

Social Media and Value Orientations: A Study of Cultural and Moral Associations among University Students in Al Ain, UAE

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Abstract

This study investigates the perceived associations between social media use and cultural, religious, social, and economic value orientations among university students in Al Ain, United Arab Emirates, using a descriptive quantitative survey design. Grounded in Inglehart's Modernization Theory, the research examines how exposure to global digital content is perceived to relate to students' value orientations within a rapidly modernizing Gulf society. A structured questionnaire consisting of 40 items distributed across four value domains was administered to a randomly selected sample of 105 students during the 2023–2024 academic year. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential tests to identify overall patterns and demographic differences. Validity and reliability analyses confirmed strong internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$). The findings indicate a moderate overall perceived association between social media use and value orientations ($M = 3.84$), with cultural and economic values showing stronger perceived associations, while social and religious values demonstrated greater stability. Significant differences were identified according to gender, academic level, and daily social media use. The results suggest that social media functions as a space for perceived moral and cultural negotiation rather than a direct driver of value change, highlighting the importance of educational and policy interventions that promote critical digital engagement while safeguarding local and religious values in the Emirati context.

Keywords: social media, cultural values, moral transformation, university students, united arab emirates, digital society, youth behavior, value change

1. Introduction

The rapid development of social media platforms has drastically changed the communication, cultural representation, and sociability of the world. Over the past decade, social media networks like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X (previously known as Twitter) have transformed from being a mere channel of moral influence to being active and dynamic places of interaction, personal identity construction, and value negotiation. Lakshman et al. (2024) indicated that in this transition, social media has become an essential tool for collective representation and establishing relationships, shaping the way people make meaning across cultures. This change in behavior corresponds to the findings of Abu Backer and Awad (2025) who revealed that one of the main factors driving Arab university students' participation in social media is the desire for gratifications like recognition, enjoyment, and social belonging, which often outweigh the consideration of accompanying psychological or cultural hazards. The richness in variability of these digital environments has been systematically classified by Koukaras et al. (2020) who distinguished social media by functional typology, such as networking, collaborating, and content sharing, each eliciting unique forms of social behaviors and value exchanges. The growing awareness about personal expectations and consequences of social media

use will greatly benefit both educators and learners, as social media is not simply a channel of communication but the dominant space in which individuals perceive, interpret, and evaluate their own moral beliefs, cultural norms, and social behaviors (Kaplan, 2016; Priopae-Șerbănescu and Mațoi, 2023).

The student body of the university has been one of the liveliest and highly interactive digital populations. They use social media platforms not only for knowledge sharing but also to express their opinions and experiences, and to learn about the different cultures, and all these activities form a kind of chain that leads to their changing attitudes towards the cultural and moral values of the society (Alenezi et al., 2022; Hameed et al., 2022). Recent empirical research by Al Ketbi et al. (2025) conducted in the UAE also points out that social media use, tolerance, ethical consciousness, and youth collective wellbeing are interrelated, thus providing more justification for the resonance of studying value orientations from an Emirati perspective. Similar findings were reported by Youssef et al. (2024), who established dependency on social media in the UAE as linked to new norms of communication, as well as an increased reliance on social-media interaction to facilitate social connections, as technology mediates intimacy and identity.

Nonetheless, the expanding prevalence of digital communication has obscured internal boundaries between public and private life, changing personal relationships and calling for stability during the perceived guiding value systems of previous collective behavior (Vallor, 2012). Values provide a long-lasting principle that is accepted for the purpose of moral judgment, social connection, and decision-making (Bayoumi, 1990; Oyserman, 2015). In Arab countries, and within the UAE specifically, values based in religion and tradition provide the basis for family loyalty, mutual respect, and sense of national belonging (Al Ketbi et al, 2025). At the same time, the visibility of universally available globalized digital content provides competing paradigmatic cultural structures involving value systems based in individualism, consumerisms and self-presentation (Al-Hunayti & Hamza, 2025; Al-Qahtani, 2023). Fahmi (2018) warns that online practices that are unregulated, may eventually lead to ethical violation and misuse of the communication platforms, highlighting the importance of contextual digital-ethics frameworks integrated in national educational systems.

