

Motivation to Learn and Training Self-Efficacy in Military Cadets: The Role of Basic Psychological Needs and Organizational Commitment

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Abstract

Psychological readiness is increasingly recognised as a critical determinant of military training success, complementing physical preparedness. This study investigated the relationship between basic psychological needs and organisational commitment on training self-efficacy and motivation to learn. A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 887 military cadets from Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia (UPNM). Data were collected using the Organisational Commitment Questionnaire (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979), the Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale (Chen et al., 2015), the New General Self-Efficacy Scale (Chen, Gully, & Eden, 2001), and the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (Pintrich, 1991). The 30.0 version of SPSS was used to perform multiple regression analysis. Results revealed that competence ($\beta = .390, p < .001$) and organisational commitment ($\beta = .295, p < .001$) were strong positive predictors of self-efficacy, while relatedness ($\beta = -.136, p < .001$) negatively predicted it. For motivation to learn, both competence ($\beta = .113, p = .012$) and organisational commitment ($\beta = .177, p < .001$) were significant positive predictors. The regression models explained 33.4% of the variance in self-efficacy ($R^2 = .334, F(4, 865) = 110.752, p < .001$) and 3.7% of the variance in motivation to learn ($R^2 = .037, F(4, 865) = 8.462, p < .001$). These findings underscore the importance of fostering psychological competence and organisational alignment to enhance cadets' training effectiveness. Future studies should consider longitudinal approaches to better understand how these psychological attributes evolve and influence training outcomes over time.

Keywords: Trainee Characteristics, Training Attitudes, Military Cadets, Psychological Needs, Training Effectiveness

Introduction

Organizational training programs serve a critical function in developing the requisite employee expertise to address contemporary and future occupational requirements, thereby

enhancing work performance and elevating individual marketability (Werner & DeSimone, 2011). These initiatives yield benefits for both the sponsoring organization and the participating employees, who receive both extrinsic and intrinsic compensation through the acquisition of new skills and subsequent performance improvements (Elangovan & Karakowsky, 1999).

Military training is essential for building the discipline, capability, and resilience of defense personnel, and while it once prioritized physical strength and technical competency, there is a growing recognition that psychological readiness is an equally powerful determinant of training success (Gould et al., 2010; Salas et al., 2012). This psychological readiness involves the mental, emotional, and motivational preparedness individuals need to successfully engage in intense training and adapt to dynamic military roles. Among the most important psychological factors are motivation to learn and training self-efficacy, both of which reliably predict how engaged and successful trainees will be (Sitzmann & Weinhardt, 2018; Bell et al., 2017).

Bandura (1997) defined self-efficacy as an individual's belief in their capacity to successfully execute specific behaviours, while motivation to learn represents the inherent willingness and drive to gain new competencies (Colquitt et al., 2000). Both constructs are foundational to the effectiveness of training programs, particularly within high-stakes environments like military institutions. Therefore, a critical step toward optimizing training outcomes is gaining a thorough understanding of the situational and dispositional antecedents that either promote or inhibit these essential psychological states.

This study utilizes Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000) as its theoretical framework, which posits that the fulfillment of three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—is fundamental to fostering internal motivation and positive performance outcomes. Within highly structured and hierarchical environments, such as military institutions, the need for competence satisfaction is particularly crucial for boosting learners' confidence and persistence (Baard et al., 2004; Van den Broeck et al., 2016). When cadets feel capable and effective in their training tasks, their belief in their ability to succeed is inherently strengthened (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Conversely, a lack of fulfillment, especially in the need for relatedness, can provoke feelings of isolation or disconnection, directly compromising both confidence and engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Alongside psychological needs, organisational commitment has also been identified as a key predictor of positive training attitudes (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). Organisational commitment reflects an individual's emotional attachment, identification, and involvement with the organisation. When cadets perceive a strong sense of commitment to their institution, they are more likely to exert effort in learning activities and invest psychologically in their training journey (Kuvaas, 2008). In military settings, where loyalty and alignment to organisational goals are fundamental, such commitment may further reinforce motivation and perseverance, especially under demanding conditions (Nesheim et al., 2020).

