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Fear of Failure, Cognitive Flexibility and Avoidant Behavior in Young Adults

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Abstract
The current research aimed to investigate the relationship between fear of failure, cognitive flexibility and avoidant behaviour among young adults. A sample of 300 (150 Male and 150 Female) were selected from different areas of Faisalabad using the convenient sampling approach. Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory, The Cognitive Flexibility Scale, The Brief Experiential Avoidance Scale were used for data collection. SPSS 23 was used to analyses the data, and a cross-sectional research design was used. The findings showed that there is a significant negative correlation between fear of failure and cognitive flexibility which means the higher the fear of failure the lower the cognitive flexibility. Fear of failure also exhibits a significant positive correlation with avoidant behaviour, meaning that people who have some fear of failure are more prone to avoidant behaviour. Furthermore, the cognitive flexibility has a significant negative correlation with the avoidant behaviour, which means that the higher the cognitive flexibility, the lower the avoidant behaviour. The findings showed that fear of failure is a significant negative predictor of cognitive flexibility with more fear of failure being associated with less cognitive flexibility. Results also indicated that fear of failure is statistically significant positive predictor of avoidant behaviour, meaning that the more fear of failure is present the more tendencies towards avoidance. The findings implied that cognitive flexibility completely mediate between fear of failure and avoidant behaviour, meaning that fear of failure mediates avoidant behaviour mostly through its effect on cognitive flexibility. Results showed that the statistical difference between males and females in the fear of failure and cognitive flexibility does not exist. While the gender difference however appears in the avoidance behaviour where the female indulges more avoidant behaviour than the males. Practically, these results suggest that improving cognitive flexibility and managing fear of failure through counseling and training can reduce avoidant behavior in young adults.

Keywords: Fear of Failure, Cognitive Flexibility, Avoidant Behaviour

Introduction
The fear of failure has become a prominent psychological construct when considering young adults and especially in the high-acidic environment of inner-city academia, doubtful career-based choices, social-comparison phenomena and performance-assessment programs. In educational and employment settings, young adults who experience extreme fear of failure amongst themselves tend to interpret evaluative experiences like examinations, presentations, interviews, or work challenges as threatening, instead of learning opportunities. It is proven in a number of studies that increased cognitive flexibility correlates with worsen emotional control, better problem-solving skills, and tolerance to stress in young adult groups (Dajani & Uddin, 2017). Such inflexible thinking makes one susceptible to psychological distress and encourages inappropriate coping

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mechanisms. Young adults navigating competitive academic and early professional landscapes frequently report heightened anxiety and social withdrawal, patterns that are consistent with avoidance-based responding under evaluative pressure (Shakeel, Iqbal, & Khan, 2025).

Avoidance behavior is a typical maladaptive coping style where individuals are trying to reduce exposure to perceived behaviors or threatening events (Zaidi & Sultana, 2023; Imran, 2022). Although avoidance might allow one to evade anxiety and discomfort, in the long term, avoidance inhibits personal development and confirms beliefs about fear. Evidence-based results continually fulfill the trend that fear of failure is a bold predictor of procrastination, inattention, and avoidance-focused achievement behavior among populations of young adults (Putwain et al., 2018). Cognitive flexibility may benefit resilience and lessen the need for maladaptive avoidance responses through effective cognitive restructuring when faced with evidence (Martin et al., 2018). The relationship between emotional regulation difficulties and burnout-related avoidance among younger populations further underscores the need for comprehensive psychological interventions (Tariq, Khan, & Atta, 2024). Finally, as noted in the current literature, fear of failure, cognitive flexibility, avoidant behavior can be discussed as interconnected due to the impact of these psychological constructs on the functioning of young adults.

Problem Statement

Fear of failure has become a prominent psychological concern among young adults, particularly within higher education and early career contexts characterized by intense performance demands and evaluative pressures. Despite its well-documented association with negative academic and psychological outcomes, the mechanisms through which fear of failure translates into maladaptive behavioral responses in young adults remain insufficiently understood (Conroy et al., 2017). However, empirical research examining the role of cognitive flexibility in shaping behavioral responses to fear of failure remains limited (Dajani & Uddin, 2017). Over time, this creates a self-perpetuating cycle of fear and avoidance, negatively affecting both performance and psychological well-being (Sirois & Pychyl, 2017). A significant gap in the literature lies in the lack of a unified model explaining how fear of failure leads to avoidant behavior, particularly through underlying cognitive mechanisms. Although cognitive flexibility is theoretically recognized as a protective factor, its moderating effect on the relationship between fear of failure and avoidant behavior in young adults has not been sufficiently examined. There is a need for integrative research that simultaneously examines these constructs within a single framework to better explain the mechanisms underlying avoidance (Crone & Dahl, 2017). The socioeconomic pressures faced by young adults in developing economies such as Pakistan including unemployment uncertainty and precarious career prospects can intensify fear of failure and associated psychological distress (Ayyubi, Ahsan, Anwar, Khan, & Shabeer, 2024). Despite growing recognition of fear of failure and its consequences, there remains a lack of clarity regarding the cognitive mechanisms that link it to avoidant behavior in young adults.