The struggle between traditional practices and foreign lifestyles is becoming increasingly significant within Emirati youth who are caught between deep-rooted traditions and appealing global digital cultures. The theoretical perspective for this research is based on Inglehart's Modernization Theory, which provides a rationale for how both socioeconomic development and globalization contribute to a slow transition from traditional values to secular-rational values to self-expression values (Inglehart, 2020). From this view, modernizing societies experience a differentiated pattern of value change and adaption, such that social and religious value systems will tend to remain stable and stable, while cultural and economic values are subject to global impact and a much larger degree of change. As a social medium of global interconnectedness, social media can be conceived as the space in which aspects of the modernization process take on visibility and can be negotiated consciously.

As a result, this analysis forecasts that the perceived relationship between social media and students' value orientations will be greater for economic and cultural values, hinting at exposure to material and global forces, than for social and religious values, which will likely hold more continuity to tradition. This ago is supported by Hafeez et al. (2020), whose results in Pakistan suggest that university students' social media exposure reshapes their moral sensitivities and values in education to support the notion that digitalization operates to advance a process of moral reflection and negotiation, rather than moral decay. The framing here lends theoretical relevance to the data by tying Emirati students' micro-level perceptions with macro-level cultural change processes that are theorized by modernization theory.

In the Arab world, various empirical research studies have come up with different conclusions regarding the relationship between social media participation and value orientations. High digital communication has been linked to moral conflict and relativism (Bouqlouf, 2018; Al-Baqqami, 2020; Al-Dahmashi, 2023), which is one of the findings, while the other finds the same thing providing awareness and participation, but only if mediated by education and critical thinking (Pahwa, 2024; Al Ketbi et al. 2025). In the UAE, social media users' engagement continues to be ambiguous, which is a situation where the traditional and global value systems coexist, intersect, and sometimes even clash, because of rapid modernization, a multicultural society, and high digital penetration levels.

Within this context, and in an attempt to address this gap, this research aims at exploring what is the perceived link between the use of social media and Emirati university students' social, cultural, religious, and economic value orientations. Thus, the central research question is tackled from the perspective of university students in Al Ain: "How do university students in Al Ain engage with the relationship between their own social media usage and their value orientations within each of these four domains?" To place these associations in better context, the present study additionally aims to investigate potential differences by gender, school level, age, and social media daily intensity in the perceived association between social media and the school experience.

With the current situation, the research conducted is about the perception of Emirati university students regarding their relationships with social media through the lens of the four value domains (social, cultural, religious, and economic).

Moreover, the study looks into the extent to which these relationships have been affected by gender, educational level, age, and their recent daily usage of social media. As such, this research helps give insight into the ways in which social media serves as an intermediary context for the negotiation of value in Gulf societies that are experiencing rapid digital globalization. Overall, the research aims to inform educational and policy efforts to enable ethical, culture-based, digital engagement, while preserving the moral and socially normative traditions of the UAE.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Media as a Context of Socialization and Value Formation

Over the last few decades social media platforms has become an instrument for communication and as a platform for socialization, a space where meanings, identities, and values are constructed and negotiated. Kaplan (2016) reminds us that social media platforms promote hyper-socialization, visibility, and self-representation implying that they become more intertwined with everyday life. Additionally, Lakshman et al. (2024), say that Facebook “is the new space of collective representation and meaning-making especially among youth”. Values, from a sociological viewpoint, are “persistent but flexible organizing principles of moral and social conduct” (Bayoumi, 1990, Oyserman, 2015); thus, extensive engagement with digitally mediated interaction could affect interpretations of these principles and lead to new norms of life.

