



Saudi Arabia, Volunteering and the Relationship with Youth Well-being

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Abstract: Previous studies have documented the positive outcomes and benefits of volunteering. However, much of this research has been conducted among so-called WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) populations. This study aimed to examine the relationships between volunteering and several well-established components of well-being (i.e., sleep quality, purpose, confidence, social connection) among a convenience sample of young adult volunteers in Saudi Arabia ($N = 182$). We hypothesized that those who volunteer more frequently would experience higher levels of well-being. The results were supportive, showing that individuals who volunteered more regularly reported higher levels of well-being across all assessed components. Specifically, loneliness was negatively correlated with volunteering frequency, and volunteering frequency was positively associated with reporting a larger friendship network. We also found associations between loneliness and poor sleep. The findings are discussed in relation to public health strategy, exploring how volunteering may contribute to promoting population-level well-being, as well as to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 agenda, which prioritizes well-being and community involvement for national development.

Keywords: volunteer, well-being, purpose, loneliness, social connection

ملخص: نجحت العديد من الدراسات برصد النتائج والفوائد الإيجابية التي يمكن جنيها من التطوع. إلا أن معظم هذا البحث أجري على ما تُعرف بمجتمعات "WEIRD"، وهو مصطلح مختصر يشير إلى كون المجتمعات غربية، متعلمة، صناعية، ثرية، وديمقراطية. سعت هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف الرابط بين التطوع والعديد من مكونات الأثران الراسخة (مثل: جودة النوم، والطموح، والثقة، والتواصل الاجتماعي) لدى عينة من المتطوعين السعوديين (عددهم 182). افترضت الدراسة وجود تأثير معيّن، وتحديدًا أن من يتطوعون بشكل متكرر يتمتعون بمستويات أعلى من الأثران. وقد دعمت النتائج فرضية وجود تأثير للتطوع، حيث أفاد من تطوعوا بانتظام بمستويات أعلى من الرفاهية في جميع المكونات المذكورة سابقًا. وتُناقش النتائج بناءً على المساهمات المحتملة للتطوع في رفع مستوى الرفاهية على مستوى السكان واستراتيجية الصحة العامة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التطوع، الأثران، التواصل الاجتماعي، السعودية، الطموح

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Volunteerism is broadly defined as the act of investing time and skill to support a cause without monetary compensation. The contexts for volunteerism are wide-ranging, from local community service to international humanitarian aid initiatives. Decades of research suggest that volunteerism benefits the individuals and communities which are served, as much as the volunteers providing the service (Carlton & Wong, 2023; Kovich et al., 2023; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). Volunteering strengthens one's sense of self-efficacy (Dakin et al., 2022). When associated with physical activity, it also leads to improved sleep quality and other health benefits. The research supporting the well-being benefits of volunteerism is unequivocal. Volunteerism is associated with greater physical and psychological well-being (Gray & Stevenson, 2020; Greenfield & Marks, 2004; Jenkinson et al., 2013; Lawton et al., 2021; Nichol et al., 2024; Piliavin & Siegl, 2007; Tse, 2020).

Social Identity and Social Needs Met Through Volunteerism

Volunteering offers an important path to social well-being. Through it, individuals fulfil their needs for social connection, self-development, and purpose (Carlton & Wong, 2023; Kovich et al., 2023; Nichol et al., 2024). In many instances, volunteering also involves collaborative effort, working with others, including co-volunteers, toward a common purpose. When voluntarism involves such connections, it can alleviate social isolation and loneliness, as well as provide a positive social identity and sense of belonging to a valued social group, with documented benefits for health and well-being (Gray & Stevenson, 2020; Williams et al., 2024). As loneliness and social isolation are currently considered as public health concerns and viewed as a risk factor for ill health of similar magnitude as obesity and smoking (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010; Hawkey et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2023; World Health Organisation, 2025), volunteerism assumes even greater value.

Social identity theory posits that a sense of purpose, belonging and meaning stemming from group identification constitutes a social cure, with positive implications for psychological and physical well-being (Greenaway et al., 2015; Haslam et al., 2009). This social identity creates a virtuous cycle, in which accrued well-being makes individuals more likely to participate in group life, thereby further promoting well-being (Putnam, 2000). An extensive review of the social identity literature led Haslam et al. (2009) to conclude: "...social identities—and the notions of 'us-ness' that they... embody



and help create—are central to health and well-being.” (pg. 3). Among youth and emerging adults, such identities are even more critical; their cultivation is related to a broad array of positive developmental and later life outcomes, from the quality of interpersonal relationships to social responsibility and civic engagement (for review, see Crocetti, 2018).

