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# Volunteerism's Dual Impact: Social and Psychological Benefits for University Students

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**Abstract**

**Objectives**: Volunteering offers significant social and psychological benefits; however, its specific impact on university students in the UAE remains underexplored. This study examined these outcomes among students at the University of Sharjah.

**Methods**: A cross-sectional quantitative design was employed, using a bilingual (Arabic-English) online questionnaire. A convenience sample of 600 undergraduate and postgraduate students was drawn from a population of approximately 15,000. The instrument included 14 items on social constructs and 10 on psychological constructs. Data were analyzed using SPSS (descriptive statistics, regression, Pearson correlations).

**Results**: Students reported greater perceived social benefits (M = 3.79), such as improved cooperation, communication, and responsibility, compared to psychological benefits (M = 3.50), which included heightened self-awareness and a sense of belonging. Key findings included a negative association between current volunteering and psychological benefits (B = -1.234, p < .001), and a positive correlation between annual volunteer hours and psychological outcomes (B = 0.290, p = .031).

**Conclusions**: Volunteering enhances social cohesion and personal responsibility, though role strain during academic terms may reduce its psychological benefits. These findings have implications for university policy and student development. Curriculum-integrated volunteering and flexible micro-volunteering initiatives are recommended to enhance engagement and foster skill development.

**Keywords**: Volunteering, Social Benefits, Psychological Benefits, University Students, UAE

# التأثير المزدوج للتطوع: المنافع الاجتماعية والنفسية لدى طلبة الجامعات.

***آيات جبريل نشوان*، آلاء الطائي، فاطمة أحمد الغرباوي، خديجة أحمد البلوشي، سلامة محمد الرحومي***

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**ملخّص**

**الأهداف :** يقدم العمل التطوعي فوائد اجتماعية ونفسية ملحوظة، إلا أن تأثيره على طلاب الجامعات في دولة الإمارات لا يزال غير مستكشف بشكل كافٍ .تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى فحص هذه النتائج بين طلاب جامعة الشارقة.

**المنهجية :** تم استخدام تصميم كمي مستعرض .بحيث تم اختيار عينة مريحة من 600 طالب وطالبة من مرحلتي البكالوريوس والدراسات العليا من بين إجمالي عدد الطلاب البالغ حوالي 15,000 في جامعة الشارقة .ثم جُمعت البيانات عبر استبيان إلكتروني ثنائي اللغة) عربي-إنجليزي (يحتوي على 14 بندًا عن البناءات الاجتماعية و 10بنود عن البناءات النفسية .تم تحليل البيانات الكمية باستخدام برنامج) SPSS الإحصاءات الوصفية، الانحدار، معاملات بيرسون.(

**النتائج :** أبلغ الطلاب عن فوائد اجتماعية متصورة أكبر) المتوسط(3.79 = ، مثل تعزيز التعاون، والتواصل، والمسؤولية مقارنة بالفوائد النفسية) المتوسط(3.50 = ، والتي شملت زيادة الوعي الذاتي والانتماء .ولقد كان لطبيعة وتوقيت العمل التطوعي تأثير كبير على هذه النتائج .أظهر تحليل الانحدار:

- وجود علاقة سلبية بين التطوع الحالي والفوائد النفسية (B = -1.234 p < 0.001).
- وجود ارتباط إيجابي بين عدد ساعات التطوع السنوية والنتائج النفسية (B = 0.290 p = 0.031).

**الاستنتاجات :** تبين أن التطوع يعزز التعاون، والمسؤولية، والانتماء، لكنه قد يسبب ضغطًا للأدوار خلال الفصول الدراسية .من جانب آخر فإن نتائج هذه الدراسة تحمل دلالات هامة لسياسات التعليم العالي ومبادرات تطوير الطلاب في الجامعات .كما يوصى بدعم التطوع من خلال برامج مدمجة ضمن المناهج وفرص التطوع المرن لتعزيز مشاركة الطلاب وتنمية مهاراتهم.

**الكلمات الدالة :** التطوع، الفوائد الاجتماعية، الفوائد النفسية، طلاب الجامعات، الإمارات العربية المتحدة

## 1. Introduction

Volunteering represents a vital and renewable resource in addressing both social and environmental challenges on a global scale. Its scope is extensive, and the positive impact it has on improving the quality of life across numerous nations is undeniable. However, efforts to systematically measure and evaluate its contributions remain sporadic and insufficient (International Labour Organization, 2011). In 2001, the United Nations General Assembly highlighted this gap by adopting a resolution encouraging governments to "establish the economic value of volunteering" (United Nations, 2002). Further emphasis came in 2005, when the General Assembly called on "[g]overnments, with the support of civil society, to build up a knowledge base on the subject, to disseminate data, and to expand research on other volunteer-related issues, including in developing countries" (UN General Assembly, 2006).

A substantial body of research, including both correlational and longitudinal studies, highlights a consistent link between helping others and experiencing personal benefits. Studies have shown that engaging in volunteering activities is often associated with higher levels of positive affect, increased life satisfaction, greater social engagement, and reduced symptoms of depression (Krueger et al., 2001; Musick & Wilson, 2003; Schwartz & Sendor, 1999). For instance, a longitudinal study involving nearly 3,000 adults aged 25 and older revealed that those who volunteered reported lower depression rates and higher life satisfaction even eight years later (Musick & Wilson, 2003). Similarly, a comprehensive meta-analysis of 37 studies found that adult volunteers consistently scored better on quality-of-life measures compared to their non-volunteering counterparts (Gorey, 1998). These findings suggest that volunteering may significantly enhance various aspects of well-being. However, the predominantly correlational and longitudinal nature of the research limits definitive causal conclusions. Moreover, the frequent use of cross-sectional designs makes it difficult to exclude the possibility of selection effects, as individuals with higher initial levels of well-being might be more inclined to volunteer (Bekkers, 2012).

Recent research underscores the profound impact of prosocial behavior, demonstrating that helping others frequently results in enhanced mood and increased subjective well-being (Geng et al., 2022; Gallagher et al., 2022; Nichol et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the difficulty of randomly assigning individuals to volunteer activities poses a challenge to establish causality, leaving a gap in the literature on the causal benefits of volunteering. Additionally, while the general advantages of volunteering are well-documented, there is a notable scarcity of empirical studies focusing specifically on the social and psychological outcomes of volunteering among university students, especially within the UAE context that has received limited scholarly attention.