Empirical research conducted in diverse cultural settings has certainly supported this perspective, which has regarded social media as a potent socializing agent. Akakandelwa and Walubita (2018) discovered that “Social media usage was affecting the way in which university students interact socially as they increasingly interact online at the expense of face-to-face interaction”. In a similar vein, Allahverdi (2022) found that greater use of social media was related to greater “emotional engagement with it” and felt dependence on it, suggesting that the habitual engagement mechanism could affect cognitive and affective orientations relevant to value systems.

2.2 Cultural and Social Values in Digital Environments

Almost all literature addresses the link between social media and cultural values, especially the rise of hybrid identities that merge local and global identities. Al-Ali (2023) reported that Syrian university students who were exposed to globalized online activities developed a double cultural orientation while maintaining a national identity and transnational cultures. Sawalhiya & Fares (2023) reported similar results, which show that social networking sites assist in the reorganisation of an academic youth culture by allowing them to continuously compare local and international values.

Social media have caused alarm in Arab societies about the impact on social cohesion and family relations. Al-Khuraif et al. (2019) documented the ways in which prolonged social media use among Saudi youth weakened family communication and interfered with intergenerational relations. Lotfi (2024), as well, noted that social media can help new types of emotional connection but also poses a threat to family life in Algeria. These results are consistent with Bouqlouf (2018) who concluded that social networking sites may generate moral and social tension among adolescents, especially when the traditional values of collectivism are combined with individualistic digital culture.

2.3 Moral and Religious Value Negotiation Online

The association between social media use and moral or religious values has been growing interest, particularly in conservative or religious societies. Al-Dahmashi (2023) found that for Saudi youth who used Snapchat, social media use and morality over morality as it related to entertainment-focused digital content and to traditional ethical principles. Safdar and Khan (2020) likewise reported that female university students in Pakistan perceived social media as a source of tension between religious responsibilities and modern lifestyles.

While some of these studies do not suggest a total moral decline, others focus on moral negotiation and cognitive dissonance. According to Vallor (2012), social media situations influence the nature of ethical reflection by manipulating friendship, visibility, and moral accountability. The Gulf researchers Pripoae-erbănescu and Mațoi (2023) propose that generation Z participates in social media via selection between digital engagement and culturally defined morality. Al Ketbi et al also exemplifies this interpretation. (2025), whose study of the UAE suggests that social media use can coexist with tolerance, ethics and community values in support of supportive social and educational environments.

2.4 Economic and Consumer Values in the Digital Sphere

Social media has ties as well to consumerist and material values rooted in advertising, influencer culture and visual self-presentation. Hafeez et al. (2020) reported that social media content promoted student learning and moral attainment, especially in terms of attaining more material success and greater living goals. Al-Qahtani (2023) observed similar trends among female students in Saudi Arabia, where platforms like TikTok reformed consumption norms and order of value.

Economic value changes do not necessarily reflect behavior changes, but Barqawi et al. (2023) reported that Emirati

adolescents and young adults use social media for health and educational purposes as well, suggesting that digital engagement is associated with multiple, or at least competing, values. These findings suggest that social media may provide visibility to consumerist pressures but without necessarily initiating consistent materialistic behavior.

2.5 Social Media, Youth, and Modernization in Arab and Gulf Societies

Inglehart's Modernization Theory also aids in interpreting these mixed results, suggesting that modernization induces incremental shifts away from the traditional toward secular-rational and self-expression ideals, particularly in the interests of economic security and cultural expression (Inglehart, 2020). In addition, empirical studies in Arab and Gulf countries show that digitalization due to modernization is often a selective or hybrid process, rather than a linear process. As Pahwa (2024) puts it in Dubai as 'ironic belonging': the ability of young people to fit into the global digital world while still being connected to local communities.

This hybridity is further emphasized by research in the UAE. Youssef et al. (2024) reported that social media use affected communication patterns but did not intrigue conventional social norms; and Alenezi and Brinthaup (2022) report that social media use among college students was a learning process and a location of value exchange. Collectively, these studies suggest that social media in Arab societies function as a place where modernization pressures are negotiated, rather than imposed.