Volunteerism, when it involves collaborative work, is likely to lead to the development of a sense of shared group membership, offering a common understanding of the social world (Drury & Reicher, 2005; Gray & Stevenson, 2020) and a positive social identity from which it is derived. The link between social identity and well-being is greater when there is societal approval and respect for the work volunteers undertake, helping volunteers feel needed, appreciated, and valued (Nichol et al., 2024; Tse, 2020). Within such contexts, volunteers are likely to be retained (van Zomeren et al., 2012), leading to a possible dose-response relationship: a greater commitment to volunteering (i.e., more frequent engagement or longer hours), potentially leading to further well-being enhancements.

Volunteering in Saudi Arabia

Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia’s plan for transformation, economic diversification, and empowerment of citizens, among many other objectives, includes enhancing national capacity through volunteerism with a target of reaching 1 million volunteers by 2030. A dedicated platform (i.e., The National Volunteer Portal) exists to connect individuals with opportunities, helping them contribute to their personal development and strengthen community well-being. Similarly aligned with Vision 2030 is the Human Capability Development Program (2021). This initiative aims to cultivate globally competitive citizens by fostering essential skills, knowledge, and national values such as moderation (الوسطية), tolerance (التسامح), and perseverance/grit (المثابرة). Volunteering offers a platform for inculcating and further cultivating such values.

A key focus of volunteering in Saudi Arabia is youth development, which is particularly important in a nation where, according to estimates from the General Authority for Statistics (2025), Gen Alpha (those born after 2010) constitute 33.5% of the population. This youthful demographic reality underscores the importance of supporting the developmental needs of youth and young adults, including, among other means, volunteering. Additionally, Saudi Arabia is home to Islam’s most holy sites and is widely considered the heart of the Islamic world. Islamic values and regional cultural heritage remain a foundation of contemporary Saudi society (Thomas, 2014). In this context, volunteering resonates strongly with religious values and Saudi social identity. Volunteering aligns well with Islamic values of charity, service, and helping others, perhaps allowing many individuals to express their faith through prosocial action. Nationally, volunteerism can serve as a vital element of policies aimed at improving population-wide well-being.

The Present Study

Most of the published scientific research exploring the well-being benefits of volunteering has been undertaken in what are called WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) nations, with few examples stemming from the Arab Gulf region. Accordingly, the present study aims to explore the benefits derived from volunteering among a sample of Saudi volunteers. The study examined volunteering frequency and a range of well-being outcomes (i.e.,



social connection, purpose, confidence, and sleep). We hypothesized a dose effect, such that we anticipated finding positive associations between:

- (H1) the frequency of volunteering and well-being measures; and,
- (H2) years of volunteering experience and well-being measures.

Participants

Participants were registered volunteers with a large arts and cultural institution based in Saudi Arabia. The institute welcomes volunteers of all ages, abilities and interests to contribute to the visitor experience while building local capacity and capability. The institution houses a theatre, cinema, museum, library and several galleries, running daily community events (e.g., concerts, exhibitions, workshops, etc.) operating with the support of volunteers. Volunteers are registered on an electronic mailing list. An invitation to participate in the study was mailed to almost 2000 volunteers, with a response rate of around 10%. Participants were informed about the nature of the study and assured of the anonymity of their participation. Participants consented by clicking on the link in the invitation email. The mean age for the sample was 20.53 years, $SD = 6.29$. Participant details are provided in Table 1. The study received ethical approval from the institution's internal review board.

Measures

All measures were translated from English into Arabic, using the translate-back-translate method using professional bilingual translators. All measures were presented with the option of accessing either Arabic or English.

Demographics and volunteering experience. Participants provided sociodemographic information: age, sex, and level of education. They were also asked about their volunteering experience, which included the length of time they had been a volunteer measured in years and months, and the frequency or regularity of their volunteering experience, endorsing one of five categories (less than monthly, monthly, fortnightly, weekly and, more than weekly).

