

Examining Emirati Youth Military Career Intentions with the Theory of Planned Behavior

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ABSTRACT— *This study examined Emirati youths' intention to pursue a military career post-national service with a modified Theory of Planned Behavior model which assumes that the likelihood of performing a behavior is determined by the strength of intention to perform that behavior and intention is determined by attitude towards the behavior; subjective norms concerning the behavior; and self-efficacy. Interviews and surveys were conducted with 238 Emirati male youths and parents. It found that younger less educated youths were more interested in pursuing a military career; believing that it would lead to beneficial outcomes, than their older counterparts. Most parents approved of their sons pursuing a military career and the latter's awareness of this opinion could increase the likelihood of youths taking up a military career. Finally, although younger less educated youths showed increased interest over time in pursuing a military career post-national service, they were more likely to change their mind about their career choice. In contrast, older and more educated youths were more resolute about their career intentions and more likely to carry out their decisions but most were not interested in a military career. The findings could be used to meet the human resource challenges faced by the UAE Armed Forces in recruiting Emirati military personnel.*

Keywords—Theory of Planned Behavior, youth career decision-making, military career, United Arab Emirates

1. INTRODUCTION

The implementation of mandatory national service in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) presents military recruiters with a pool of draftees who could be attracted to a military career post-national service. The discipline and regimentation of the service period socialize draftees early into the military culture; its norms, language and identity. Hence, the national service experience could ease the transition for youths, who have yet to decide on a profession, to pursue a military career. Hence this study aims to examine Emirati male youths' intention to pursue a military career post-national service with a modified TPB model which assumes that the likelihood of performing a behavior is determined by the strength of intention to perform that behavior and intention is determined by three factors: attitude towards the behavior; subjective norms concerning the behavior; and self-efficacy. Findings from this study could be used to meet the human resource challenges faced by the UAE Armed Forces in recruiting Emirati military personnel.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Transitioning from national service to a military career

In 2014, the UAE introduced mandatory national service that required all able-bodied male citizens (Emiratis), aged 18 to 30 years, to undergo national service while it is optional for females. Since 2014, the service length had increased in stages: from nine months initially to 12 months (in 2016) then 16 months (in 2018) for Emiratis with high school qualifications and above [1]. In 2022, the service duration was reduced to 11 months for high school graduates while youths leaving school without qualifications must serve three years [2]. Academic deferment for higher education ended in 2020 when the National Service and Reserve Authority announced that high school graduates must first complete a four-month basic military training course after which they are allowed to start university studies [3].

Implementation of the service was justified based on its geopolitical, economic and social benefits. The UAE is witnessing outbreaks of political instability and civil war in many of its neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. With national service, the UAE Armed Forces would have access to a steady stream of citizen draftees and reservists to defend the country, leading to reduced dependency on mercenaries and greater military self-sufficiency [4]. Also, service training would instill discipline, work ethic, teamwork, and other core competencies needed in work and life. Finally, the service would develop patriotism and a sense of national identity among its citizens that could help in nation-building [5]. For young draftees who lack occupational aspirations, national service offers a path towards a

military career. The service period is typically used by military recruiters to identify candidates for training as commissioned officers. The discipline, regimentation and physicality of the service socialize recruits early into the military culture; its norms, language and identity. Hence, the national service experience could ease the transition for youths, who have yet to decide on a profession, to pursue a military career.

2.2 Theory of Planned Behavior: Youth intention towards a military career

The theory of planned behavior (TPB) [6-7], which was extended from the theory of reasoned action (TRA) [8], postulates that strength of one's intention to perform a behavior determines the likelihood of carrying out that behavior. Intention refers to the likelihood that an individual would perform or try to perform a behavior. One's intention to perform a behavior is influenced by three factors: attitude towards the behavior; subjective norms about performing the behavior; and belief in own ability to successfully perform the behavior (self-efficacy).

