

VOCATIONAL INTERESTS AMONG STUDENTS IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the vocational interest of grades 9 and 12 students in the United Arab Emirates, using the Emirates Scale for Vocational Interest (ESVI), which is an Arabic version of the Kuder Occupational Interest Survey (KOIS). After confirming the reliability of the ESVI, it was administered to a total sample consisted of 796 students, 428 of whom were from the ninth grade and 368 from the twelfth grade. The ninth grade sample consisted of 166 males and 262 females, whereas the twelfth grade sample consisted of 187 males and 262 females. The age of the participants ranged from 13 to 19 years of age. The results showed that, the participants had diverse vocational interests with greater preference for activities that see them in jobs typical of helping others, understanding nature and solving problems, being creative and productive, working with electronics, participating in outdoor work activities and promoting security and public order. The respondents least prefer doing activities that are characteristic of clerical, literary and persuasive jobs. There were significant differences in the preferred activities of the participants, according to grade level and sex relative to some subscales, which reflects a wider influence of potential factors in the environment in a society that is at the intersection of tradition and modernity. This paper contributes vital inputs to the very much needed knowledge base, required for career exploration and vocational guidance in the school setting.

KEYWORDS: Vocational Guidance, Vocational Guidance, Vocational Interest Scale, Vocational Preference

INTRODUCTION

Researchers of McKinsey warned in 1998 of an impending war, which they termed, 'the war for talent' and they predicted that, this will intensify in the years to follow. To this effect, they recommended the aggressive development of talent and putting people on the job, before they are ready (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001). This reiterated the significance of the vocational development of the young. Hartung, Porfeli, & Vondracek, (2005) cited that childhood as an important milestone in human development and an important formative period, for vocational development had been the theme of mid-twentieth century theorists such as Ginzberg, Ginsburg, Axelrad, and Herma (1951), Havighurst (1964), Roe (1956), and Super (1957). This stimulated further interest on how children thought about their future careers and the choices that they made to pursue these (Borgen & Young, 1982; Seligman, Weinstock, & Heflin, 1991; Schultheiss, Palma, & Manzi, 2005). Holland (1973), later provided the context to these ideas and claimed that, 'environmental interactions are important variables for understanding vocational interests and that the congruence between vocational interests and characteristics of the work environment are important for satisfaction with career choice' (Noronha & Ambiel, 2015:50). A further extension of these ideas led to the conceptualization of the developmental-contextual meta-theory, which focused on the child's active role and his interaction with the environmental context (Araujo and Taveira, 2009). This highlighted the importance of knowledge on the dynamics of career preferences and vocational interest, among the young seen within the environmental context.

The most common demographic factors associated with vocational interest in the literature are sex and age, or grade level. Su, Rounds, & Armstrong (2009), came up with one of the most comprehensive reviews, involving a meta-analysis of 47 vocational interest assessments with a combined sample of over 500,000 people. Accordingly, sex differences in five of six RIASEC areas were noted. The results showed that, males scored higher than females along the Realistic and Investigative dimensions, while females scored higher than males in the Artistic, Social, and Conventional dimensions. Both males and females did not differ significantly, along the enterprising dimension. Sex differences had also been found on the People-Things dimension of Prediger's model. Studies on the strong assessment appear to be highly consistent, with the larger literature. Results show that, males scored higher than females on the realistic and investigative dimensions and had lower scores on the Artistic and Social dimension with little to no difference in the Enterprising dimension (Donnay et al., 2004). On conventional dimension, males scored higher than females in contrast to the findings of Su et al. (2009).

A study conducted by Prediger, Roth and Noeth (1973), likewise showed considerable sex differences in the occupational choices of boys and girls. Accordingly, more than fifty percent of 11th grade girls preferred jobs, under the clerical and secretarial work, education and social services and nursing and social care categories, while only seven percent of the boys preferred jobs in these categories. In contrast, close to fifty percent of the boys preferred jobs under the technologies and trade clusters, while only seven percent of the girls chose to have jobs under these clusters. Boys and girls showed an equal representation of the natural-social and medical clusters.

According to Bastien (2014), the lack of consensus about gender differences is, because the measured difference in interest had not yet been adequately explained. There is also the possibility of item bias in interest inventories and the influence of construct-irrelevant factors (Messick, 1989). Fouad and Walker (2005) also cited that, perceived barriers and opportunities can be a cause especially among ethnic groups. Another possibility is because of occupational stereotyping (Aros, Henly, and Curtis, 1998). On the whole, the items used in interest inventories can influence gender-related differences (Einarsdottir & Rounds, 2009).