Fear of failure is an established psychological construct that can be defined as the disposition of a person to expect adverse consequences like shame, embarrassment or lowered self-esteem in evaluative or achievement condition situations. In motivation terms, fear of failure is directly related with avoidance-oriented achievement goals where an avoidance goal-oriented individual, it is avoidance driven as opposed to success oriented. Overall, fear of failure is a complex

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psychological concept that depends on cognitive, emotional, developmental, neurobiological, and environmental aspects. The broader macroeconomic and institutional environment also contributes to performance pressure; in Pakistan specifically, fiscal instability and institutional constraints further compound the stress experienced by young adults pursuing education and employment (Shabeer, Ayyubi, Usman, & Khan, 2024).

Cognitive flexibility is commonly accepted as one of the key elements of executive functioning which allows individuals to be adaptively flexible in their thinking, behaviors, and strategies in reaction to the changing environmental demands. Studies point to the fact that cognitive flexibility is a fundamental executive process, which supports adaptive cognition and is essential in goal-oriented behavior in dynamic conditions (Dajani & Uddin, 2017). Avoidant behavior is an adaptive coping style whereby the individual intentionally avoids, postpones or avoids any stressful, threatening or emotionally uncomfortable situation (Imran, Khan, & Rani, 2025; Imran, Sultana, & Jat, 2023). Clinical studies propose that avoidance has a pivotal role in the continuation and deterioration of psychological disorders with time (Kashdan et al., 2017). The emerging role of digital environments and technology-driven stressors adds a further layer to avoidance tendencies among young people navigating modern academic and professional demands (Iqbal, Rashid, Anwar, & Shabeer, 2025).

Rationale

Despite the growing awareness of such difficulties worldwide, the fear of failure is still highlighted to disrupt psychological functioning and performance in young adults, which explains why recent empirical research should be carried out in a context-specific way. One of the main reasons why the proposed study should be conducted is that little is known about the application of fear of failure to any behavioral consequences, especially in growing up adult groups. Despite the theoretical reasoning indicating a moderating value of cognitive flexibility, the empirical data, especially in non-Western populations, are scarce and inconclusive. Nevertheless, the interplay of these variables has not been adequately explored in young adults. Although these are the contextual realities, there is a paucity of empirical studies on the interaction between fear of failure, cognitive flexibility, and avoidant behavior, among young adults in Pakistan. Research in the Pakistani socio-academic context has noted that institutional constraints and competitive pressures play a significant role in shaping young adults' psychological responses (Farooqui, Khan, Kamboyo, Scholar, & Uddin, 2023). The second significant literature gap is the absence of integrative frameworks to study fear of failure, cognitive flexibility, and avoidant behavior in the same context.

The present study holds substantial importance as it contributes to a deeper understanding of the psychological processes shaping behavior among young adults in academic and early professional contexts. This study addresses that gap by offering a more comprehensive explanation of how cognitive and emotional processes jointly contribute to behavioral outcomes in young adults, thereby advancing existing psychological models. Educational leadership and reform efforts in Pakistan further highlight the urgent need for psychological research that informs how institutions can better support student well-being and adaptive functioning (Hamid, 2025).

Objectives

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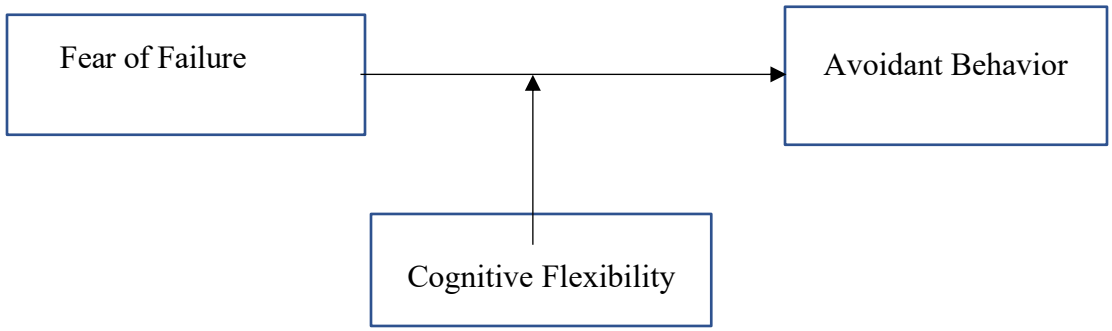
1. To examine the relationship between fear of failure, cognitive flexibility and avoidant behavior in young adults.
2. To investigate whether fear of failure predicts cognitive flexibility and avoidant behavior in young adults.
3. To analyze the mediating role of cognitive flexibility in the relationship between fear of failure and avoidant behavior in young adults.
4. To explore gender differences in fear of failure, cognitive flexibility, and avoidant behavior among young adults.