### 1.1. Setting the Scene: Volunteering in the UAE context

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) places significant emphasis on the role of volunteering in fostering sustainable development and shaping a brighter future for upcoming generations. The country is home to numerous organizations dedicated to volunteering and community service, supported by a comprehensive national volunteering portal, such as Volunteers.ae, which coordinates and promotes such initiatives across the nation. This portal enables individuals, groups, and organizations to register, find, and participate in volunteer opportunities, thereby cultivating a culture of giving and social responsibility throughout all seven Emirates (United Arab Emirates Government, n.d.; Volunteers.ae, 2024). These platforms allow individuals, groups, and institutions to register, discover, and participate in volunteer opportunities, fostering a national culture of giving and social responsibility.

Recent policy reforms have further enhanced volunteer engagement by simplifying participation processes, introducing legal protections for volunteers, and recognizing the economic value of volunteer contributions estimated at AED 123 million in Abu Dhabi alone in 2024 (DCD, 2024). National data also indicate that volunteer participation rates among the working-age population may exceed those of formal employment, and that the number of volunteer hours is substantial (International Labour Organization, 2021). However, without comprehensive measurement and analysis, the true developmental capacity of this volunteer labor remains underutilized and invisible to policymakers.

With over 622,000 volunteers registered on the National Volunteering Platform, there is increasing recognition of the sector's strategic importance. Yet, while macro-level data on volunteerism exist, there remains a notable gap in empirical

research exploring the social and psychological benefits of volunteering, especially among university students in the UAE. Understanding these benefits is crucial for informing targeted policies, designing effective volunteer programs, and maximizing the developmental and well-being outcomes for young people (Saraidi et al., 2020). This study helps fill that gap by examining how volunteering affects the social and emotional well-being of university students, focusing on those at the University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Practically, this study enhances understanding of how demographic factors (age, gender, employment) and volunteer work characteristics (type, duration, intensity) influence the social and psychological benefits of volunteering. It expands knowledge of the personal and societal impacts of volunteering within a unique and under-researched context. Theoretically, the study contributes by applying established frameworks, such as Social Capital and Rational Choice theories within a local university setting. Additionally, it offers valuable insights for decision-makers, university staff, and youth organizations in the UAE and similar contexts. By showing that volunteering has real social and emotional benefits, this study supports efforts to encourage community involvement, improve mental health, and build useful life skills among young people. The findings can help guide volunteer programs that meet community needs while also helping students grow personally and professionally, contributing to the wider goal of national development.

### *1.2 Research Objectives*

This study aims to:

1. Identify the social benefits of volunteering among university students at the University of Sharjah.
2. Assess the psychological benefits of volunteering among university students at the University of Sharjah.

## 2. Review of literature

Volunteering is broadly defined as an activity where individuals or groups willingly dedicate their time and effort to support a cause, person, or community without expecting monetary compensation (Wilson, 2000). In recent years, there has been increasing attention on volunteering among students and youth. Countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US) have implemented policies at federal, state, and local levels to encourage or mandate community service in public schools, aiming to foster youth and student involvement in volunteering activities (Kim & Morgül, 2017). For instance, the UK's National Union of Students reported that approximately 725,000 British students—about one-third of the student population—participate in volunteer work each year (Ellison & Kerr, 2014).

It is observable that student volunteering brings several benefits to students, universities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), local communities, and society at large (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2020). Policymakers, educators, and civil society advocates often regard youth volunteering as a powerful tool for fostering civic engagement and promoting active citizenship among younger generations. Consequently, it is increasingly seen as an essential strategy for civic renewal. Moreover, youth volunteers often have unique motivations, benefits, and outcomes compared to adult volunteers, reflecting their distinct life stages and social contexts (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2008). The following sections will review key studies relevant to understanding the implications and dynamics of youth and student volunteering.

### 2.1. Youth Volunteering: Reasons and Motivations

Various theoretical approaches have been developed to explain the motivations behind volunteering. One of the structured approaches classifies these motivations into self-oriented and other-oriented ones. The latter involves actions aimed at the well-being of others and social benefits in relation to values such as expressing prosocial and humanitarian values. By contrast, the former focuses on personal gains made from volunteering. These motivations, both other-oriented and self-oriented, are highly dynamic and often intersect. As Holdsworth and Brewis (2014) suggest, volunteers address both community needs and individual gains. Research consistently indicates that student volunteers are motivated by a blend of altruistic intentions and egoistic considerations, reflecting a complex interplay of selfless and self-focused factors (Brooks, 2002; Hustinx, 2001; Rehberg, 2005).

Regarding other-oriented motivations, the feeling of altruism plays a crucial role in encouraging volunteering (Smith et al., 2010). Students have strong motives related to their values and a desire to help others, approaching volunteering as a social activity (Clarke et al., 2007). They prefer to devote their leisure time to volunteering to make positive changes and help others (Hamzah et al., 2016; Ellison & Kerr, 2014). Further, they seek to strengthen their relationships with friends and family who also participate in volunteering.

Group identity is important for youth, and thus, the volunteer group is a pivotal factor in shaping their volunteering experiences and motivations (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2008). Norms established by schools, peers, and parents, as well as the ethnic characteristics of the youth group, impact students' participation in volunteering activities (Jugert et al., 2013). Volunteering is viewed as a way of expressing a feeling of community belonging.

In general, families and teachers are often the main actors introducing young students to volunteerism (Gage & Thapa, 2012). Thus conceived, student volunteering is considered a habitual phenomenon, motivated by the example of other volunteers in the same environment. This fosters a sense of social commitment toward the broader community (Clarke et al., 2007). Consequently, students may not always be motivated by specific goal-oriented objectives but instead perceive volunteering as a social phenomenon. This perspective emphasizes the role of volunteering in fostering and sustaining social relationships, as well as promoting positive interactions among individuals, groups, and organizations (Hustinx et al., 2010).

Self-oriented motivations can be varied. Career motivations, particularly volunteering to enhance one's CV, are among the main factors influencing youth volunteering, especially given the increasing interest in mandatory volunteer services in public schools (Anderson & Green, 2012; Smith et al., 2010). Young people may also be interested in gaining new experiences and broadening their perspectives on various issues (Gage & Thapa, 2012). Further, the desire to develop leadership potential and improve communication skills is often mentioned as a reason behind volunteering (Hamzah et al., 2016). Self-oriented motivations are often associated with socio-psychological needs, such as seeking a sense of being valued, enhancing self-esteem, diverting attention from personal challenges, or alleviating feelings of guilt over one's own privileges (Geng et al., 2022). Thus, educational attainment and earnings in young adulthood are found to be positively associated with youth volunteering.

### 2.2. Outcomes/Benefits

In relation to motivation, youth volunteering has both personal and civic-societal benefits.