In terms of age, Osipow and Fitzgerald (1996:115) cited that, "vocational maturity is the congruence between an individual's vocational behaviour and the expected vocational behaviour at that age. The closer the correspondence between the two, the greater the individual's vocational maturity." During adolescence, interests, capacities and values develop, which are all aspects of career maturity. A study by O'Bryant, Durrett, & Pennebaker (1978) showed that, students from fifth grade to college (10-22 years) were less stereotypical in their career preferences, as they move from one grade to another. In the study of Guthrie and Herman (1982) on the relationship between sex and age with vocational maturity, they found that age had a significant relationship with vocational maturity. This supported the work of Super (1974), Crites (1965, 1974) and Achebe (1982), who likewise found that vocational maturity increased with age and grade.

Based on the foregoing, it was observed that studies on the vocational interests of the young using existing inventories, showed mixed results. Furthermore, there is a dearth of studies on vocational interest, in the Arab world and specifically, the UAE. In consideration of these points, there is a need for a more contextualized assessment of the vocational interests of the youth considering the existing realities contingent, to the real work environment. Accordingly, this paper examined the vocational preferences of grades nine and twelve students in the United Arab Emirates, using the Emirates Scale for Vocational Interest (ESVI) developed by Al Ghorani, Dodeen, Darwish and Farghali (2011).

The ESVI adopted the sub-scales of the Kuder Occupational Interest Survey (Bennett, 2012) and added to it the police/military subscale.

METHODOLOGY

Method

The method of investigation used is quantitative and employed the survey in generating the research data.

Research Instrument

The Emirates Scale for Vocational Interests, developed by Al Ghorani, Dodeen, Darwish and Farghali (2011), was used to assess the vocational interests of students. The Emirates Scale for Vocational Interests is composed of eleven subscales: Literary Interests, 13 items; Outdoor Interests, 15 items; Police / Military Interests, 14 items; Computational / Commercial Interests, 15 items; Scientific Interests, 16 items; Mechanical Interests, 15 items; Artistic Interests, 16 items; Persuasive Interests, 11 items; Social Service Interests, 15 items; Clerical Interests, 14 items; Electronic Interests, 15 items. Other than the Police/Military subscale, all the other sub-scales were adopted from the KOIS or Kuder occupational interest survey (Bennett, 2012). The choice of the KOIS was premised on the observation that, the inventory is related to Holland's RIASEC (Miller, 2010). The items were modified to suit the work environment that, the students can relate to and were translated into Arabic. The scale consists of 159 items or activities divided into 53 groups, each includes three activities. The student determines the activity that he or she prefers more than other activities and the least activity that he prefers or tends to. The scale's reliability was found to be high with alpha coefficients, for subscales ranging between 0.65 to 0.86, for the sample of female students between 0.62 to 0.83, for the sample of male students.

Eight psychologists with PhDs evaluated the face validity of Emirates Scale, for Vocational Interests. The consensus among them ranged between 96% to 100% for all items. In terms of internal validity, the correlation between each item and the total score for each subscale was computed, to determine the internal consistency as an indicator of the scale validity. All correlations were positive and significant at $p < 0.01$.

Participants and Procedures

Data was collected from samples of children in the middle school and secondary school, in United Arab Emirates. The total sample consisted of 796 students, 428 of whom were from the ninth grade and 368, from the twelfth grade. The ninth grade sample consisted of 166 males and 262 females, and the twelfth grade sample consisted of 187 males and 262 females. The age of the participants ranged, from 13 to 19 years of age ($M=15.99$ years, $SD=1.80$ years). The Emirates Scale for Vocational Interests (ESVI) was administered by psychologists in the children's respective classrooms. Testing included a packet of questionnaires and students were requested to answer each item, individually. Data collection lasted approximately 40 min per classroom.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Vocational Interest of the Respondents

The unsegregated descriptive data shown in Table 1 general shows that, job-related activities along the social service ($M=33.31$) sub-scale of the ESVI generated the highest mean score, among the respondents. This was followed by job-related activities, in the scientific ($M=32.92$), artistic ($M=32.49$), electronic ($M=30.61$); outdoor ($M=29.87$); military/police ($M=29.00$); and computational/commercial ($M=27.57$) subscales.

The least preferred activities were those related to jobs typical of the clerical ($M=26.64$), literary ($M=25.93$) and persuasive ($M=20.37$) sub-scales.