Confidence and Purpose. Confidence and purpose were both single-item self-report measures that directly asked how the respondent's volunteering experience impacted their sense of purpose, as well as confidence. Participants answered on a 4-point scale, with higher scores indicative of a higher perceived positive impact. Participants also answered general questions concerning loneliness, social connections (number of friends) and sleep quality, variables widely associated with health and well-being.

Loneliness UCLA-LS-3 (Hughes et al., 2004). The UCLA Loneliness scale is a widely used unidimensional measure of loneliness. It is considered psychometrically sound and easily administered (Russell et al., 1978; Xu et al., 2018). The short version of the scale was used, which included three items: (1) I lack companionship, (2) I feel left out, and (3) I feel isolated from others. Respondents answered in terms of frequency: hardly ever, some of the time, and often, scored 1, 2, and 3, respectively. The recommended cut-off score, defining loneliness as a score of 6 or more, was used as a guideline. The scale demonstrated good internal reliability, with an α value of 0.77.

Social Connection/Number of Friends. In measuring social connection, we used a self-report item quantifying the size of the individual's close friend network (Veazie et al., 2019). This item



asked respondents to report the number of close friends they have by answering: “How many close friends do you have?”

Sleep Quality Scale (SQS; Snyder et al., 2018). As a general measure of physical well-being, we measured sleep quality as a well-established proxy (Muzni et al., 2021). There are many validated brief measures of sleep quality. We used the shortest measure with evidence of validity and reliability, i.e., the single-item SQS asking, “During the past seven days, how would you rate your sleep quality, overall?”, with respondents scoring sleep quality from 0 (terrible) to 10 (excellent).

Results

All participants ($N = 182$) were included in the study. Females were more prevalent than males, with more than half of the sample reporting being under the age of 20. See Table 1 for all participant characteristics.

Table 1

Sample characteristics of volunteer respondents

Variable	Group	N (%)
Female	Yes	113 (62.08)
	No	69 (35.27)
Under 20	Yes	71 (39.01)
	No	111 (69.98)
College Graduate	Yes	42 (23.07)
	No	140 (76.92)
Weekly Volunteerism	Yes	84 (46.15)
	No	98 (53.84)
Volunteering more than 1 Yr.	Yes	103 (56.59)
	No	79 (43.40)

Descriptive Analysis

Mean length of time volunteering across all participants was 1.83 years, $SD = 3.75$. The frequency of volunteering was assessed by asking whether it was ‘less than monthly’, ‘fortnightly’, ‘weekly’, or ‘more frequent than weekly’. The modal response was ‘more frequently than weekly’, with 57 participants reporting this cadence, accounting for 31.14% of the sample. There were, however, 34 participants (the second-largest group comprising 18.57% of the sample) whose volunteerism was less frequent than monthly. The mean loneliness score was 3.64, $SD = 1.18$. In total, ($N = 15$) 8.24% of the volunteers scored above the UCLA loneliness cut-off, with Item three, i.e., “I feel isolated from others”, being the most strongly endorsed ($M = 1.38$, $SD = 0.96$). The mean number of close friends was 3.07, $SD = 0.95$.



Correlational Analysis

Sex, age and educational level were uncorrelated with duration or frequency of volunteering. Table 2 shows the inter-item correlations for the study's key variables of interest.

Table 2

Correlational analysis of study's key variables

	Volunteering Length	Volunteering Frequency	Confidence	Purpose	Sleep	Loneliness
Volunteer Frequency	-.123					
Confidence	-.013	.187*				
Purpose	.148*	.160*	.219**			
Sleep	.147	.191*	.311***	.131		
Loneliness	.091	-.184**	-.422***	-.275***	-.539***	
No. of Friends	.031	.163*	.295***	.134	.298***	-.467***

Note: All Ns = 182, Volunteering Length = 1 (one year or more), Volunteering Frequency = 1 (weekly or more). *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$ (two-tailed hypotheses)