Hypotheses

5. There is a significant relationship between fear of failure, cognitive flexibility and avoidant behavior in young adults.
6. Fear of failure significantly predicts cognitive flexibility and avoidant behavior in young adults.
7. Cognitive flexibility mediates the relationship between fear of failure and avoidant behavior in young adults.
8. There are significant gender differences in fear of failure, cognitive flexibility, and avoidant behavior among young adults.

Conceptual Framework



This study proposes that fear of failure (independent variable) influences avoidant behavior (dependent variable) both directly and indirectly through cognitive flexibility (mediator). Higher fear of failure is expected to reduce cognitive flexibility by promoting rigid, threat-focused thinking patterns. In turn, lower cognitive flexibility increases the likelihood of avoidant behavior. Thus, cognitive flexibility functions as a psychological mechanism that explains how and why fear of failure leads to avoidant behavior in young adults.

Literature Review

Of these, the fear of failure has appeared as an important construct that has affected operation not only in academic and professional but also in personal sphere. Simultaneously, cognitive flexibility, the skill of altering one thought and behavioral approaches as the circumstances change, is an important factor in how the young adults cope with the stressors and difficulties. The complexity of these variables is necessary to learn psychological adaptation and functioning in young adult groups (Westhoff et al., 2024). There is empirical evidence indicating that the

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cognitive flexibility plays a significant role in mediating between fear of failure and avoidance behavior in young adults. Conversely, young adults who have lower cognitive flexibility have stiff thinking patterns, they take failure as an indication of their personal weaknesses and lessened self-worth. Researchers also point out that fear of failure, cognitive flexibility, and avoidant behavior are to be seen as a set of interconnected constructs that have a combination of effects on behavior and mental health in young adults. Accumulating evidence from psychological research indicates that emotional regulation capacities—including resilience—play a foundational role in buffering against fear-based cognitive states and their behavioral consequences (Saleem, Khan, & Imran, 2025).

Fear of failure has been consistently identified as a central psychological construct influencing emotional functioning, motivation, and behavioral engagement in young adults (Imran, Akhtar, & Khan, 2026; Haider, et al., 2025). However, contemporary research suggests that these effects are not merely direct; rather, fear of failure alters underlying cognitive processes, particularly cognitive flexibility, which in turn shapes behavioral outcomes. Empirical findings indicate that fear-based cognitive states, such as fear of failure, are associated with reduced cognitive flexibility due to heightened emotional reactivity and attentional rigidity. This suggests that fear of failure may impair cognitive flexibility, thereby constraining adaptive coping processes (Martin et al., 2016). The compounding effect of psychological vulnerability in competitive academic environments—where young people struggle with social stigma and unmet support needs—further exacerbates the impact of fear on cognitive functioning (Shehzad, Khan, & Khan, 2024). Cognitive flexibility thus acts as a critical psychological resource whose depletion under fear conditions paves the way for maladaptive behavioral patterns.

In this sense, cognitive flexibility operates as a cognitive mechanism through which fear of failure exerts its influence, rather than as an independent or buffering factor (Dennis & Vander Wal, 2015). However, much of the existing literature remains indirect, often inferring this relationship without explicitly testing it, highlighting a gap in empirical validation (Crone & Dahl, 2016). This suggests that cognitive flexibility may serve as a transmitting mechanism through which fear of failure influences downstream behavior (Putwain et al., 2018). Neurocognitive research provides additional support, linking fear responses to heightened activity in emotional processing regions that interfere with prefrontal executive functioning, the neural basis of cognitive flexibility. This limitation is addressed in the current study by positioning cognitive flexibility as a mediator that explains how fear of failure influences behavioral outcomes. The concept of silence and disengagement in stressful organizational environments—whereby individuals suppress their responses and withdraw rather than engage—provides a behavioral parallel to the avoidance patterns observed in academic settings (Liu, Lyu, Irfan, Sarmad, Ayub, & Ishaq, 2023).