Table 1: Vocational Preferences of the Respondents

| Subscales | Total Sample | |
|---------------------------|--------------|------|
| | M | Rank |
| Literary | 25.9341 | 10 |
| Outdoor | 29.8701 | 5 |
| Police / Military | 29.0093 | 6 |
| Computational /Commercial | 27.5757 | 8 |
| Scientific | 32.92 | 2 |
| Mechanical | 28.4125 | 7 |
| Artistic | 32.4909 | 3 |
| Persuasive | 20.3678 | 11 |
| Social Service | 33.3152 | 1 |
| Clerical | 26.645 | 9 |
| Electronic | 30.6069 | 4 |

From the distribution of the mean scores, it can be generally seen that, the respondents have diverse vocational interests with more preference for activities that see them helping others; understanding nature and solving problems, being creative and productive, working with electronics, participating in outdoor work activities; and promoting security and public order. The respondents least prefer doing activities that are typical to clerical, literary and persuasive jobs.

Difference in Vocational Interest according to Grade Level

A comparison of the means of the vocational interests, between grade 9 and grade 12 students shows that, grade 9 pupils generally has a higher preference for activities typical of jobs along the scientific ($M=33.56$); artistic ($M=33.54$); and social service ($M=33.27$) subscales of the ESVI. This is followed by preferences for job-related activities in the electronic ($M=31.78$); outdoor ($M=29.03$); police/military ($M=28.63$); mechanical ($M=27.19$); and computational/commercial ($M=27.01$) subscales. The preferences that generated lower means include, activities typical of jobs in the clerical ($M=26.95$); literary ($M=25.84$); and persuasive ($M=20.21$) subscales.

Among grade 12 students, their vocational preferences were higher for job-related activities, under the social service ($M=33.44$); scientific ($M=32.39$); and artistic ($M=32.23$) subscales of the ESVI. This is followed by preferences for activities related to jobs characteristic of the outdoor ($M=30.27$); electronic ($M=29.35$); mechanical ($M=29.07$); police/military ($M=28.93$); and computational/commercial ($M=28.04$) subscales. Preference for job-related activities typical of the clerical ($M=26.58$); literary ($M=26.33$) and persuasive ($M=20.58$) subscales generated lower mean scores among the students.

It can be noted that there is a similarity between grade 9 and grade 12 students, in their higher preference for activities typical to jobs characteristic of the scientific, artistic and social service, subscales and their lesser preference for activities typical to jobs in the clerical; literary; and persuasive subscales of the ESVI. A two-tailed independent t-test was done to assess differences in the observed means between the group of grade 9 and grade 12 students. Accordingly, significant differences were found between the two groups in all ESVI subscales except in literary, police / military, persuasive, social service, and clerical. (See table 2).

Table 2 T-test Results of Comparisons between Grade 9 and Grade 12 Students on Emirates Scale for Vocational Interests (ESVI)

| Subscales | Grade 9 | | Grade 12 | | t | df | p |
|--------------------------|----------|---------|----------|---------|-------|-----|------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | | |
| Literary | 25.8458 | 6.14231 | 26.3533 | 5.60947 | 1.209 | 794 | .227 |
| Outdoor | 29.0631 | 6.46868 | 30.2717 | 6.36852 | 2.647 | 794 | .008 |
| Police / Military | 28.6285 | 5.16290 | 28.9293 | 5.11773 | 823 | 794 | .411 |
| Computational/Commercial | 27.0164 | 5.09095 | 28.0462 | 4.86163 | 2.905 | 794 | .004 |
| Scientific | 33.5561 | 7.86443 | 32.394 | 7.33546 | 2.144 | 794 | 0.03 |
| Mechanical | 27.1893 | 6.59779 | 29.0734 | 6.71389 | 3.984 | 794 | .000 |
| Artistic | 33.5444 | 5.41923 | 32.2337 | 5.57776 | 3.356 | 794 | .000 |
| Persuasive | 20.2173 | 3.43245 | 20.5815 | 3.61406 | 1.457 | 794 | .146 |
| Social Service | 33.2710 | 4.83076 | 33.4429 | 4.91087 | .497 | 794 | .620 |
| Clerical | 26.9509 | 3.95228 | 26.5897 | 4.13170 | 1.259 | 794 | .208 |
| Electronic | 31.7827 | 6.27265 | 29.3533 | 6.19486 | 5.479 | 794 | .000 |
| Total | 317.0654 | 2.08719 | 317.2690 | 2.22713 | 1.330 | 794 | .184 |

The results indicate that, the interest in activities typical of jobs under the literary, police / military, persuasive, social service and clerical subscales of the ESVI did not vary among the respondents regardless of grade level. On the other hand, the grade level of the respondent was a discriminating factor for preferred job-related activities typical of the electronic, artistic, mechanical, scientific, computational/commercial, and outdoor subscales of the ESVI.