First, it contributes to one's social capital. Volunteering helps students cultivate new skills, particularly communication skills, and strengthens the accumulation of social capital (Duke et al., 2009). It may also positively impact academic motivation and performance (Kim and Morgül, 2017). Furthermore, it helps youth in exploring career pathway, improving their employability both during the school years and after graduation (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2020). Moreover, it improves confidence and self-esteem (Hamzah et al., 2016).

Volunteering generates psychological benefits and contributes to overall well-being. Attaining emotional stability is also among the benefits of volunteering (Hamzah et al., 2016). The positive effect of volunteering on well-being has been confirmed in several studies from different countries. For example, a recent quantitative study conducted in 2020 surveyed 1,871 college students across China and found that volunteering positively influenced students' well-being (Geng et al., 2022). The study also highlighted that student volunteering benefits both public interests and private gains, emphasizing that these two aspects are not mutually exclusive. In fact, students motivated by a combination of public service and personal benefits were more likely to engage in frequent volunteering (Geng et al., 2022). Similarly, studies from Australia, the Netherlands, Israel, and the United States have demonstrated that other-oriented motivations, such as altruism, are more strongly associated with enhanced well-being. In contrast, self-oriented motivations, such as career development, showed no significant positive impact on well-being (Stukas et al., 2016; Gillath et al., 2005).

Besides the psychological benefits, the social benefits of youth volunteering are several. Engaging in volunteer activities helps students adhere to moral values and principles while developing their civic skills (Kim & Morgül, 2017). Youth who

engage in volunteering activities often develop a deeper understanding of life's realities and expand their knowledge of the world (Hamzah et al., 2016).In addition, volunteering contributes to the expression of prosocial and humanitarian values, thereby enhancing societal values, understanding and social cohesion (Geng et al. 2022).

Moreover, volunteering can help communities and NGOs meet their needs by providing skilled labor without incurring additional costs and expenses (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010). Through the contributions of volunteers, particularly their time and effort, many budget-constrained organizations are able to continue offering services in health care, education, and other essential areas (Gage & Thapa, 2012). Youth volunteering is also anticipated to have a lasting influence on adult volunteering behaviors, particularly when the initial experience of youth volunteering is entirely voluntary. Moreover, volunteering has the potential to enhance social and political awareness, motivating young individuals to participate more actively in political processes (Smith, 1999).

Williamson et al. (2018) further highlights that volunteering supports the development of the five interconnected elements of well-being outlined in Seligman's PERMA model (2011). These elements include: (1) the cultivation of positive emotional experiences, (2) active engagement at both personal and community levels, (3) the formation of meaningful relationships with fellow volunteers and the individuals they serve, (4) a sense of meaning and purpose derived from their volunteer roles, and (5) a sense of accomplishment from successfully completing tasks and contributing effectively.

Some studies further sub-categorize other-oriented and self-oriented motivations and benefits of volunteering (Bromnick et al., 2012).For self-oriented benefits, the sub-categories include Personal Rewards, Employability, Skills, and Personal Growth. For other-oriented benefits, the sub-categories are Belonging, Helping, and Generativity. It is worth noting, however, that Employability, Skills, and Personal Growth are interwoven. So, students' motivations are not only closely interrelated, but the benefits of volunteering also intersect.

2.3. Student Volunteering in Arab countries

Recent regional studies have significantly advanced the understanding of youth volunteering in Arab contexts, offering detailed methodological insights and highlighting the unique social, psychological, and civic outcomes of volunteering. For instance, Alhajjaj and Al Nabulsi (2022) conducted a cross-sectional survey of 6,016 health students during the COVID-19 lockdown in Jordan, finding that 29.36% volunteered in healthcare roles. Their results showed that a sense of "moral duty" was a powerful motivator, increasing the odds of volunteering by more than twofold ($p < 0.001$). This underscores how crisis situations can mobilize youth toward collective action and skill development, reinforcing the importance of social responsibility in Arab societies. Similarly, Al Gharaibeh (2010) used a mixed-methods approach with 480 Jordanian undergraduates, combining semi-structured interviews and a 30-item survey. The study revealed that 63% of female students volunteered, often in family- or child-focused organizations, with motivations centered on personal development and character building. This gendered pattern highlights the influence of cultural and social expectations on volunteering behaviors in the region.

A recent study from Qassim University (2025) in Saudi Arabia applied the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to a sample of 6,016 healthcare students, using a 34-item validated scale ($\alpha = 0.82$). The findings showed that students with higher academic achievement (GPA > 4.5) were 40% more likely to volunteer than their peers ($p = 0.02$), suggesting a mutually reinforcing relationship between academic success and volunteering in the Arab context.

At the policy level, Haddad (2015) conducted a comparative analysis across 12 Arab nations and found that countries with established national volunteering frameworks experienced 22% higher rates of youth civic engagement compared to those without such support. This finding illustrates the critical role of supportive legal and policy environments in fostering a culture of volunteerism among Arab youth.

Collectively, these studies reveal that Arab youth volunteering is shaped by individual motivations (such as moral duty and personal growth), social norms, academic achievement, and supportive policy frameworks. They also demonstrate that volunteering serves as a vehicle for both individual development and broader societal revitalization, particularly during times of crisis (Alhajjaj & Al Nabulsi, 2022; Al Gharaibeh, 2010; Qassim University, 2025; Haddad, 2015). In the context

of the United Arab Emirates, Saraidi et al. (2020) surveyed 667 health sector volunteers using the Volunteer Motivation Inventory. The study found "understanding" a desire for learning and practical experience to be the top motivator, followed by self-esteem. Organizational and systemic barriers were the main obstacles. The findings underscore the role of both intrinsic motivations and structural challenges in shaping volunteer engagement.

Despite the growing body of research, there remains a notable gap in understanding how the benefits of volunteering manifest within university settings in the UAE, especially regarding the factors that influence these benefits. Previous studies have primarily focused on general motivations and outcomes, often overlooking the nuanced ways in which demographic variables, the nature of volunteer activities, and institutional contexts shape the social and psychological returns of volunteering for university students. Moreover, there is limited empirical evidence from the United Arab Emirates, a rapidly developing context where youth engagement is a national priority (UNV, 2012; UAE Gender Balance Council, 2022).

This study is important because it directly addresses these unexplored dimensions by empirically examining the social and psychological benefits of volunteering among university students at the University of Sharjah. It specifically investigates how demographic factors (such as gender, academic level, and employment status) and the nature of volunteer activities (type, intensity, and duration) affect perceived benefits. By doing so, the research provides a more nuanced and context-specific understanding of the complex relationship between volunteering and student well-being in the UAE.