Fear of failure has been widely recognized as a significant predictor of avoidant behavior, particularly in academic and performance-related contexts. While this direct association is well-established, the literature often lacks clarity regarding the internal mechanisms that translate fear into avoidance (Conroy et al., 2017). Not all individuals with high fear of failure exhibit avoidance, suggesting that additional cognitive processes influence this relationship (Putwain & Symes, 2018). Procrastination research provides further evidence of avoidance as a behavioral outcome of fear of failure, where individuals delay tasks to temporarily regulate emotional distress. The role of digital stress and cognitive fatigue in compounding avoidance tendencies is increasingly

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recognized as relevant to understanding how young adults disengage under pressure (Daniel, Yusuf, Masih, & Daniel, 2025).

Achievement goal theory and self-worth frameworks suggest that avoidance functions as a protective mechanism to defend self-esteem (Elliot & Hulleman, 2017). Longitudinal studies indicate a reciprocal cycle between fear of failure and avoidance, where avoidance reinforces fear over time. However, the mechanism through which fear initiates avoidance remains underexplored (Hong et al., 2021). Thus, the relationship between fear of failure and avoidant behavior is better understood as an indirect process operating through cognitive mechanisms rather than a purely direct effect.

Cognitive flexibility has been identified as a critical determinant of adaptive versus maladaptive behavioral responses. Individuals with high cognitive flexibility are more capable of reinterpreting stressful situations, exploring alternative strategies, and engaging with challenges, whereas those with low flexibility are more likely to rely on rigid thinking patterns that promote avoidance (Dajani & Uddin, 2015). The psychological resources fostered through growth-oriented experiences—such as entrepreneurial optimism and sustainability orientation—demonstrate a parallel capacity to buffer individuals from fear-based avoidance by strengthening cognitive adaptability (Zhang, Rana, Bashir, Adeel, Khokhar, & Ding, 2023).

Empirical research consistently links cognitive rigidity to avoidant coping, particularly under conditions of stress and uncertainty. This suggests that reduced cognitive flexibility directly contributes to the development of avoidance behaviors (Chamberlain et al., 2021). This adaptive processing reduces the need for avoidance and promotes persistence and engagement (Zhou et al., 2020). However, these studies often treat cognitive flexibility as a predictor rather than as part of a broader causal chain (García-Villamisar & Dattilo, 2015). Recent findings suggest that cognitive flexibility may function as a mechanism linking internal psychological states to behavioral outcomes. This suggests that cognitive flexibility is not only associated with avoidance but plays a functional role in its development (Thomas et al., 2021). When integrated with findings from preceding sections, this establishes a coherent mediation model in which fear of failure influences cognitive flexibility, which in turn determines avoidant behavior. Avoidance patterns documented in workplace and organizational contexts—where hostile interpersonal dynamics generate withdrawal and silence—mirror the behavioral disengagement observed in academic settings among fear-prone individuals (Masih, Naqshbandi, Ahmed, Punchanathan, & Ng, 2026). Understanding the abusive or toxic environmental cues that trigger disengagement allows for a more contextualized interpretation of avoidance as a response that transcends purely individual psychological deficits (Jalil, Sarmad, & Shafi, 2023).

Theoretical Background

One of the most relevant theories to explain the fear of failure in young adults is the Achievement Goal Theory. According to this theory, achievement goals characterize the motivation and the behavior of individuals, and it is divided into mastery goals and performance goals. Accordingly, Achievement Goal Theory offers a substantial basis on comprehending how fear-of-failure is formed and impacts behavioral patterns among young people (Elliot et al., 2017).

Cognitive Flexibility Theory describes the ability of persons to flex their thoughts and behavior in new settings and other complicated circumstances (Imran, Akhtar, & Khan, 2026; Zaidi, et al.,

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2024). People possessing high cognitive flexibility have higher chances of viewing challenges as learning and growth opportunities, but low cognitive flexibility people have rigid thinking styles. Thus, the Cognitive Flexibility Theory emphasizes the role of adaptive thinking to assure resilience and problem-solving and is, therefore, very relevant in explaining psychological functioning in young individuals (Spiro et al., 2019).

Experiential Avoidance Theory is a detailed theory explaining avoidant behavior basing on the fact that individuals tend to evade thoughts, feelings, and unpleasant experiences. One of the claims in this theory is that individual's resort to avoidance behavior to get rid of a psychological discomfort, despite the long-term negative consequences of the habit. Therefore, Experiential Avoidance Theory provides a suitable understanding of the development and maintenance of avoiding behaviors in youths to emotional difficulties (Hayes et al., 2016).

Research Methodology

Research Design

The research design adopted in this study was cross-sectional research design where the data were collected at one given time among young adults.

Participants

Population of the Study was young adults. A sample of 300 (150 Male and 150 Female) was selected from different areas of Faisalabad. The researcher used a non-probability method of sampling, which was convenient sampling. This method was selected because it is practical and simple to access and the researcher was able to sample out individuals who fit the inclusion criteria necessary to conduct the study.