Difference in Vocational Interest according to Sex

A comparison of the means of the vocational interests of male and female students shows that, male students generally have a higher preference for job-related activities along the social services (M=33.00), scientific (M=32.75); outdoor (M=32.06); mechanical (M=31.52); and police/military (M=31.15) subscales of the ESVI. This is followed by preferences for activities related to jobs typical of the electronic (M=30.14); computational/commercial (M=28.31); and artistic (M=27.82). The preferences that generated lower means include activities typical of jobs in the clerical (M=25.41); literary (M=24.64); and persuasive (M=20.21) subscales.

Among the female students, their vocational preferences were higher for activities relative to jobs under the artistic (M=37.16); social service (M=33.62); and scientific (M=33.08) sub-scales of the ESVI. This is followed by preferences for activities typical of the electronic (M=31.07); clerical (M=27.87); outdoors (M=27.67); literary (M=27.22); police/military (M=26.87); and computational/commercial (M=26.83). Preference for activities related to jobs in the mechanical (M=25.29) and persuasive (M=20.52) subscales generated the least mean scores, among the students.

It can be noted that, there is a similarity between males and females in their higher preference for activities along the scientific and social service, subscales and their lesser preference for activities along the persuasive subscales of the ESVI. The results of the two-tailed independent t-test in table 3, shows significant differences between male and female students in literary, outdoor, police / military, computational / commercial, mechanical, artistic, clerical and electronic subscales of Emirates Scale for Vocational Interests (see table 1).

Table 3: Comparisons between Male and Female Students on Emirates Scale For Vocational Interests (ESVI)

| Subscales | Male | | Female | | t | df | p |
|---------------------------|----------|---------|----------|---------|--------|-----|------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | | |
| Literary | 24.6402 | 5.84392 | 27.2280 | 5.70226 | 6.291 | 794 | .000 |
| Outdoor | 32.0652 | 6.22940 | 27.6749 | 5.93997 | 10.137 | 794 | .000 |
| Police / Military | 31.1473 | 4.66257 | 26.8713 | 4.70094 | 12.795 | 794 | .000 |
| Computational /Commercial | 28.3116 | 4.76127 | 26.8397 | 5.11090 | 4.160 | 794 | .000 |
| Scientific | 32.7564 | 5.09820 | 33.0835 | 5.85030 | .829 | 794 | .407 |
| Mechanical | 31.5269 | 6.58424 | 25.2980 | 5.41296 | 14.647 | 794 | .000 |
| Artistic | 27.8215 | 5.51438 | 37.1603 | 6.48486 | 21.551 | 794 | .000 |
| Persuasive | 20.2096 | 3.48230 | 20.5260 | 3.54750 | 1.260 | 794 | .208 |
| Social Service | 33.0028 | 4.86318 | 33.6275 | 4.85527 | 1.802 | 794 | .072 |
| Clerical | 25.4164 | 3.76655 | 27.8736 | 3.91682 | 8.943 | 794 | .000 |
| Electronic | 30.1416 | 6.54029 | 31.0722 | 6.16986 | 2.058 | 794 | .040 |
| Total | 317.0397 | 2.39047 | 31.72551 | 1.94272 | 1.403 | 794 | .161 |

The results indicate that, the interest in activities related to jobs typical of the scientific, social service and persuasive subscales of the ESVI did not vary among the respondents, regardless of sex. On the other hand, the sex of the respondents was a discriminating factor for job-related literary, outdoor, police / military, computational /commercial, mechanical, artistic, clerical and electronic subscales of Emirates Scale, for Vocational Interests.

DISCUSSIONS

The finding of this paper showed that, age discriminated the choices between grade 9 and grade 12 students in the UAE relative to, electronic, artistic, mechanical, scientific, computational/commercial, and outdoor subscales of the ESVI. The means of the job –related activities, typical of jobs along outdoor, computational/commercial, and mechanical scales were higher among the Grade 12 students compared to grade 9 students. On the other hand, the means of job-related activities, typical of jobs in the artistic and electronic subscales were higher among grade 9 students compared to grade 12 students. There is greater interest with age regarding job-related activities, along the outdoor subscales among older students in the study sample because at their age, their autonomy in pursuing outdoor activities is greater. Most of the grade 12 students reach the age that qualifies them to get driving licenses, own cars, and left on their own, to explore the environment. This also exposes them to a number of outdoor activities related to work. Greater understanding of the events shaping the social and economic development of the UAE among grade 12 students may be a factor that can account for their higher mean scores, in the computational/commercial and mechanical sub-scales, compared to grade 9 students. The UAE is the commercial hub of the Middle East, which is ranked 26th among the top 30 countries worldwide in the ease of doing business ranking (Everington, 2016). This provides incentives for the young to venture into the commercial world. As a corollary, the UAE is moving towards full computerization of its business processes and rewards innovative ideas and applications in the computing field. The convergence of worldwide mechanical industries in the UAE and the government's, move towards Emiratization and opens greater opportunities for the young to work in global brand industries. This can also be a motivation for grade 12 students, to pursue a career in jobs under the mechanical sub-scale.