Additionally, the study tackles several underexplored aspects identified in the literature. For example, while young people with disabilities report benefits from volunteering, they face significant barriers in accessing suitable opportunities (Lindsay, 2016). The role of volunteering in fostering resilience during challenging situations, such as public health emergencies, also requires further exploration (Alhajjaj & Al Nabulsi, 2022). Furthermore, the literature notes that the benefits of student volunteering often depend on effective collaboration between students, universities, and NGOs, and that mismatches in expectations can lead to disappointment for both students and organizations (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2020).

By providing quantitative insights into how formal volunteering impacts the social and psychological well-being of university students in the UAE, this study contributes both theoretically and practically. It applies established theories within a local university setting to create a comprehensive framework for understanding volunteering behavior. The findings offer practical guidance for policymakers, university administrators, and youth organizations in designing volunteer programs that maximize developmental and well-being outcomes for young people. The study demonstrates that both social and psychological benefits accrue from volunteering, informing strategies to foster civic engagement, promote mental health, and develop transferable skills among youth. Ultimately, this research supports the development of volunteer initiatives that address community needs while supporting students' personal and professional growth, thereby contributing to broader societal well-being and national development goals (Saraidi et al., 2020; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2020).

### *1.4 Research Questions*

**This study poses the following research questions:**

- How do demographic factors such as age, gender, and employment status influence the social and psychological benefits of volunteering among university students?
- What is the relationship between the characteristics of volunteer work (type, duration, and intensity) and the social and psychological outcomes experienced by student volunteers?

## 3. Theoretical Framework

The emergence of several intellectual currents has led to a great theoretical diversity aimed at explaining social phenomena. In this regard, the present study seeks to select a range of theories to form a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding individuals' choices and behaviors. These theoretical propositions enhance conceptual diversity, particularly in relation to altruism and attitudes toward volunteering. Many sociologists have explored how these relationships influence individuals' behaviors and actions in various contexts, emphasizing the moral aspect in their study

of individuals' behavior.

One of the most widely recognized and influential theoretical frameworks is 'Social Exchange Theory', which is grounded in the principles of social economics. This theory posits that exchanges between individuals mainly occur through money and material goods, while altruism and attitudes are exchanged through emotional needs such as love, compassion, service and information sharing. It suggests that altruistic values operate according to the principle of cost and benefit, with individuals providing services to others as a form of altruism. The benefits they receive can be either internal, such as self-satisfaction and anxiety reduction, or external, such as increased appreciation from others (Osman & Sari, 2010). George Homans (1961) also demonstrated that personal needs and goals are the primary drivers of individuals' behavior, along with the rewards they gain from mutual interactions. Sociologists have successfully bridged exchange theory and symbolic theory by explaining how elements of social behavior and reciprocal activities among individuals result from motivation and emotions, which are manifested in voice tones, facial expressions, and body movements. This theory maintains that the exchange process is essentially a process of alignment, compatibility, and sharing of values and meanings (Lawler et al., 2008).

Furthermore, the Social Judgment Theory highlights the role of the social environment—such as family, university, and reference groups—in shaping values and attitudes. Social psychologists believe that social factors are important in determining an individual's value system, as individuals adopt different attitudes, beliefs, opinions, and prevailing values from the society in which they live. Terry and Hogg (1999) argue that this theory underscores the role of various groups in guiding individuals' behaviors and shaping their attitudes. Social norms guide individuals in choosing certain behavioral patterns and in assessing the extent to which these behaviors should be retained, changed, or modified to align with social values. Heider (1958) argued that two types of relationships contribute to forming attitudes and values toward individuals or things: Unit relationship, which is the relationship between an individual and a specific situation without considering the accompanying emotions, and Sentimental-Relationship, which refers to a relationship among a group of individuals characterized by terms such as hate, love, or rejection. This theory indicates a pattern of relationships based on the personal connections among individuals and between individuals and objects, with an emotional dimension. The more homogeneous the relationship between the group and the situations or individuals, the more balanced the relationship, and vice versa.

Additionally, altruistic behavior, as represented by volunteering, can be explained based on the Utility Theory. This theory suggests that acts of kindness fulfill a "natural selfish inclination" for emotional rewards derived from contributing to others' well-being (Andreoni, 1989). While altruism prioritizes collective interests, scholars argue that even selfless acts may align with indirect personal satisfaction, such as the "warm-glow" effect of giving (Andreoni, 1998). For example, kidney donation exemplifies prioritizing others' survival over individual gain, reflecting intrinsic motivations to alleviate suffering (Marsh, 2023).

Moreover, Social Capital theory (Kreuter & Lezin, 2002) interprets customs and informal rules, such as altruism and volunteering, as elements that create an atmosphere of cooperation within a group. Trust is a key component of social capital, which encompasses social dimensions like values and attitudes that serve as fundamental criteria in society. Social networks foster coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. Social capital, which primarily reflects the social system and trust, promotes collaboration and encourages individuals to take active roles in society, such as adopting positive attitudes toward volunteering (Hajazi, 2006). Putnam (2002) extended the study of social capital from the individual to the collective level, emphasizing that social capital encompasses elements of social organization that can drive development and progress in society. Putnam (2002) also identified three components of social capital: ethical commitments and standards, social values, and social networks, especially voluntary associations. Social Capital Theory defines social capital as the horizontal relationships between individuals that foster cooperation within a community. It consists of social networks and civil engagement networks, as well as shared habits that affect the productivity of society. Social capital is identified as the networks of relationships and the informal norms of trust that facilitate reciprocal exchanges (Hassan & Helal, 2009).

One theory that explains values and attitudes is Rational Choice Theory (Hechter & Kanazawa,1997), which describes societal values and attitudes as the result of individual choices aimed at maximizing utility and benefits, such as helping others. According to this theory, the attitudes of individuals toward volunteering are a direct outcome of these choices. It

posits that individuals who are purpose-driven, with their attitudes aim to achieve specific goals and objectives within a framework of selected choices. Rational Choice Theory emphasizes that individuals with positive attitudes towards volunteering act to achieve goals that align with the hierarchical sequence of their choices. Additionally, these actors aim to maximize the benefits and advantages derived from their attitudes towards volunteering. Several factors may influence these attitudes, such as ease of joining volunteer centers and awareness of laws regulating volunteering behaviors.

Furthermore, Rational Choice Theory has addressed criticisms directed at other theories and is considered one of the modern theories that effectively explain the value pattern of altruism and volunteering. This theory attempts to elucidate how individuals select the best means to achieve their purposes and the criteria by which they differentiate between available choices of actions within the constraints of rationality. For these reasons, this study adopted this theory when constructing the volunteer questionnaire and will use it to interpret the results.