Discussion

This study set out to explore, in a Saudi context, the association between volunteering and current well-being, as indicated by confidence, purpose, and social connection. To capture physical well-being, sleep quality was included as a component. In line with earlier studies (Gray & Stevenson, 2020; Greenfield & Marks, 2004; Jenkinson et al., 2013; Lawton et al., 2021; Nichol et al., 2024; Piliavin & Siegl, 2007; Tse, 2020), volunteering was indeed associated with well-being. Specifically, loneliness was negatively correlated with volunteering frequency, while all other well-being variables were positively correlated with the tendency to regularly spend more time volunteering. This supports hypothesis one, that the frequency of volunteering (dose-response) would be correlated with well-being metrics. Hypothesis two, however, was only partially supported, in that volunteering length (i.e., the number of years and months one had been volunteering) was correlated with only one of the well-being metrics, purpose. Based on the current analysis, we suggest that frequent volunteering may be more beneficial than sustained volunteering over many years at low frequency. However, the correlational nature of the study precludes causal claims.

The strongest correlation in the present study was between loneliness and sleep. There exists a well-established and extensive literature documenting this link, with sleep disturbance proposed as the possible mechanism underlying the relationship between loneliness and physical health problems (for a systematic review, see Griffin et al., 2020). However, the correlational nature of the sleep-loneliness evidence also means that debates about directionality and causality persist.



Loneliness was also associated with having fewer friends, aligning with prior findings reporting the anticipated correlation between relative social isolation and loneliness (Taylor et al., 2023). It is also noteworthy that volunteering frequency was associated with reporting a larger friendship network. The possibility that volunteerism might reduce loneliness, perhaps through opportunities for friendship, is worth further investigation, especially given the significant public health implications of social disconnection.

The only well-being variable positively correlated with volunteering length (career length) was purpose. It is possible that simply being registered as a volunteer, even in the absence of frequent engagement, provides a valuable social identity which can strengthen an individual's sense of purpose (Greenaway et al., 2015). Maybe, even in the absence of regular opportunities to actively volunteer, being identified as a volunteer and one associated with a well-respected institution confers a sense of purpose that increases with duration (e.g., I have been a volunteer with the Red Crescent for the past 5 years).

Among the present Saudi youth sample, volunteering was associated with greater well-being and reduced loneliness. These findings hint at the potential public health benefits of large-scale volunteering initiatives. The present study, although relatively small, clearly identified well-being benefits associated with both volunteering frequency and volunteering career length.

Limitations

This preliminary study, however, has some significant limitations. First, the study is correlational and cross-sectional, and as such, our findings cannot be considered causal or speak to the temporal nature of the relationship between well-being and volunteerism. It might be that those with higher levels of well-being are in better financial positions or psychological states to provide more frequent voluntary service in the first place. A further limitation of the current study is that it relies on a relatively small sample of volunteers from the arts and cultural sector. This limits our ability to generalize these findings to other sectors and volunteering contexts.

Future studies might adopt longitudinal designs, perhaps using experience-sampling methodologies to examine the temporal relationship between volunteering and increases in well-being. Similarly, larger, more diverse samples across sectors and regions of Saudi Arabia might yield additional actionable insights. Ultimately, it might also be possible to undertake experimental studies in which group allocation (active vs inactive volunteers) is randomized.

Implications and Conclusions

To our knowledge, this study is the first of its kind that explores volunteering as a statistical predictor of well-being among Saudi volunteers. Given Saudi Arabia's strategic commitment to volunteering to foster social cohesion and well-being, these results are promising. Our findings also offer insights relevant to the growing global concerns about the negative public health impacts of loneliness and social isolation (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010; Hawkley et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2023), which have also been identified in Saudi workplaces (Gallup, 2025). In 2025, at the World Health Assembly, the member states of the World Health Organisation approved the first-ever resolution on fostering social connection for global health. The resolution firmly establishes combating loneliness and social isolation as global health priorities (World Health Organisation,



2025). Volunteer programs could be promoted with this goal in mind, further extending its mission by targeting employee groups and older adults. Similarly, our results suggest that volunteering programs may be more effective if they provide frequent opportunities for active volunteerism (e.g. more than once per week).

Volunteering can be leveraged as a strategic tool for promoting population-level well-being and economic prosperity nationwide. Poorer well-being at the population level has a negative impact on the economy, typically measured in terms of disability-adjusted life years, workplace absence, and decreased productivity (Ferrari et al., 2013). As Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 aims to diversify the economy and enhance the quality of life for citizens and residents, volunteering can potentially play a crucial role in this endeavor.

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