Despite growing interest in the psychological underpinnings of military training, empirical studies integrating both basic psychological needs and organisational commitment as predictors of training attitudes remain limited, particularly in the Malaysian context.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines how basic psychological needs and organisational commitment influence training self-efficacy and motivation to learn among military cadets at Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia (UPNM). By identifying the psychological drivers that underpin effective training engagement, this study contributes to both theoretical advancement and the practical design of more psychologically attuned military training programmes.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey design to investigate the relationship between basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness) and organizational commitment as predictors of training self-efficacy and motivation to learn. The sample comprised 887 trainee cadets enrolled at the Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia (UPNM). Participants were intentionally selected using purposive sampling to ensure the research focused exclusively on individuals within a structured military training environment. Crucially, the research received formal institutional support and ethical clearance, evidenced by a collaboration letter issued by the Ministry of Defence Malaysia granting official access to the military training centre.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) Research Ethics Committee (Reference: UKM PPI/111/8/JEP-2023-100). The study was funded by the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS), awarded by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia under the project code FRGS/1/2022/SS09/UKM/03/2.

Data collection was executed in controlled, supervised settings. Participants were allotted one hour to complete the self-administered questionnaires. To ensure the highest quality of response and minimize the potential for respondent fatigue, cadets were explicitly informed of their right to seek clarification on any item, and short, necessary breaks were permitted throughout the administration period.

Participant

A total 887 participants completed the questionnaire and the majority of them are male (801, 90.30%), Islam (809, 92.24%), and had Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) (879, 99.10%), that equivalent to General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (GCE O-Level of GCSE).

Table 1

Demographic information

Demographic		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	801	90.30
	Female	86	9.70
Religion	Islam	809	92.24
	Hindu	16	1.82
	Buddha	23	2.63
	Christian	29	3.31
Educational Background	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM)	879	99.10
	Diploma/Sijil	6	0.68
	Matrikulasi/Asasi/STPM/STAM	2	0.22

Measurements

Cadets' basic psychological needs were measured using the Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale (BPNSFS; Chen et al., 2015). This scale assesses both the satisfaction and frustration of the three fundamental psychological needs outlined in Self-Determination Theory: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Examples of satisfaction items include "I feel confident that I can do things well" (competence satisfaction) and "I feel that my decisions reflect what I really want" (autonomy satisfaction). Frustration items include "I feel pressured to do too many things" (autonomy frustration) and "I feel excluded from the group I want to belong to" (relatedness frustration).

Trainee cadets' levels of organisational commitment were assessed using the Organisational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ) developed by Mowday, Steers, and Porter (1979). This instrument evaluates the extent to which individuals are psychologically attached to and involved with their organisation. It consists of 15 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). Sample items include "I feel very little loyalty to this organization" (reverse-scored) and "I am extremely glad that I chose this organization to work for over others I was considering at the time I joined".

Self-efficacy was measured using an adapted version of the New General Self-Efficacy Scale (NGSES) by Chen, Gully, and Eden (2001), contextualised for the military training environment. This scale assesses cadets' belief in their capability to perform effectively in training-related tasks. The NGSES includes 8 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree). Example items include "I will be able to achieve most of the goals that I set for myself" and "I am confident that I can perform effectively on many different tasks".

Motivation to learn was assessed using the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) developed by Pintrich (1991), specifically focusing on the task value subscale. Sample items include "Understanding the subject matter of this course is very important to me" and

"I am very interested in the content area of this course." Higher scores indicate stronger motivation to learn.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 30. Both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were employed. Inferential analyses included Pearson's correlation to assess the relationships between variables and multiple regression analysis to determine the predictive effects of basic psychological needs and organisational commitment on training self-efficacy and motivation to learn. Statistical significance was determined at the $p < .05$ level.

Results

The main objective of this study is to investigate the influence of basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence and relatedness) and organisational commitment on training self-efficacy and motivation to learn among trainee cadets at UPNM. correlation analyses will be presented first, followed by multiple regression.