## 4. Methods

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional design to examine the experiences and perceived benefits of volunteering among university students. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling, with the survey link disseminated via university email lists and official student social media platforms targeting both undergraduate and postgraduate students at the University of Sharjah.

Convenience sampling was selected primarily for its practicality, cost-effectiveness, and ability to quickly access a large and diverse student population within a limited timeframe. This approach is common in social science research when the target population is readily accessible, as it facilitates rapid data collection at minimal expense, which is essential for studies constrained by resources or deadlines (Koerber & McMichael, 2008; Rahi, 2017). Although convenience sampling carries the risk of selection bias, it is particularly suitable for exploratory research aiming to identify trends or generate hypotheses within specific, accessible groups such as university students (Nikolopoulou, 2022).

Data were gathered using a self-administered online questionnaire, a method that offers several advantages. Online surveys allow for swift data collection from geographically dispersed participants, reduce costs related to printing and data entry, and minimize errors since participants enter their responses directly (Bachmann & Elfrink, 1996; Andrews et al., 2003; Ilieva et al., 2002). These features make online surveys especially appropriate for studies involving university students, who are typically comfortable with digital platforms and can be efficiently reached through institutional communication channels.

The questionnaire, developed and validated by the researchers, was bilingual (Arabic-English) and demonstrated good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.80. It included items covering demographic information, volunteering experience, and perceived social and psychological benefits of volunteering. The questionnaire consisted of three sections: demographic details, volunteering experience, and perceived benefits. The social constructs section included 14 items, and the psychological constructs section included 10 items. The Returns to Volunteering Scale, adapted from prior literature and refined by experts in volunteer organizations and social sciences, also showed satisfactory reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.74 and a statistically significant test-retest intraclass correlation coefficient of 0.90 (Carmines & Zeller, 1979). The collected quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, employing descriptive statistics alongside regression and correlation analyses to explore relationships within the data.

Data collection took place between April and July 2023. Participants were required to meet the following inclusion criteria: (1) currently enrolled at the University of Sharjah, (2) aged 18 years or older, and (3) having completed at least 10 hours of volunteer work per year. Individuals engaged in paid volunteer roles or who submitted incomplete responses were excluded.

Participants were invited to complete a voluntary and anonymous web-based questionnaire via Google Forms. At the end of the introductory section, participants were presented with two options: "I agree to participate in the study" or "I do not wish to participate." Only those who consented to participate were included in the final sample, thereby ensuring informed consent was obtained from all participants.

## 5. Results

**Table 1. Characteristics of the Participants**

| Characteristics | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | | |
| Male | 189 | 31.5 |
| Female | 411 | 68.5 |
| **Age** | | |
| 18-20 | 186 | 31.0 |
| 21-23 | 151 | 25.2 |
| 24-26 | 263 | 43.8 |
| **Education Level** | | |
| Diploma | 143 | 23.8 |
| Bachelor's degree | 405 | 67.5 |
| Graduate studies | 52 | 8.7 |
| **Working Condition** | | |
| Working | 157 | 26.2 |
| Not Working | 443 | 73.8 |
| **Currently a volunteer** | | |
| Yes | 247 | 41.2 |
| No | 353 | 58.8 |
| **Average Volunteer Hours per Year** | | |
| 10-40 | 502 | 83.6 |
| 40-70 | 50 | 8.3 |
| 70-100 | 48 | 8.1 |
| **Years of Volunteer Experience** | | |
| **1-4** | 292 | 48.7 |
| 5-8 | 250 | 41.7 |
| 8 and above | 58 | 9.7 |
| **Nature of Volunteer Work** | | |
| Peers Tutoring | 193 | 32.2 |
| Providing material and moral support | 39 | 6.5 |
| Community Service | 257 | 43 |
| Management and organization of volunteer work | 105 | 17.7 |

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics to illustrate the characteristics of the volunteers. The statistics reveal that the majority of participants were aged 24-26 years (44%), followed by participants aged 18-20 years (31%) and participants aged 21-23 years (25%) age brackets. The sample predominantly consists of female participants (68%), with their male counterparts making up the remaining 32%. The majority of participants held a bachelor's degree (67%), followed by those with a diploma (24%) and postgraduate students (8%).This distribution suggests a high level of education among the participants. Although a third of the sample were employed (26%), the majority were engaged in volunteering (41%), which indicates the importance of volunteering among young people. This may, however, be attributed to the timing of the data collection: during Emirati relief efforts for the 2023 earthquake in Syria and Turkey. It is worth noting that the majority of

the sample spent 10-40 hours annually volunteering (83%), with the remainder volunteering between 40-100 hours annually (16%). The majority had less than 5 years of experience in volunteering (49%), followed by the participants, while about 41.7% had 5-8 years of experience. Participants primarily engaged in educational roles (32%) and community service (43%), with fewer involved in volunteer management and organization (17%).

**Table 2. Social and Psychological Benefits of Volunteering among University Students**

| | **Mean X±ss** | **Min-max** |
|---|---|---|
| **Social Benefits** | 3.79±**2.9** | 0.1-5.0 |
| **Psychological Benefits** | 3.50±3.00 | 0.0-1.8 |

- **Mean (X ± SS)**: The average score and standard deviation (SS).
- **Min-Max**: The range of scores from minimum to maximum.

Table 2 shows how the social return from volunteering was perceived to be higher than psychological benefits, with average scores of 3.79 and 3.50, respectively. This may be because social benefits are more observable, while psychological returns are more subjective.

**Table 3. the Social Benefits of Volunteering**

| **var** | **Mean** | **Std. Deviation** | **ranking** |
|---|---|---|---|
| I cooperate positively with others | 3.79 | .495 | 1 |
| More able to lead due to frequent volunteering | 3.56 | .644 | 8 |
| I set my goals realistically by balancing volunteering with my personal life. | 3.57 | .627 | 7 |
| More flexibility in dealing with others due to the diversity of those we deal with voluntarily. | 3.65 | .576 | 5 |
| I have experience and knowledge in various fields due to the multiplicity of volunteer fields | 3.35 | .804 | 10 |
| I have many friends in various volunteer organizations | 3.04 | .974 | 11 |
| Invest your free time in positive activities correctly | 3.49 | .717 | 9 |
| Able to take responsibility and perform various roles | 3.72 | .517 | 2 |
| More experienced and able to solve my own problems | 3.61 | .620 | 6 |
| Able to communicate and talk to others better. | 3.70 | .563 | 3 |

| var | Mean | Std. Deviation | ranking |
|---|---|---|---|
| I got to know important personalities in different fields | 3.30 | .876 | 12 |
| Enjoy teamwork skills. | 3.70 | .581 | 3 |
| It has extensive relations with various volunteer organizations in the country | 3.00 | 1.026 | 13 |
| I support the goals of volunteer organizations | 3.67 | .638 | 4 |

Table 3 highlights the social benefits of volunteering among university students, with the highest-rated benefits being cooperation with others (Mean = 3.79) and the ability to take responsibility (Mean = 3.72). These benefits may be considered more tangible and observable compared to others, such as building extensive relationships with volunteer organizations, which had the lowest mean score (3.00). The results suggest that students perceive social benefits like teamwork and communication as more significant, while networking and external relationships are viewed as less central to their volunteering experience.