Grade 9 students scored higher in activities, in the electronic and artistic activities because at their age, they start to develop the fascination for the digital world, which is both electronic and artistic. A term has been coined for this cohort, which is a growing phenomenon – the Arab Digital Generation. It's members consist of young people ranging in age, from 15 to 35 who are digitally active; own a laptop or a desktop, i-phone, Smartphone; and have unlimited access to the internet (Sabbagh, Mourad, Kabarra, Shehadi, & Samman, 2012). It has been found that, activity in digital gaming is higher among

the younger member, starting at age 15 which gradually decreases with age. Fascination for digital gaming can be a factor shaping the choices of the grade 9 students, in activities that are related to jobs in the electronic and artistic sub-scales.

The findings of this paper further showed that, the sex of the students discriminated their choices of activities, typical to jobs characteristic of the outdoors, police / military, computational / commercial, mechanical, artistic, clerical and electronic subscales of Emirates Scale, for Vocational Interests. Males outscored females on job-related activities along the outdoor, police/military, computational/commercial and mechanical sub-scales, while females outscored males in their choice of activities relative to jobs typical of the literary, scientific, artistic, clerical, and electronic subscales. In Tracey et al.,'s (2005), sex differences have been noted and was accounted on the basis of ability. Accordingly, males scored higher than females in math and science, and females scored higher than males in English and reading. Indeed, this is similar to the pattern of academic skills development, for males and females (ACT, 1997). Su, Rounds and Armstrong (2009), also found out that males preferred to work with 'Things' and females preferred to work with 'People.' In terms of the RIASEC, Rounds and Day (1999) also found that males preferred Realistic and Investigative interests and women clearly preferred social interests.

Whereas, there is a tendency towards gender stereotyping because of the culture and religion, in the UAE (Norris, 2010;Alibeli, 2015), a shift had been observed in what was deemed acceptable and taboo regarding career choices and aspirations, in the direction of breaking gender stereotypes (Sukumaran, 2013). In the UAE, the ratio of females in the third level of education is 85% and females have been out performing males in schools. In a study, 92% of the female students considered themselves very ambitious and wanted to aspire for top-level jobs (Ahmad, AlDarmaki, & Almutawa, 2017).

It can be noted from the findings that, choices for activities related to jobs in the social services and persuasive subscales consistently did not significantly vary according to grade and sex. While job-related activities, typical of the social services subscale generated higher mean scores, job-related activities typical of the persuasive subscales generated the least mean scores, in terms of grade and sex. The social services sub-scale constitute, among other jobs that are related to public service or government. It has been observed that, despite the abundance of employment opportunities for Emirati nationals, they preferred jobs in government rather than the private sector. The reasons are economic and patriotic. Economic reasons include better salaries and shorter working hour, and patriotic motivation is based on the belief that, if one works for the government, he or she is also working and giving back to the country (Deleure, 2016).On the other hand, activities related to the persuasive subscales, garnered the lowest means because these are activities either related to sales on one hand and politics on the other hand. Either ways, this did not appear to be appealing to the students. For one, sales are mostly associated with expatriates. Expatriates dominate the sales industry from pharmaceuticals to bazaars, which is quite a time-intensive activity. Activities related to jobs in politics had a low appeal on account of the fact that, the political system in the UAE is based on vision-driven leadership and there is the absence of political parties.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper concludes that, the ESVI is a successful tool in drawing out the activities that high school students in the UAE preferred doing relative to specific jobs typical of the ESVI subscales. While this paper does not totally support nor totally contradict findings in the literature, as the differential activities preferred on account of grade and sex reflects on a wider influence of potential factors in the environment, in a society that is at the intersection of tradition and modernity. The results of the study are not definitive in the sense of identifying the right jobs for the right students, but the information

can be leveraged as vital inputs, in the very much needed knowledge base required for career exploration and vocational guidance and development, in the school setting.

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