Inclusion Criteria

- Individuals aged 18–26.
- Willingness to participate and provide informed consent.
- Ability to read and understand the survey questionnaires.

Exclusion Criteria

- Not willingness to participate and provide informed consent.
- Participants aged less than 18 and above than 26.

Procedure

After receiving approval from the Board of Study (BOD), the necessary clearance to proceed by the Board of Advanced Study and Research (BASR). A rapport-building relationship was developed with the participants to ensure their comfort and comprehension of the research aims. Prior to participation, all participants received a brief description of the study's objectives, and formal consent was obtained. Throughout the study, ethical considerations were strictly followed, with a special emphasis on ensuring participants' rights and well-being.

Statistical Analysis

Statistical calculations for the study were conducted using SPSS version 23. To analyze the relationships and predictors of the outcomes, a combination of descriptive and inferential statistics was applied, which included Pearson Product Moment correlation, regression analysis,

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independent sample t-tests, and analysis of variance. The data analysis was carried out with the SPSS version-25.

Results

Table 1

Frequencies and percentages of demographic variables of Study (N = 300)

Variables	Category	*f*	%
Age	10-20	163	54.30
	21-30	137	45.70
Gender	Male	150	50.00
	Female	150	50.00
Education	Matric	04	01.30
	Inter	131	43.70
	BS	165	55.00
Family Structure	Nuclear	108	36.00
	Joint	192	64.00
Socioeconomic Status	Lower Class	37	12.30
	Middle Class	247	82.30
	Upper Class	16	05.30
Residence	Urban	175	58.30
	Rural	125	41.70
	Total	300	100.0

Note. F = Frequency, % = Percentage

Table 1 demonstrates that the sample (N = 300) consists of young individuals (54.3% 10–20) with equal gender representation. Majority of the participants are BS students (55.0%), singly living (64.0%), and middle socioeconomic status (82.3%). The percentage of it living in urban areas (58.3) is higher than that living in rural areas.

Table 2

Variables Descriptive Statistics and Scale's Reliability Analysis (N = 300)

Scale	*M*	*SD*	*α*	Skewness	Kurtosis
The Fear of Failure Scale	-2.58	17.79	.90	.159	-.505
The Cognitive Flexibility Scale	59.29	14.36	.80	.427	.560
The Brief Experiential Avoidance Scale	73.36	17.36	.96	-1.22	.322

Note. M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation

Table 2 contains the descriptive statistics and reliability analysis of the study variables. The Fear of Failure Scale has a mean score of -2.58 (SD = 17.79) with a high degree of reliability (0.90),

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whereas the cognitive flexibility possesses a mean of 59.29 (SD = 14.36) and an acceptable degree of reliability (α = 0.80). Brief experiential avoidance scale has the best measure of reliability (.96) and mean of 73.36 (SD = 17.36). The values of skew and kurtosis show that the data can be considered normally distributed which means that they will be useful to perform further parametric tests.

Table 3

Bivariate Correlation Fear of Failure, Cognitive Flexibility and Avoidant Behavior in Young Adults

Variables	1	2	3
1. Fear of Failure	-	-.64**	.19**
2. Cognitive Flexibility		-	-.30**
3. Avoidant Behavior			-

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01

Table 3 displays the bivariate correlation of the fear of failure, cognitive flexibility and avoidant behavior among young adults. The findings show that there is a significant negative correlation between fear of failure and cognitive flexibility (r = -.64, p = .01) which means the higher the fear of failure the lower the cognitive flexibility. Fear of failure also exhibits a significant positive correlation with avoidant behavior (r = .19, p < .01), meaning that people who have some fear of failure are more prone to avoidant behavior. Furthermore, the cognitive flexibility has a significant negative correlation with the avoidant behavior (r = -.30, p < .01), which means that the higher the cognitive flexibility, the lower the avoidant behavior.

Table 4

Fear of Failure Predicting Cognitive Flexibility in Young Adults

Predictor	*B*	*SE B*	*β*	*t*	*p*	*95% CI for B*
Constant	57.93	.639	-	90.62	< .001	[56.67, 59.19]
Fear of Failure	-.524	.036	-0.648	-14.70	< .001	[-.594, -.453]

Note. **p < .01, B = Unstandardized coefficient, SE = standard error; β = standardized coefficient; CI = confidence interval, R^2 = .42

A simple linear regression was conducted to examine whether Fear of Failure significantly predicts Cognitive Flexibility among young adults. The model was statistically significant, F (1, 298) = 216.19, p < .001, indicating that fear of failure significantly predicts cognitive flexibility. The model explained 42% of the variance in cognitive flexibility (R^2 = .42), suggesting a moderate level of explained variability. The standardized beta coefficient showed a significant negative relationship between fear of failure and cognitive flexibility (β = −.648, t = −14.70, p < .001). This indicates that higher fear of failure is associated with lower cognitive flexibility in young adults.