The TPB has been applied in research that predict human behavior in the military context. The model was used to examine weight management behavior among military personnel [9-10]. Sanaeinasab et al. [11] developed an educational health promotion program based on the TPB to increase physical activity among 84 overweight military personnel. Findings showed all TPB constructs improved between baseline and 3 months after the intervention, suggesting that TPB-based interventions may be effective in promoting weight management. Liu et al. [12] adopted the TPB to compare factors affecting smoking cessation intentions of male and female volunteer soldiers. Survey results showed that subjective norms (friends) was a key factor for both genders in smoking cessation intention while perceived behavioral control; as the perception of easiness or difficulty to carry out the action, was a main factor for male participants. Schnaubelt [13] applied the TPB constructs in a survey to identify factors predicting a military blood donor's intention to donate blood. It found that respondents' attitude and perceived behavioral control towards blood donation were strongly related to their future intention to donate again. Britt et al. [14] examined the likelihood of military reservists seeking help for psychological problems in view of perceived stigma, beliefs and attitudes towards treatment seeking. Its findings supported the TPB assumption that perceived stigma and beliefs about psychological problems were linked to attitude toward treatment seeking.

When the United States (US) ended conscription in 1973 and adopted an All-Volunteer Force (AVF) policy, the US Department of Defense focused on recruiting American youths for the military. It employed the Youth Attitude Tracking Study (YATS) and later the Youth Polls to examine enlistment propensity trends to predict recruitment numbers needed to fulfill military manpower needs, track advertising effectiveness and develop programs to enhance enlistment propensity [15-17]. Studies on American youth intention (or propensity) to join the military generally found the construct to be a strong predictor of actual enlistment [18-20]. Gibson et al. [21] developed a TPB model to examine youth military career intentions and parental influence on youth intentions. It sampled American youths aged 16 to 21 years, both genders, who had never served in the military nor enrolled in any military training program or service academy. Findings showed that subjective norms, attitudes, and efficacy beliefs (as personal belief in own ability to successfully complete a behavior) of youths significantly predict intentions to enlist. Also, norms, attitudes, and efficacy beliefs of parents predict their intentions to recommend a military career to their children. Ford et al. [19] utilized the TPB model to compare American youth pre-enlistment expectations, attitudes, and intentions toward military service with tenure of military career. Historical data from YATS and the Youth Polls on youth attitudes toward military service, expectations about the effect of military career on quality of life, and intention to enlist were compared to job tenure of those who later enlisted. Statistical results indicated that youths who initially had no interest in joining the military and no expectation that a military career would positively affect their quality of life, yet later joined the service, had shorter military careers.

In non-American recruitment contexts, Yong et al. [22] adapted the TPB and decomposed theory of planned behavior (DTPB) [23] models to examine factors contributing to low enlistment rates of youths into the Malaysian Armed Forces. Consistent with earlier studies, results showed that intention predicts actual enlistment behavior, subjective norms (influence of peers/parents) affect enlistment decisions, and self-efficacy affects enlistment decisions in the absence of actual military experience. Vinothkumar & Subramania [24] used the TPB to examine the effect of attitude, subjective norms (peers, teachers, parents) and self-efficacy on high school students' intention to enlist in the Indian Armed Forces. Quantitative survey results from 190 male participants showed significant correlation between the three factors and intention to enlist. Given the brief history of the UAE national service, there is little research on youth military career decision-making post-national service [25]. Hence this study aims to examine Emirati male youths' intention to pursue a military career post-national service. Findings from this study could be used to meet the human resource challenges faced by the UAE Armed Forces in recruiting Emirati military personnel.

3. METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology whereby it is assumed that knowledge gained from participant self-reported views towards the military is based on interpretation in a specific time and context. While the findings may be extrapolated to similar conditions, the results are not claimed to be statistically generalizable to wider populations.

