1983). Criminal intent and consequence severity: Effects of moral reasoning on punishment. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 9(4), 638-645.
- Kaplan, U. (2019). Dynamic developmental complexity of moral motivation for adolescents and young adults. In *Psychosocial development in adolescence* (pp. 177-192). Routledge.
- Kaviya, A., & Sethia, S. (2023). Moral Identity: Bridging the Gap between Social Courage and Prosocial Behavior in Emerging Adults. *Journal of the Indian Academy of Applied Psychology*.
- Krebs, D. L., Denton, K., & Wark, G. (1997). The forms and functions of real-life moral decision-making. *Journal of Moral Education*, 26(2), 131-145.
- Krettenauer, T., Colasante, T., Buchmann, M., & Malti, T. (2014). The development of moral emotions and decision-making from adolescence to early adulthood: A 6-year longitudinal study. *Journal of youth and adolescence*, 43, 583-596.
- Lapsley, D., & Hardy, S. A. (2017). Identity formation and moral development in emerging adulthood. *Flourishing in emerging adulthood: Positive development during the third decade of life*, 1, 14-39.
- Lapsley, D., LaPorte, E., & Kelley, K. (2023). Moral cognition in adolescence and emerging adulthood.
- Malti, T., & Buchmann, M. (2010). Socialization and individual antecedents of adolescents' and young adults' moral motivation. *Journal of youth and adolescence*, 39, 138-149.
- Malti, T., Keller, M., & Buchmann, M. (2013). Do moral choices make us feel good? The development of adolescents' emotions following moral decision making. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 23(2), 389-397.
- McCabe, D. L., Dukerich, J. M., & Dutton, J. E. (1991). Context, values and moral dilemmas: Comparing the choices of business and law school students. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 10, 951-960.
- Mechler, H., & Bourke, B. (2011). Millennial college students and moral judgment: Current trends in moral development indices. *Journal of Organizational Moral Psychology*, 2(1), 27.
- Mitra, D., & Arnett, J. J. (2021). Life choices of emerging adults in India. *Emerging adulthood*, 9(3), 229-239.
- Molchanov, S. V. (2016). Moral decision making in adolescence. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 233, 476-480.
- Onat Kocabiyik, O., & Kulaksizoglu, A. (2014). A qualitative survey examining the moral identities of young adults. *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice*, 14(3), 851-858.
- Paciello, M., Fida, R., Tramontano, C., Cole, E., & Cerniglia, L. (2013). Moral dilemma in adolescence: The role of values, prosocial moral reasoning and moral disengagement in helping decision making. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 10(2), 190-205.
- Padilla-Walker, L. M. (2016). Moral development during emerging adulthood. *The Oxford handbook of emerging adulthood*, 449-463.

Impact of Moral Decision Making in Emerging Adults

- Raaijmakers, Q., Engels, R., & Van Hoof, A. (2005). Delinquency and moral reasoning in adolescence and young adulthood. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 29*(3), 247-258.
- Schwartz, S. J., Zamboanga, B. L., Luyckx, K., Meca, A., & Ritchie, R. A. (2013). Identity in emerging adulthood: Reviewing the field and looking forward. *Emerging adulthood, 1*(2), 96-113.
- Sham, F. M., Yaqin, A. I. N. U. L., & Wachidah, H. N. (2021). Moral Reasoning Theory: Between Kohlberg's and al-Ghazali's Perspective. *International Journal of Islamic Thought, 20*, 25-33.
- Shaver, P. R., & Mikulincer, M. (2012). An attachment perspective on morality: Strengthening authentic forms of moral decision making. *The social psychology of morality: Exploring the causes of good and evil, 10*(1), 257-274.
- Steinberg, L., & Cauffman, E. (1996). Maturity of judgment in adolescence: Psychosocial factors in adolescent decision making. *Law and human behavior, 20*(3), 249-272.
- Villacís, J. L., Naval, C., & De la Fuente, J. (2023). Character strengths, moral motivation and vocational identity in adolescents and young adults: A scoping review. *Current Psychology, 42*(27), 23448-23463.
- Weber, J. (2019). Understanding the millennials' integrated ethical decision-making process: Assessing the relationship between personal values and cognitive moral reasoning. *Business & Society, 58*(8), 1671-1706.
- Wood, D., Crapnell, T., Lau, L., Bennett, A., Lotstein, D., Ferris, M., & Kuo, A. (2018). Emerging adulthood as a critical stage in the life course. *Handbook of life course health development, 123-143*.

Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Tatiwala, S. & Sethia, S. (2026). Impact of Moral Decision Making in Emerging Adults. *International Journal of Indian Psychology, 14*(1), 780-787. DIP:18.01.074.20261401, DOI:10.25215/1401.074