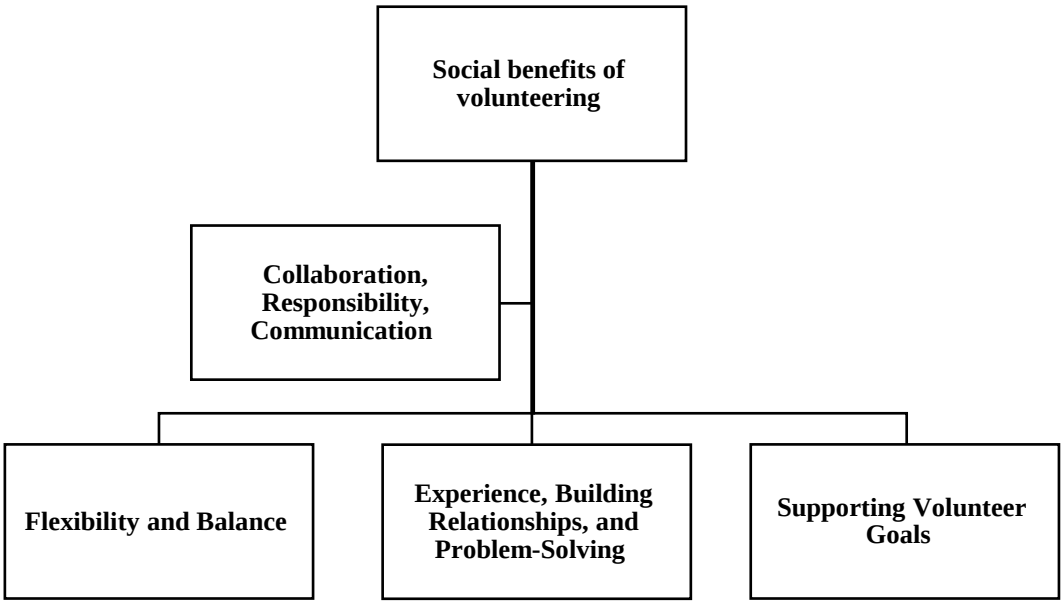



**Figure 1. The Social Benefits of Volunteering**

Figure 1 shows the social benefits of volunteering, including collaboration, responsibility, and communication. Youth report significant benefits such as cooperating with others, taking responsibility, and enjoying teamwork, which is ranked among the highest. Volunteering also helps develop flexibility and balance, as participants learn to manage personal and volunteer commitments. Additionally, volunteering fosters relationship-building and problem-solving skills, which contribute to personal growth and support for community goals.

### *5.1 Collaboration, Responsibility, Communication*

According to the study's findings, youth believe that volunteering offers intangible advantages and rewards that they can experience regularly. Nevertheless, they have a long-term impact on their lives. Some statements that demonstrate this include: "I cooperate positively with others, can take responsibility and perform various roles, and enjoy teamwork skills" which, based on the arithmetic mean and standard deviation, ranked in the top three. This can be explained by the fact that volunteering mostly depends on how you deal with the issues and necessities of your immediate surroundings.

### *5.2 Flexibility and Balance*

Young people in Emirati society believe that volunteering helps them develop social skills like as flexibility and balance in handling everyday issues and a variety of social contacts. The following statements — "I am more able to lead due to frequent volunteering," "I set my goals realistically by balancing volunteering with my personal life," "I am more flexible in dealing with others due to the diversity of those we interact with through volunteering," and "I invest my free time in positive activities" — ranked fifth, seventh, eighth, and ninth, respectively, according to the arithmetic mean. These responses highlight that one of the most crucial benefits young people gain from volunteering is learning life lessons, such as balancing responsibilities and being adaptable.

### *5.3 Experience, Building Relationships, and Problem-Solving*

Working with various groups daily in youth volunteer programs fosters the development of relationships with many involved parties in the community and enhances crisis management and problem-solving skills. Through these significant community connections, individuals directly benefit — which may be one of the key non-material rewards of volunteering.

### *5.4 Supporting Volunteer Goals*

Young people who volunteer are directly impacted by taking on a variety of volunteer issues, whatever they may be, and becoming a part of this society and its segments. They also take on the responsibility of fulfilling volunteer goals, meeting the needs of society, and even providing support to other volunteers.

**Table 4. the Psychological Benefits of Volunteering**

| var | Mean | Std. Deviation | ranking |
|---|---|---|---|
| I feel I belong to my country with the help of its various individuals and institutions. | 3.80 | .506 | 3 |
| I am proud to be an active member of my community. | 3.86 | .434 | 1 |
| I do not suffer from loneliness and isolation. | 3.45 | .920 | 10 |
| I feel socially safe when participating in these volunteer activities. | 3.75 | .550 | 4 |
| I got rid of negative feelings towards others when interacting with all members of the community by volunteering. | 3.66 | .626 | 9 |

| var | Mean | Std. Deviation | ranking |
|---|---|---|---|
| I feel appreciated by others for my volunteer work. | 3.68 | .624 | 8 |
| I feel self-esteem for my volunteer work. | 3.76 | .544 | 6 |
| I feel satisfied and happy to participate in volunteer work | 3.84 | .454 | 2 |
| More able to rationally choose between alternatives to beneficial behaviors. | 3.74 | .505 | 5 |
| I feel more sensitive to others as a result of my interactions with various segments of society in volunteering. | 3.73 | .561 | 7 |

Table 4 illustrates the psychological benefits of volunteering, with the highest-rated benefit being pride in being an active member of the community **(**Mean = 3.86, SD = 0.434), ranked 1st. Participants also reported feeling satisfied and happy with their volunteer work (Mean = 3.84, SD = 0.454), ranked 2nd. The data suggests that feelings of pride, satisfaction, and a sense of belonging to the community are central psychological outcomes of volunteering. On the other hand, the lowest-ranked benefits include freedom from loneliness (Mean = 3.45, SD = 0.920), ranked 10th, and getting rid of negative feelings towards others (Mean = 3.66, SD = 0.626), ranked 9th. Overall, psychological benefits related to self-esteem, satisfaction, and social safety were rated highly, reflecting the positive emotional and psychological impact of volunteering.