3.1 Conceptual framework and measures

This study aims to examine Emirati male youths' intention to pursue a military career post-national service with a modified TPB model which assumes that the likelihood of performing a behavior is determined by the strength of intention to perform that behavior [6,8]. The construct *intention* is the likelihood that an Emirati male youth would pursue a military career post-national service which is influenced by three factors:

(a) *attitude* towards the behavior. An individual's positive attitude towards the behavior stems from a strong personal belief that favorable outcomes would result from performing that behavior and the converse applies for a negative attitude. This factor is measured in this study as an individual's *degree of interest* in pursuing a military career post-national service.

(b) *subjective norms* (social pressure) concerning the behavior: While the original TPB treats this factor from the position of the actor i.e. the individual's perception of the opinion of others about that action, this study adopts a modified definition. The *subjective norms* factor is treated from the position of significant others (parents) and measured as *degree of parental support* given to pursue a military career post-national service. Hence, there is greater likelihood of performing a behavior when significant others in one's life approve of carrying out that behavior and the converse applies when the significant others disapprove of the action.

(c) *self-efficacy*: There is greater likelihood of performing a behavior when there is a strong personal belief in one's ability to successfully perform the behavior and persist when difficulties are encountered. This factor is measured as the extent of an individual's *increase in interest over time* in pursuing a military career post-national service and determination to stand by the decision made.

3.2 Sample

Non-probability sampling was used to identify Emirati participants with specific socio-demographic characteristics that enabled exploration of different perspectives on youth military career decision-making post-national service (Table 1) and this purposive sample is not intended to be statistically representative. Groups 1 to 3 were all male Emirati youths obliged to serve after high school/college graduation and unlikely to be permanently exempted from service at the time of data collection. Group 1 were high school students; Group 2 were college students and Group 3 were participants who were either employed, unemployed or studying part-time. Group 4 were Emirati parents who had at least one child and hence would likely have an opinion on their child's future intention to pursue military career post-national service.

Table 1: Groups 1 to 4 Emirati participant criteria

Characteristics	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Both genders
Education	High school students	Undergraduates	Employed/unemployed/ part-time studies	Not specified
Age (in 2019)	16 – 17 years	18 – 28 years	18 – 28 years	18 yrs and above

3.3 Instruments and ethics

Three questionnaires (for survey, individual and focus group interviews) were developed with slight variations of questions for each participant group. Each questionnaire contained closed questions on demographics and the constructs examined. However, open-ended questions were included in the interview/focus group questionnaires to follow up on participants' choices in the closed questions. In this qualitative study, *construct validity* as the appropriateness of the questions for eliciting the required information, was addressed at the piloting stage which identified a) difficulty in understanding the questionnaires' instructions and questions worded in English and b) a need to probe superficial responses in interviews. Hence, the final questionnaires were printed in English and Arabic, participants had the option to have interviews conducted in either language and probing questions were added to the interview protocol. The types of closed questions used were a) nominal measurement scale with dichotomous categories; and b) ordinal scales with itemized categories (Likert-type attitudinal scale) that enable participants to express judgment on own experiences, attitudes, and beliefs. While the use of noncommittal response options could lead to errors of central tendency, a Not Sure option was included in the question pertaining to interest in a future military career to reduce participant frustration and avoid unfounded assumptions about the extent of knowledge possessed by the participant.

The main ethical issues in this study were participant protection, confidentiality, and informed consent. Institutional Review Board approval for the study protocol was obtained prior to data collection. This research did not place participants in physical danger. Confidentiality of identity was ensured by not gathering real names of participants, using codes to replace names in data processing and publications. Assent was obtained from Group 1 since they were minors (below 18 years) and consent obtained from their parent/guardian. All participants read, understood and signed an informed assent/consent form (in English and Arabic) that included the project aims, assurance of confidentiality, assent/consent to voluntary participation and the right to withdraw from participation anytime without penalty.