Table 2 indicates the correlation analysis between autonomy, competence, relatedness and organisational commitment with training self-efficacy and motivation to learn. The result shows that autonomy, ($r(885) = +.40, p < .01$), competence ($r(885) = +.27, p < .01$), relatedness ($r(885) = +.52, p < .01$), organisational commitment ($r(885) = +.48, p < .01$) have positive correlations with training self-efficacy. However, only competence ($r(885) = +.14, p < .05$) and organisational commitment ($r(885) = +.47, p < .05$) have positive correlations with motivation to learn. Detailed correlation analysis are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2
Correlation table between all variables

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Autonomy (1)	1				
Relatedness (2)	0.56**	1			
Competence (3)	0.59**	0.56**	1		
Organisational Commitment (4)	0.61**	0.52**	0.56**	1	
Self-efficacy (5)	0.40**	0.27**	0.52**	0.48**	1
Motivation to Learn (6)	0.08	0.05	0.14*	0.17*	0.24**

** $p > .001$, * $p > .05$

Next, a multiple regression analysis was performed to evaluate whether autonomy, competence, relatedness, and organisational commitment significantly predicted trainee cadets' self-efficacy and motivation to learn. The overall model was statistically significant, $F(4, 865) = 110.752, p < .001$, and accounted for 33.4% of the variance in self-efficacy scores ($R^2 = .334$). The significant predictors were competence ($\beta = .39$), organisational commitment ($\beta = .29$) and relatedness ($\beta = -.14$). Meanwhile for motivation to learn, the overall model was statistically significant, $F(4, 865) = 8.462, p < .001$, and accounted for only 3.7% of the

variance. The significant predictors were organisational commitment ($\beta = .18$) and competence ($\beta = .11$).

In sum, competence and organisational commitment consistently predicted higher levels of both self-efficacy and motivation to learn among military cadets. The negative association between relatedness and self-efficacy offers a noteworthy counterintuitive finding that warrants further exploration in structured, hierarchical environments such as military academies. Detailed regression coefficients are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Multiple Regression Results Predicting Self-Efficacy and Motivation to Learn

Variable	Training Self-Efficacy			Motivation to Learn		
	SE β	t	p	SE β	t	p
Autonomy	0.019	1.78	0.546	0.035	-1.19	0.348
Competence	0.390	-3.85	< .001	0.113	-1.71	0.012
Relatedness	-.136	10.47	< .001	0.016	2.53	0.642
Organisational Commitment	0.294	7.97	< .001	0.177	3.96	< .001
R ²	0.334			0.037		
F (df)	F (4, 865) = 110.752			F (4, 865) = 8.462		
			< .001			< .001

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate basic psychological needs (competence, relatedness, and autonomy) and organisational commitment on training self-efficacy and motivation to learn among military cadets. The findings offer both expected and novel insights into the psychological mechanisms that underpin training attitudes in structured, high-demand environments such as military academies.

The results reaffirm the centrality of competence in enhancing both self-efficacy and motivation to learn. Cadets who perceive themselves as capable and effective in training tasks report greater confidence and willingness to engage in learning. This is consistent with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that competence satisfaction is essential for fostering intrinsic motivation and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). In military settings, competence often translates into task mastery, discipline execution, and physical performance, all of which are externally observable and frequently reinforced. Studies have shown that in high-performance environments, competence becomes not only a psychological need but also a social currency that determines inclusion and status (Baard et al., 2004; Lira et al., 2022).

Organisational commitment also emerged as a significant predictor of both outcomes, aligning with previous research suggesting that emotional attachment to the institution strengthens trainees' investment in learning processes (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). In rigidly hierarchical systems like the military, where alignment with

organisational goals is critical for group cohesion and operational efficiency, commitment likely provides a motivational anchor. This connection may reflect what Gagné and Deci (2005) describe as “internalised regulation,” whereby individuals adopt external expectations as personally meaningful, enhancing both motivation and performance. Cadets who feel emotionally bonded to their institution may be more resilient, persistent, and willing to engage in learning, even under pressure (Nesheim et al., 2020; Dello Russo et al., 2023).