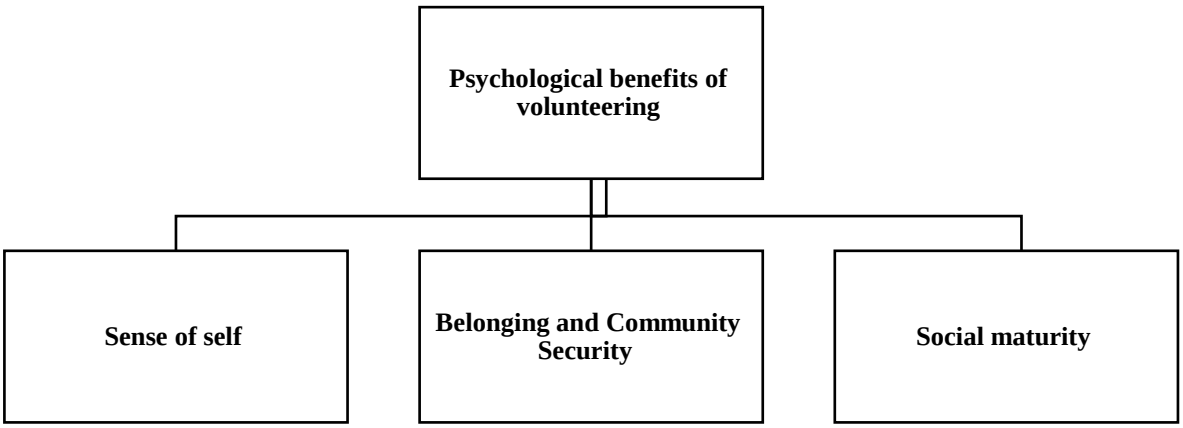



**Figure 2. The Psychological Benefits of Volunteering**

Figure 2 illustrates the psychological benefits of volunteering, focusing on self-esteem, belonging, and social maturity. Youth report a strong sense of pride in their community involvement, with feelings of belonging and social safety also ranking highly. Volunteering helps build positive self-identity, enhancing participants' emotional well-being. Additionally, it fosters social maturity, as individuals develop a greater sensitivity towards others and improve their decision-making abilities.

### *5.6 Sense of Self and Identity*

For young people, giving to others without expecting anything in return—aside from intangible rewards—can help foster self-awareness and greater acceptance of their own flaws and lived experiences. Statements like "I am proud to be an active member of my community," "I feel social security when participating in volunteer activities," and "I feel satisfied and happy to participate in volunteer work" ranked first, second, and fourth, respectively, highlighting this impact.

### *5.7 Belonging and Community Security*

The young Emirati volunteers express that by swiftly participating to national non-profit volunteer activities, their sympathies toward their nation and its problems have grown. The following sentences make this clear: "I feel I belong to my country with the help of its various individuals and institutions, “and “I am more able to choose beneficial behaviors rationally among alternatives."

### *5.8 Social maturity*

One of the most significant invisible benefits of volunteering is the sense of balance, reason, duty, belonging, and the ability to measure all relationships and needs using mental scales. It's possible that their exposure to a variety of situations and relationships, particularly in their formative years, raises their level of maturity and civic duty. The analysis of the relationship between age, gender, work status, education, current volunteering, hours and years of volunteering and the nature of volunteer work revealed statistically significant associations with psychological benefits. Specifically, engaging in volunteering while studying and the nature of the work were strongly related to higher psychological benefits. This may be due to the fact that young people who engage in volunteering develop a greater understanding and appreciation of its psychological benefits.

The analysis also showed a statistically significant relationship between the nature of volunteer work — whether educational, community-based, or administrative — and the psychological benefits that the individual received. The psychological benefits tend to be more pronounced in certain types of volunteer work, while they are negligible in others. This variation is attributed to the different mechanisms and the nature of each work.

Moreover, no significant positive relationships and mutual influence were found between psychological benefits and other variables in the study. This suggests that factors such as employment status, age, gender, and education do not have a significant impact on the psychological benefits young people derive from volunteering.

**Table 5. Association between Variables and Psychological Benefits**

| Variables | B | Beta | Sig |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | .194 | .021 | .633 |
| **Age** | .338 | .069 | .131 |
| **Educational Level** | -.518 | -.068 | .093 |
| **Working Status** | .192 | .020 | .669 |
| **Are you currently a volunteer?** | -1.234 | -.144 | <.001 |
| **Average Volunteer Hours per Year** | .290 | .087 | .031 |
| **Years of Volunteer Experience** | .098 | .015 | .704 |
| **Nature of Volunteer Work** | -.552 | -.170 | <.001 |
| a. Dependent Variable: s2 | | | |

Table 5 presents the association between various variables and psychological benefits of volunteering. The results indicate that being a current volunteer (B = -1.234, Beta = -0.144, p < .001) and the nature of volunteer work (B = -0.552, Beta = -0.170, p < .001) have significant negative associations with psychological benefits. Conversely, the average volunteer hours per year (B = 0.290, Beta = 0.087, p = 0.031) show a significant positive association with psychological benefits. Other variables, such as gender, age, educational level, working status, and years of volunteer experience, do not show statistically significant associations with psychological benefits. These findings suggest that the intensity and nature of volunteer work, rather than demographic or experience factors, play a more significant role in influencing the psychological outcomes of volunteering.

## 6. Discussion

This study explored the social and psychological benefits of volunteering among university students at the University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. The total population of the University of Sharjah is approximately 15,000 students, and the present research recruited a sample of 600 students (4% of the total population) through convenience sampling. The sample was diverse in terms of gender, age, education level, and work status, with females representing 68.5% of participants and the majority holding a bachelor's degree (67.5%). Data were collected via a bilingual (Arabic-English), self-administered online questionnaire. The study tool included 24 items: 14 items measured social benefits (the "social construct"), and 10 items assessed psychological benefits (the "psychological construct"). The instrument demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.80) and was adapted from validated scales in previous research (Carmines & Zeller, 1979; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2020).

The findings revealed that students perceived social benefits (M = 3.79, SD = 2.9) as slightly higher than psychological benefits (M = 3.50, SD = 3.0). This result is consistent with prior regional and international studies, which have shown that volunteering enhances social capital, teamwork, and responsibility (Kim & Morgül, 2017; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2020). The highest-rated social benefits in this study included cooperation with others, taking responsibility, and enjoying teamwork skills. These align with Putnam's (2002) Social Capital Theory, which emphasizes the critical role of trust, networks, and civic engagement in fostering effective volunteerism.