3.4 Data analysis

The findings were based on the survey and interview datasets. Quantitative data from closed questions were processed and subjected to simple statistical analysis. Individual and focus group interviews were audio-recorded (with consent) and transcription done with InqScribe software [26]. Since participants could respond in English or Arabic in interviews, qualitative responses in Arabic were translated to English during transcription. The qualitative data was subjected to thematic analysis which is an interpretive process involving identification of common patterns in the data based on an understanding of the conversational content and context. A bottom-up approach was used to sort responses into broad themes that emerged from the data. Then sub-themes were identified to refine the main themes. In the coding scheme, frequency of theme occurrence was assumed to indicate importance of the idea. Reliability between coders was checked before coding the complete datasets. Finally, the meanings underlying the themes were interpreted based on the research aims. The quantitative results are presented as descriptive statistics and qualitative results are presented as themes which are illustrated by quotes from the transcripts.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The total sample was 238 Emirati participants distributed across four demographic groups (Table 2). Group 1 participants were high school students, aged 16 to 17 years in 2019. All were single; 98.2% had an average monthly allowance below US\$5,450; and most expected to graduate in 2019 (59.6%). Group 2 were full-time university undergraduates, aged 18 to 28 years in 2019. Most were single (98.3%); with an average monthly allowance below US\$5,450 (94.1%); and expected to graduate between 2019 and 2020 (48.2%). Group 3 participants were either employed, unemployed or studying part-time, aged 18 to 28 years in 2019. Most were single (91.5%); with an average monthly allowance above US\$5,450 (60%). Group 4 participants were parents with at least one child (55.9% mothers); 33.3% had children aged 18-30 years who (if sons) would be obliged to serve, are serving or had completed national service in 2019. Most participants were 34 to 54 years old (72.9%), employed (67.2%), with a university degree (78%), more than 8 years' work experience (74.4%), and a monthly income above US\$5,450 (74.4%).

Table 2: Participant demographics: Groups 1 to 4

Demographics		Group 1 ¹	Group 2 ¹	Group 3 ¹	Group 4 ¹
Age (in 2019)		16-17 yrs	18-28 yrs	18-28 yrs	18 yrs & above
Marital status	Single	100%	98.3%	91.5%	0%
	Married	0%	0%	8.5%	91.3%
AV monthly income²	Above US\$5,450	1.8%	5.9%	60.0%	74.4%
Expected year of graduation	In 2019	59.6%	28.6%	-	-
	In 2020	25.5%	19.6%	-	-
Employment	Employed	-	-	31.3%	67.2%
Children	> 2 children	-	-	-	83.1%
	Service eligibility ³	-	-	-	33.3%

¹ % based on number of participants per group. Groups 1 & 2: N=60 each; Groups 3 & 4: N=59 each. ² 1 USD = 3.67AED (30 July 2022). ³ % of children aged 18-30 years who would be eligible for national service.

4.1 Attitude towards a military career

To measure *attitude as degree of interest* towards pursuing a military career post-national service, Groups 1 to 3 participants indicated their interest on a 5-point scale from Very Interested to Not Interested and Not Sure. Table 3 shows a higher interest level from Group 1 (66.6%) than Group 2 (33.3%) and Group 3 (23.7%). Hence, more Group 1 participants held a positive attitude towards pursuing a military career post-national service and the belief that favorable outcomes would result from that behavior and the converse applies for Groups 2 and 3. The results suggest that a positive attitude towards pursuing a military career is directly related to age and educational attainment viz. younger less educated Emirati male youths are more likely to take up a military career and believe that it would lead to beneficial outcomes than their older counterparts. This finding is consistent with the literature where YATS found that positive propensity (as intention to enlist in the military) declines with age as younger American youths are more likely to voluntarily enlist than their older counterpart and positive propensity also declines with increasing educational attainment [15] as the latter could offer wider occupational choices. Interestingly, Groups 1 (18.3%) and 3 (32.2%) were more ambivalent (Not Sure) towards a military career which presents opportunities for military recruiters to influence their career decision-making.

