4th World Conference on **Psychology** and **Behavioral Sciences**

London, UK

15 - 17 May 2026

Cognitive and Behavioral Mechanisms of Risk Anticipation: The Role of Virtual Reality in Enhancing Decision-Making Under Uncertainty

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Abstract

Risk anticipation represents a core cognitive-behavioral process underlying effective decision-making in dynamic and uncertain environments. It involves the integration of perceptual cues, attentional allocation, and predictive processing, enabling individuals to identify and respond to potential threats before they fully materialize. Despite its importance, traditional training approaches often emphasize procedural knowledge rather than the psychological mechanisms that support adaptive responses under uncertainty.

This paper explores the cognitive and behavioral mechanisms of risk anticipation and examines the role of immersive Virtual Reality (VR) as an innovative tool for enhancing decision-making performance. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from cognitive psychology and human factors research, the study focuses on how VR-based environments facilitate experiential learning, improve hazard detection, and accelerate the development of anticipatory skills. By simulating complex and high-risk scenarios in a controlled setting, VR allows repeated exposure to critical situations without real-world consequences, thereby supporting the calibration of perceptual and motor responses.

Empirical findings indicate that VR training leads to significant improvements in both the accuracy of risk detection and the speed of behavioral responses, suggesting enhanced cognitive processing efficiency. Moreover, the results highlight the persistence of individual differences, particularly in relation to risk-related behavioral tendencies, which continue to influence performance outcomes even after training. This suggests that while VR enhances overall competence, it does not entirely eliminate variability rooted in cognitive and behavioral profiles.

The paper concludes that immersive technologies such as VR represent a promising direction for advancing psychological training methodologies, offering both theoretical insights into risk-related cognition and practical applications in domains such as transportation safety, emergency response, and professional training under uncertainty.

Keywords: risk anticipation; decision-making under uncertainty; virtual reality (VR); cognitive processes; behavioral adaptation; hazard perception; reaction time; individual differences; risk behavior; immersive training