Psychological benefits were also notable, with students reporting strong feelings of pride, satisfaction, belonging, and social safety as a result of their volunteer activities. The highest-rated psychological benefit was pride in being an active member of the community (M = 3.86, SD = 0.43), followed by satisfaction and happiness from volunteering (M = 3.84, SD = 0.45). These findings extend the application of Seligman's PERMA model (Seligman, 2011; Williamson et al., 2018) to the Emirati context, confirming that volunteering supports well-being through positive emotions, engagement, meaning, and accomplishment.

Regression analysis provided further insight into the factors influencing psychological benefits. Notably, being a current volunteer and the nature of volunteer work were negatively associated with psychological benefits, while average annual volunteer hours were positively associated. This nuanced result may be explained by Rational Choice Theory (Hechter & Kanazawa, 1997), which suggests that students balancing academic and volunteer commitments may experience role strain, especially when the demands of volunteering are high or misaligned with personal interests. This finding echoes Haski-Leventhal et al. (2020) work with Chinese students, where excessive volunteer hours led to diminishing psychological returns.

Contrary to some regional findings (e.g., Al Gharaibeh, 2010; Alhajjaj & Al Nabulsi, 2022), this study did not find significant gender differences in psychological benefits. This may reflect the UAE's proactive gender-equality policies in volunteering, such as the National Volunteering Portal, which has promoted balanced access for both male and female students (UAE Gender Balance Council, 2022). Additionally, the relatively low scores for building relationships with NGOs suggest that Emirati students may prioritize immediate skill-building and personal growth over long-term organizational affiliations, a trend that aligns with neoliberal educational models but diverges from findings in other Arab contexts (Hajazi, 2006; Saraidi et al., 2020). Moreover, the significant role of family, university, and national policies in shaping volunteering

attitudes and behaviors among youth, as discussed by Haddad (2015), is corroborated by the high engagement of students in structured volunteer activities at the University of Sharjah.

The study's results are also supported by Social Exchange Theory, which posits that individuals engage in volunteering to maximize rewards and minimize costs (Osman & Sari, 2010). The emphasis on employability and skill development found in this sample mirrors findings from Israeli-Arab youth (Geng et al., 2022), where volunteering was strongly linked to career advancement. These successful strategies are evidenced by the fact that approximately half of the sample were volunteers during the study. In addition, a statistically significant relationship exists between current volunteering, supported by both government and local community initiatives and the social and psychological benefits of volunteering. The awareness of young people regarding the importance of volunteering and non-profit work reflects the evolving nature of modern societies, where young people need more than academic excellence to secure employment after graduation. One way to their employability is through participation in volunteer work. This is consistent with the arguments of Homans (1961) and rational choice about the returns of volunteering.

Studies have found a significant overlap between individuals participating in volunteering and those receiving job opportunities, illustrating interconnected forces of motivation. Young people gain valuable benefits from volunteering, including the opportunity to reflect on these experiences in relation to future employment (Bromnick et al., 2012). The results of the present study reveal a statistically significant relationship between volunteering and current volunteer work, with the majority of the sample actively participating in volunteer activities. This relationship is also evident in the clear connections between the nature of volunteer work and its social and psychological benefits, which vary according to individuals' specialization, future career and practical ambitions. The overall pattern of findings underscores the importance of both intrinsic (psychological) and extrinsic (social, career-related) benefits in motivating youth volunteering.

As researchers, we interpret these findings as evidence that the unique social context of the UAE, marked by a strong national identity, robust institutional support, and recent mobilization during national crises, significantly influences the benefits students gain from volunteering. The high proportion of female volunteers likely reflects the impact of national gender-balance initiatives rather than a sampling bias. The negative relationship between work status and psychological benefits suggests that students working more than 20 hours per week may experience time constraints and role conflict, aligning with the principles of Social Exchange Theory. Additionally, the relatively low scores regarding relationships with NGOs may point to a preference for short-term, skills-based volunteering opportunities over long-term organizational involvement.

## 7. Recommendations

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed:

1. Universities should integrate micro-volunteering programs into the academic curriculum, offering academic credit and formal recognition to incentivize sustained participation. This approach can enhance student engagement, foster skill development, and maximize both the social and psychological benefits of volunteering.
2. Policymakers and NGOs should design flexible, skills-based volunteer opportunities that accommodate students' academic and work commitments, reducing the risk of role strain and enhancing psychological well-being.
3. Future research should explore the experiences of underrepresented groups, such as students with disabilities, and investigate the long-term impacts of volunteering on career and life outcomes.

In summary, this study fills a critical gap by providing empirical evidence on the social and psychological benefits of volunteering among university students in the UAE. It links findings to established theories and prior research and offers actionable guidance for stakeholders aiming to promote youth engagement and well-being through volunteering.

## 8. Conclusion and Limitations

The results of this study indicate that participants generally have a strong positive recognition of the benefits of volunteering and are highly motivated to engage in volunteer work and non-profit work in general. However, there are

differences in the intensity of participation by gender and the social and psychological benefits experienced by young people. Specifically, while strong relationships exist between gender and social benefits, this effect is absent in the case of gender and psychological benefits. Overall, participants enjoy a high level of social and psychological benefits, with the social benefits outweighing the psychological ones. This may be attributed to the nature of the psychological factors and contemporary youth's awareness of them. Participants express high satisfaction with the methods and volunteer initiatives implemented in Emirati society, as evidenced by their long-term engagement in volunteer activities, as reflected in the findings of the current study. These results underscore the comprehensive development of volunteer work policies in Emirati society, particularly those targeting its most vital demographic: the youth.

However, the present study is not without limitations. First, the use of convenience sampling may introduce bias, which limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized to the broader university student population. Additionally, since the research was conducted at a single university, the results may not fully represent the experiences of students from other institutions or regions. The cross-sectional design also restricts the ability to establish causal relationships between volunteering and its benefits. Furthermore, all data were self-reported, making them vulnerable to recall errors or social desirability bias. Finally, data collection occurred over several months, during which participants' perceptions may have changed, potentially affecting the consistency of the responses.

## 9. Implications and Future Directions

Given these limitations, the results should be interpreted with caution. Future studies should use random sampling, include multiple universities, and apply longitudinal designs to better understand cause-and-effect relationships and improve representativeness. Additionally, qualitative research could offer richer insights into students' experiences and motivations for volunteering.

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