In individual and focus group interviews, participants elaborated with reasons for their chosen attitude towards a military career. The following highlights the main themes (Tables 4-5) and quotes from transcripts are included to represent participants' voices. Across groups, the main reasons for being interested in pursuing a military career post-national service were *Patriotism* and *Early interest in military service* which was consistent with the literature, Woodruff et al. [27] found that American recruits who reported high enlistment propensity were largely influenced by patriotic reasons. In the UAE context, this desire to serve and defend the country is a strong motivator for enlistment in both national service and later the military. Patriotism was a main factor underlying male Emirati youths' preference to enlist rather than defer national service obligation in 2014 [28] and remained stable over time [29]. Early influencers of

American youth attitude towards a military career include parents, socioeconomic status, previous disciplinary issues/substance abuse, race and ethnicity [30]. Although participants in this study did not elaborate on their early life influencers, anecdotal accounts of significant others' military life experiences during interviews indicated that they are likely to be family members and parents who supported military careers.

Table 3: Attitude factor: Degree of interest in military career post-national service

Q. After completing national service, are you likely to be interested in a military career? ¹	G1	G2	G3
Very Interested	20.0%	8.3%	0.0%
Interested	28.3%	6.7%	5.1%
Somewhat Interested	18.3%	18.3%	18.6%
Not Interested	15.0%	56.7%	44.1%
Not sure	18.3%	10.0%	32.2%

¹ % based on number of participants per group. Groups 1 & 2: N=60 each; Group 3: N=59.

Table 4: Reasons for interest in military career – ranked by importance (Groups 1-3)

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
Patriotism: National defense	Patriotism: Duty to country	Early interest in military service
Physical nature of military work		Military as employer of last resort ¹
National service experience eases transition to military career		

¹ Employers of last resort (ELR) are employers in an economy to whom workers go for jobs when no other jobs are available

“I want to protect my country by going for a career in the military.” (InterviewG1R14)

“I want to join the military service ... because all their activities are physical, not like sitting and playing with a computer ... You wake at 3 a.m. in morning and start doing fitness like warm up, and start running. I like these physical activities.” (InterviewG1R2)

“When joining national service, one will acquire new knowledge but when continuing military career most of the knowledge will already be known so it will be more easy as a career.” (InterviewG1R4)

“I am interested in the military career ... from high school.” (InterviewG3R11)

“In the case I would not get a job in [company X], as an engineering job, the army would still accept the engineer immediately.” (InterviewG3R11)

The main reasons for a lack of interest in pursuing a military career post-national service were *Career interests outside the military*; *Military work conditions*; and *Lack of career development opportunities*. A comparison of preferred careers other than the military showed an interesting difference between groups. Careers preferred by Group 1 tended to be idealistic (soccer player, a pilot, astronaut) which was expected given their age and high school education. However, Groups 2 and 3 had clear career choices in mind and preferred specific civilian occupations that are related to their university academic majors and qualifications in science and engineering. Participants also expressed concern over their inability to adjust to the regimentation, discipline, relocation of self and family to another country that are expected in military life. Transcript data showed anecdotal accounts of family and friends who experienced a lack of career development opportunities in-service which likely influenced participants' lack of interest in pursuing a military career.

Table 5: Reasons for lack of interest in military career – ranked by importance (Groups 1-3)

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
Career interests outside the military	Career interests outside the military	Mis-match between academic majors and military field
Low salary, limited benefits	Military work conditions: Regimentation, Relocations	Military work conditions: Regimentation, Relocations
Lack of career development opportunities		Negative recommendations for friends/family Little to no exposure to military career Lack of career development opportunities

“If I have good grades, I prefer going to medicine than military.” (InterviewG1R6)

“My older brother continued in the military and I can see how he is having some problems between his normal life and his military life. He does not have my holidays, and he is having some problems with his wife and children because he rarely sees them. Sometimes work place him in very far locations and we start to get worried about him to the extent that even our mother and father worries about him. So I see it to continue as a soldier in the military is very difficult for me so I am not interested at all.” (G2 FG#1R2)