2.6 Research Gap and Contribution

Despite the growing body of literature there are still some gaps. First, because many studies focus on a single value domain or platform, they cannot fully explore the interactions of social, cultural, religious and economic values. Second, behavioral outcomes or media dependence have dominated the empirical work in the UAE and have been under-researched as an empirical predictor of moral negotiation by focusing less on students' perceptions of value. Finally, few studies explicitly use modernization theory to explain differentiation across value domains.

The present study contributes to the literature by providing a theoretically grounded, multidimensional view of the perceptions of students' values as they are shared and valued in a rapidly modernizing Gulf society, by exploring the notions of value negotiation through social media on four dimensions of the Emirati.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

A descriptive quantitative survey design was used in the study to investigate the influence of social media on the four value dimensions, social, cultural, religious, and economic, among students at Al Ain University. The descriptive approach was appropriate for the study because it studies recent phenomena as they manifest in the real world allowing for a statistical analysis of patterns and differences among demographic groups (Alenezi et al., 2022). A descriptive design also parallels past sociological studies that have investigated the relationship between behavior in a digital space and transformations in value.

3.2 Study Population and Sample

All students in the College of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences at Al Ain University during the 2023-2024 academic year (N = 875) made up the study population. All students were sampled using a simple random sampling method of 105 students, or about 12% of the population, giving every student an equal chance to be in the study and supporting the generalization of the study outcomes (Bouqlouf, 2018). The sample had a near gender balance with a total of 56 females (53% of the sample) and 49 males (47% of the sample), supporting the trustworthiness of the gender-based comparisons for the later analyses (See Table 1 for exact distribution).

Table 1. Distribution of the Study Sample by Gender

Gender	Total Number	Sample	Percentage (%)
Female	467	56	53
Male	408	49	47
Total	875	105	100

3.3 Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Demographic data were gathered to determine if participants' age, academic status, and social media engagement acted as moderators in the relationship between social media and value systems. The demographics of the sample is displayed in Table 2. The majority of participants (52.4%) were under age 25, and 40% indicated using social media for more than four hours per day. The high usage supports the representativeness of the student audience in analyzing social media's effect on value orientations.

Table 2. Distribution of the Study Sample by Demographic Variables

Variable	Category	Frequency	Mean
Age	<25 years	55	4.15
	25–30 years	34	4.13
	>30 years	16	4.12
Hours Spent on social media	<1 hour	4	4.04
	2–3 hours	33	3.77
	3–4 hours	26	3.77
	>4 hours	42	3.30
Academic Level	First and Second Years	49	2.72
	Third and Fourth Years	56	2.00
Variable	Category	Frequency	2.01

3.4 Research Instrument

A structured questionnaire was created following a review of past research (e.g., Al-Hunayti & Hamza, 2025; Al-Qahtani, 2023; Sawalhiya and Fares, 2023). There were also 40 items across the four subscales: social values (10 items), cultural values (10 items), religious values (10 items), and economic values (10 items). For responses, a five-point Likert scale was established from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The means of the scores were then interpreted as low for means from 1.00 to 1.99, moderate for 2.00 to 2.99, and high for 3.00 to 5.00. The goals of instrument were to assess how social media exposure is influencing to either continue to adopt or to reject certain important social and moral values.

3.5 Validity of the Instrument

Validity was evaluated for content by selected faculty members in the fields of sociology, psychology, and education. The experts reviewed survey items with reference to their relevance in relation to the culture, clarity of conveyance of language, and dimension-objective relevance. Feedback and suggestions from the experts were used as a revision process to reach consensus, establishing and confirming sufficient content validity with an 80% reviewer agreement.

The reliability of the instrument was assessed both by test–retest and by calculating Cronbach's alpha. A test–retest correlation conducted one week after the initial assessment yielded a coefficient of $r = 0.91$, indicating good stability. In addition, Cronbach's alpha calculated for all subscales was strong, ranging from 0.77 to 0.89. The overall instrument yielded an alpha of 0.89. The details of the reliability analysis results are presented in Table 3, confirming that the instrument is appropriate to use in Emirati culture for quantitative analysis.