Table 5

Fear of Failure Predicting Avoidant Behavior in Young Adults

Predictor	*B*	*SE B*	*β*	*t*	*p*	*95% CI for B*
Constant	73.84	.996	-	74.13	< .001	[71.88, 75.80]
Fear of Failure	.186	.055	.191	3.35	< .001	[.077, .296]

Note. **p < .01, B = Unstandardized coefficient, SE = standard error; β = standardized coefficient; CI = confidence interval, R^2 = .03

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A simple linear regression was conducted to examine whether fear of failure predicts avoidant behavior among young adults. The model was statistically significant, F (1, 298) = 11.28, p = .001, indicating that fear of failure is a significant predictor of avoidant behavior. However, the model explained only 3.6% of the variance in avoidant behavior (R^2 = .036, Adjusted), indicating a very small effect size. This suggests that although the relationship is statistically significant, fear of failure alone is a weak predictor of avoidant behavior in practical terms. The standardized coefficient (β = .191, p = .001) indicates a small positive relationship, meaning higher fear of failure is associated with slightly higher avoidant behavior. However, the low explained variance suggests that other psychological, contextual, or cognitive factors likely play a much stronger role in determining avoidant behavior.

Table 6

Cognitive Flexibility Mediating the Relationship between Fear of Failure and Avoidant Behavior in Youth

Total Effect

Variables	*Effect b*	*p*	*Boot SE*	*95% Boot UL*	
				Boot LL	*Boot UL*
Fear of Failure → Avoidant Behavior	.186	< .001	.055	.077	.296

Direct Effect

Variables	*Effect b*	*P*	*Boot SE*	*95%BootCI*	
				Boot LL	*Boot UL*
Fear of Failure → Cognitive Flexibility	-.524	< .001	.036	-.594	-.453
Cognitive Flexibility → Avoidant Behavior	-.383	< .001	.088	-.556	-.211
Fear of Failure → Avoidant Behavior	-.014	= .840	.071	-.154	.125

Indirect effect

Mediator	*Effect*	*Boot SE*	*95%BootCI*	
			Boot LL	*Boot UL*
Cognitive Flexibility	.201	.043	.116	.285

Note. **p < .01, B = Unstandardized coefficient, SE= Standard Error, Model Summary: Cognitive Flexibility model: R = .648, R^2 = .421, F (1, 298) = 216.19, p < .001, Avoidant Behavior model: R = .308, R^2 = .095, F (2, 297) = 15.54, p < .001

The results indicate that cognitive flexibility significantly mediates the relationship between fear of failure and avoidant behavior in young adults. Fear of failure influences avoidant behavior indirectly through its negative effect on cognitive flexibility, which in turn predicts increased

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avoidant behavior. The absence of a significant direct effect suggests that the relationship between fear of failure and avoidant behavior is primarily explained through cognitive flexibility.