“... my brother was in the military ... he told me that the major problem in the military is that ... once starting your career, [you] do not develop too much compared to other careers. Your developing in the military is less than your developing in engineering or medicine careers so that is the matter which makes me not interested in the military career.” (G3 FG#2R2)

4.2 Subjective norms concerning pursuing a military career

To measure *subjective norms* as *parental support* given to pursue a military career post-national service, Group 4 participants indicated their level of support on a 4-point scale from Very Supportive-Not Supportive. Most parents were supportive (79.7%) of a military career post-national service for sons (Table 6). While this finding did not establish a direct link between parental support and youths' awareness of that level of support, future research would examine the communication of that support by parents to youths and the latter's awareness of parental opinion on the issue. Hence, the limited interpretation of the results at this stage is that most parents approve of their sons pursuing a military career and the latter's awareness of this opinion could increase the likelihood of youths taking up a military career post-national service.

Table 6: Subjective norms: Parental support

Q. If you have a son, after he has completed national service, would you support him taking up a military career? ¹	G4
Very supportive	28.8%
Supportive	23.7%
Somewhat supportive	27.1%
Not supportive	20.3%

¹ % based on number of participants per group. Group 4: N=59

4.3 Self-efficacy concerning pursuing a military career

To measure *self-efficacy* as an *increase in interest over time* in pursuing a military career post-national service and determination to stand by the decision made, Groups 1 to 3 compared their current (2019) interest level in a military career with the previous year (2017 or 2018). Most Group 1 participants were interested a military career post-national service (66.6%, Table 3) and more showed increased interest over time (46.6%) than Group 2 (23.3%) and Group 3 (15.3%) (Table 7). However, results for *Not Changed* option showed that fewer G1 participants (39.7%) indicated that their position had not changed over the previous year compared to Groups 2 and 3 (58.1%; 66.1%). This suggests that Groups 2 and 3 participants are more resolute about their career decisions; whether Interested, Not Interested, or Not Sure about pursuing a military career post-national service, hence more likely to carry out their intentions. Although Group 1 showed increased interest in pursuing a military career post-national service, they are more likely to change their mind about their career choice. Since 59.6% of Group 1 participants were expected to graduate soon (in 2019), their increased interest could be attributed to an imminent need for career decision-making.

Table 7: Self-efficacy factor: Increase in interest over time

Q. Compared to this time last year (2017/18), my interest in a military career has ¹ ...	G1	G2	G3
Increased	46.6%	23.3%	15.3%
Decreased	13.8%	18.3%	18.6%
Not changed	39.7%	58.3%	66.1%

¹ % based on number of participants per group. Groups 1 & 2: N=60 each; Group 3: N=59.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined Emirati male youths' intention to pursue a military career post-national service with a modified TPB model which assumes that the likelihood of performing a behavior is determined by the strength of intention to perform that behavior and intention is determined by *attitude* towards the behavior; *subjective norms* concerning the behavior; and *self-efficacy*. It found that a positive attitude towards pursuing a military career is directly related to age and educational attainment viz. younger less educated youths are more likely to take up a military career and believe that it would lead to beneficial outcomes than their older counterparts. Also, that most parents approve of their sons pursuing a military career and the latter's awareness of this opinion could increase the likelihood of youths taking up a military career. Finally, although younger less educated youths showed increased interest over time in pursuing a military career post-national service, they are more likely to change their mind about their career choice. In contrast, older and more educated youths are more resolute about their career decisions and more likely to carry out their intentions but most were not interested in a military career. This finding is relevant for military personnel recruitment purposes and suggests that recruitment efforts may be more fruitful with high school students. While this study did not establish a direct link between parental support and youths' awareness of that level of support for the subjective norms factor, future research could examine the communication of that support by parents to youths and the latter's awareness of parental opinion on the issue. Also, future work could expand the category of significant others to include friends and relatives.

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