Perhaps the most unexpected finding is the negative relationship between relatedness and self-efficacy. While relatedness is typically associated with greater engagement and psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017), its negative predictive value in this study suggests that in military contexts, social closeness may sometimes interfere with task focus or personal confidence. One possible explanation is that strong peer bonds, while emotionally supportive, may foster social comparison or over-reliance on group consensus, limiting individual self-belief. In collectivist or command-driven environments, cadets may prioritise group belonging over personal competence, thus dampening their sense of self-efficacy.

This aligns with findings from Robazza et al. (2023), who noted that in elite athletic teams, similar to military units, relatedness sometimes leads to pressure to conform, reducing individual autonomy and perceived capability. Another interpretation may involve performance anxiety or fear of judgment, where tight-knit groups heighten sensitivity to peer evaluation, thus reducing confidence in personal performance. In this way, relatedness may inadvertently act as a social constraint, especially in environments where success is highly visible and publicly evaluated.

Contrary to SDT predictions, autonomy did not significantly predict either self-efficacy or motivation to learn. While autonomy is generally considered a cornerstone of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000), its relevance may be context dependent. In military institutions, autonomy is structurally limited due to standardised protocols, hierarchical command chains, and fixed curricula (Soeters, 2000; Winslow, 2004). Thus, cadets may not associate autonomy with their training experience or may have adjusted their motivational frameworks to emphasise discipline and compliance over self-direction. In such contexts, external regulation, when aligned with competence and commitment, may still result in positive training attitudes (Van den Broeck et al., 2016).

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of research on psychological factors in military training by examining how basic psychological needs and organisational commitment influence self-efficacy and motivation to learn among military cadets. The findings confirm that perceived competence and organisational commitment are strong positive predictors of both training self-efficacy and learning motivation. These results reinforce the importance of internal capability and emotional alignment with institutional values as central drivers of successful training engagement in hierarchical, high-performance environments such as military academies.

A particularly noteworthy and theoretically provocative finding is the negative association between relatedness and self-efficacy, suggesting that, in tightly regulated group

settings, social connection may not always enhance personal confidence. This finding challenges the assumption that all basic psychological needs uniformly foster positive outcomes across contexts and calls for a more nuanced understanding of how social dynamics operate in collectivist or discipline-oriented systems.

This study offers important theoretical and contextual contributions to the literature on military training effectiveness. Theoretically, the findings extend Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) by showing how distinct components of basic psychological needs, especially competence and relatedness, differentiate their influence on self-efficacy and motivation to learn within a highly structured military context. By integrating SDT with organisational commitment, the study advances current models of trainee readiness and demonstrates that organisational alignment continues to predict motivation even after accounting for psychological needs. Contextually, the study provides empirical insights into the psychological dynamics that underpin training effectiveness within a structured, hierarchical military training system (Heward et al., 2024). The results highlight how motivation, efficacy, and psychological needs function within environments characterized by discipline, collective identity, and role clarity, offering a nuanced understanding of how these factors interact in a military education setting. Together, these contributions advance both theory and practice by clarifying the mechanisms through which cadets develop readiness for effective learning and performance.

Despite its contributions, the study is not without limitations. The use of a cross-sectional design limits causal interpretations, and future longitudinal studies are needed to explore how psychological variables and training attitudes evolve over time. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported measures may introduce social desirability or response biases, particularly in military settings where conformity is valued. The study also did not explore potential moderating variables, such as gender, cultural orientation, or leadership style, which may influence how psychological needs are experienced.

Future research should adopt longitudinal or experimental designs to trace the development of self-efficacy and learning motivation across different phases of military training. Investigating how psychological needs interact with external stressors (e.g., high-stakes assessment, physical fatigue) may offer a richer understanding of motivational resilience. Given the unexpected finding regarding relatedness, future work should explore qualitative or mixed-method approaches to better understand cadets lived experiences of social connection, peer pressure, and group identity.

Training designers and military educators should also consider tailoring interventions to strengthen competence-building experiences and reinforce organisational identification without inadvertently suppressing individual confidence. Finally, future studies could expand this model to incorporate other psychological constructs, such as grit, goal orientation, or leadership climate, to better account for the complexity of military learning environments.

In sum, this study provides new insights into the psychological architecture of training effectiveness and invites continued exploration into how institutional and individual factors shape the motivation and capability of future military professionals.

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