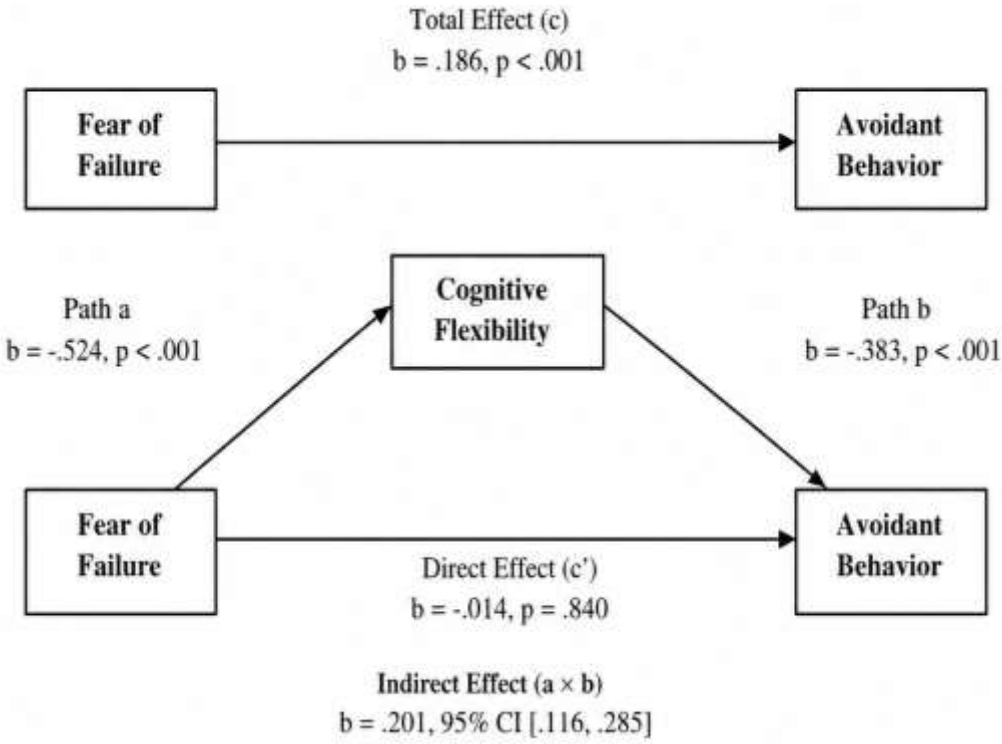

Figure 2: Mediation Model

Table 7

Mean differences Between Fear of Failure, Cognitive Flexibility and Avoidant Behavior in Young Adults Based on Gender (N = 300)

	Male 150		Female 150				
Variable	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p*	Cohen's d
Fear of Failure	-2.09	17.61	-3.07	18.02	.473	.63	0.06
Cognitive Flexibility	60.76	14.51	57.82	14.11	1.77	.07	0.21
Avoidant Behavior	70.68	18.45	76.04	15.80	-2.70	.00	0.31

Table 7 shows the results of independent samples t-test that analyzed the gender differences in fear of failure, cognitive flexibility, and avoidant behavior among the young adults. In accordance with the results, the statistical difference between males and females in the fear of failure does not exist ($t = .473$, $p = .63$). On the same note, the difference in cognitive flexibility is not significant at the standard level ($t = 1.77$, $p = .07$), whereas males have a slightly higher mean scores compared to females. Another notable gender difference however appears in the avoidance behavior ($t = -2.70$, $p < .01$) where the female indulges more avoidant behavior than the males. Comprehensively, the findings indicate that gender does not play a critical role in fear of failure or cognitive flexibility but it affects avoidant behavior among young people significantly.

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Discussion

The first hypothesis proposed a significant relationship among fear of failure, cognitive flexibility, and avoidant behavior in young adults. Fear of failure showed a significant negative association with cognitive flexibility, indicating that higher fear is linked with reduced cognitive adaptability. In contrast, fear of failure demonstrated a weak but significant positive relationship with avoidant behavior, while cognitive flexibility was negatively associated with avoidance. The relatively stronger relationship between fear of failure and cognitive flexibility suggests that fear primarily affects internal cognitive processes, rather than directly translating into behavior. This pattern supports a more nuanced interpretation in which cognitive mechanisms, rather than emotional intensity alone, explain behavioral variation in young adults. The negative relationship between fear of failure and cognitive flexibility is consistent with prior evidence suggesting that fear-based cognition constrains cognitive processing. Importantly, this does not imply a uniform cognitive deficit, but rather a context-dependent reduction in flexibility under evaluative pressure (Martin & Marsh, 2018). Similarly, the association between cognitive flexibility and avoidant behavior indicates that cognitive rigidity is more proximally related to avoidance than fear of failure itself. This aligns with executive functioning literature suggesting that reduced cognitive shifting under stress contributes to maladaptive coping patterns (Miyake & Friedman, 2017). This finding is important because it challenges simplistic interpretations that equate fear directly with behavioral disengagement (Elliot & Hulleman, 2017). Research on emotional intelligence and resilience further supports this view, demonstrating that individuals with stronger emotional resources tend to maintain cognitive flexibility even under conditions of evaluative stress (Saleem, Khan, & Imran, 2025). The social-emotional development of young adults—including processes related to identity formation and competence appraisal—constitutes a foundational substrate on which fear-based cognition operates (Khan, Khan, & Waqas, 2025).

The second hypothesis examined fear of failure as a predictor of cognitive flexibility and avoidant behavior. Results confirmed that fear of failure significantly predicts reduced cognitive flexibility and slightly increased avoidant behavior in young adults. However, the predictive strength of fear of failure differed substantially across outcomes. This distinction is critical and suggests that fear of failure operates primarily as a cognitive disruptor rather than a direct behavioral determinant. These findings align with developmental cognitive models which argue that fear-based cognitions reduce cognitive control and increase attentional bias toward negative outcomes, thereby limiting flexible thinking (Zhou et al., 2019). Instead, fear likely interacts with cognitive mediators before influencing behavior. This is consistent with achievement motivation theories suggesting that fear of failure contributes to avoidance only when adaptive coping mechanisms are compromised (Putwain & Symes, 2018). The role of regulatory and institutional contexts in shaping performance-related anxiety has been documented in organizational and governance research, indicating that performance demands embedded in broader structural systems contribute to fear-based responses (Saddique & Haq, 2025). Likewise, economic instability and the unpredictability of career outcomes in emerging economies may amplify evaluative fears among young adults by narrowing their perceived margin for error (Kausar & Qayyum, 2018).

The third hypothesis proposed that cognitive flexibility mediates the relationship between fear of failure and avoidant behavior. The results supported a significant indirect-only mediation effect, indicating that fear of failure influences avoidant behavior primarily through its impact on

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cognitive flexibility. This finding is theoretically important because it shifts the explanatory focus from direct emotional causation to cognitive processing pathways. Fear of failure appears to reduce cognitive flexibility, and reduced flexibility, in turn, increases avoidant behavior. The absence of a significant direct effect suggests that fear of failure alone is insufficient to explain avoidance when cognitive processes are considered. In this framework, fear of failure alters interpretive processing, narrowing cognitive flexibility and increasing reliance on avoidance-based coping strategies (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2017). While fear of failure has often been treated as a direct predictor of avoidance, the present findings suggest that its behavioral impact is largely indirect and cognitively mediated. The macroeconomic uncertainty experienced by Pakistani youth—including volatile economic conditions and financial insecurity—constitutes an external stressor that intensifies cognitive rigidity and avoidance tendencies (Kausar, Khan, Khan, Perdana, & Siddique, 2021). This implies that interventions targeting avoidance should focus less on fear reduction alone and more on enhancing cognitive flexibility. Ethical and developmental frameworks that integrate personal growth with professional readiness are increasingly recognized as necessary to support adaptive functioning in contemporary youth (Shah, Ali, & Khan, 2025).

The final hypothesis examined gender differences in fear of failure, cognitive flexibility, and avoidant behavior. The findings indicated no significant gender differences in fear of failure and cognitive flexibility, while a small but significant difference was observed in avoidant behavior, with young adult females reporting higher avoidance.

The absence of gender differences in fear of failure suggests that performance-related anxiety is now a broadly shared experience among young adults in competitive academic environments. Similarly, the lack of gender differences in cognitive flexibility supports neurocognitive perspectives that executive functioning is primarily shaped by developmental and environmental factors rather than gender. However, the higher avoidant behavior among females aligns with evidence suggesting gendered differences in coping strategies. This does not reflect cognitive deficiency but rather differences in coping orientation and emotional processing styles (Compas et al., 2017). Uncertainty and financial stressors—such as those documented in the context of exchange rate volatility and macroeconomic disruptions—disproportionately affect younger populations' psychological stability and may contribute to gendered patterns of behavioral withdrawal (Kausar, Rashid, & Saddique, 2022). Importantly, given the small effect sizes in the present study, these differences should be interpreted cautiously rather than as strong or deterministic gender effects (Chaplin & Aldao, 2018). Research on mental health stigma and help-seeking behaviors among young adults further contextualizes these gendered avoidance patterns within broader socio-cultural frameworks (Shehzad, Khan, & Khan, 2024). Organizational and human resource frameworks emphasizing holistic approaches to individual performance further suggest that multi-level support systems are necessary to address both cognitive and behavioral dimensions of fear-based disengagement (Shah, Qazi, & Khan, 2025).

Conclusion

Conclusively, the current study underscores the importance of fear of failure in the determination of cognitive and behavioral consequences in young adults. Further, Cognitive flexibility was also an important underlying mechanism with all its effects mediating the relationship between fear of failure and avoidance, suggesting that maladaptive coping pattern is a result of deficits in adaptive

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thinking. The study in general highlights the significance of increasing the cognitive flexibility to lessen the adverse effects of fear of failure and suppress avoidance behaviors of young adults. The integration of professional development, ethical leadership frameworks, and psychological skill-building holds particular promise for interventions aimed at reducing fear-based avoidance in educational and organizational settings (Ghazanfar & Ul Haq, 2025). Research with Pakistani young adults in high-pressure academic environments should also consider the broader institutional and economic drivers of fear and avoidance, including the compounding effects of gaming-related distraction and academic disengagement observed among youth (Ahmed, Latif, Chandio, ShujaUddin, & Akbar, 2021). The conflict management strategies deployed in team and organizational contexts—including those that balance individual satisfaction with collective performance—provide a useful analogue for designing psychological interventions that reduce avoidance and promote engagement among young adults (Rana, 2015).

Recommendations

The sample of the current study was limited to the Faisalabad city; this can reduce the extent of generalizability of the results and thus in future studies the umbrella sample should consist of participants at different geographical points. The research was based on a cross-sectional design that limits the ability to interpret the results causally, therefore future research is recommended to use longitudinal designs to broaden the depth, comparability, and rigor of results. Moreover, relying on the self-reported information only, the bias related to the responses might have emerged; therefore, the integration of qualitative research, like interviews, might have given a more detailed and thorough insight into the phenomena.

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