Table 3. Reliability of the Questionnaire

Variable	Number of Items	Test–Retest (r)	Cronbach's Alpha (%)	Significance Level
Social Values	10	.861**	86.8	.000
Cultural Values	10	.824**	77.9	.000
Religious Values	10	.850**	77.6	.000
Economic Values	10	.804**	82.1	.000
Total Values Scale	40	.882	88.9	.000

The questionnaire items were developed to tap into observable indicators of values conflict, negotiation and adaptation in daily life, rather than measuring abstract values constructs. The results should thus be conceptualized as indicators of tension and reinterpretation of students' value systems. This conceptualization is consistent with a sociological view of values as structures of lived, contingent meaning, not fixed moral things.

3.6 Data Collection Procedures

After obtaining institutional approval, the final questionnaire was disseminated electronically and on paper. Out of 121 responses that were returned, 105 were complete and valid for analysis. Participants were advised of the purpose of the study, anonymity, and that participation was voluntary. The data collection was conducted in the semester one of the 2023–2024 academic year.

3.7 Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed through SPSS (Version 28.0). Descriptive statistics, such as means, standard deviations, and frequencies were used to summarize participant responses. Inferential analyses were conducted using independent-sample t-tests to investigate differences on the basis of gender and academic level, and one-way ANOVA was used for age and daily social media usage time. Tukey post hoc tests were conducted when ANOVA results were significant to conduct pairwise comparisons. All inferential analyses were conducted with a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$ and included statistical and interpretive results.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

The study “Social Media and Value Orientations: A Study of Cultural and Moral Associations among University Students in Al Ain, UAE” received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee. All procedures conformed to the Declaration of Helsinki (2013 revision), and the UAE national research ethics guidelines. Before participation, participants signed electronic informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and participants were also guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality and their responses would be used solely for academic research.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics of Value Dimensions

4.1.1 Social Values

This dimension of social values is presented in the present study as a composite of intergenerational relations, family cohesion, social conformity, and individual independence within the Emirati social structure. The average score for the social values dimension was 3.36, suggesting a moderate perceived link between social-media use and students’ social values. It is not an reflection of attitude of isolated students, but rather a perception of how students negotiate social expectations and personal self-definition in digitally mediated environments.

The item analysis pinpointed certain conflicts very clearly. The highest average scores were that of the intergenerational relationships like feeling family communication is lacking because of social media use and being confused as to whether one should satisfy the parents or follow his/her own way. Collectively, these items weigh on a larger dimension of intergenerational tension and negotiation of autonomy, which suggests students see social media as creating awareness about generational differences more than it does in terms of resolving family ties.

These findings are consistent with Al-Khuraif et al. (2019), who found that demonstrable negative impacts on family cohesion/communication and weakened intergenerational connections, as well as the introduction of new types of digital connectedness, resulted from the extensive use of social media among Saudi youth. Similar observations were reported by Lotfi (2024), whose examination of Algerian society identified both a simultaneous risk of relational distance for families, while also providing new possibilities for emotional connectedness and social support, elucidating a dual impact on family life in Arab society and families as influencers of social values.

In a related line of discussion, Safdar and Khan (2020) noted that female university students in Pakistan experience a similar moral and social conflict when digital interactivity constructs the boundaries of familial authority and personal autonomy. Higher mean values for items related to social media, as shown in Table 4, suggest that students believe social media creates inter-generational tension and erodes familial interaction. In contrast, modesty, decency, and respect for traditions had the lowest mean values, indicating that these characteristics have largely survived contact with the online world. Conversely, items that represented modesty, decency and respect for tradition, one of the core components of normative social order, were recorded at a lower mean, indicating relative stability of social norms despite digital exposure.

Akakandelwa and Walubita (2018) reported similar findings, indicating that university students are the target of social media, which encourages digital engagement and ultimately changes communication patterns with family and peers, resulting in less face-to-face time with family and peers, and more online engagement. Youssef et al. (2024) similarly noted that dependence on social media in the UAE reconstitutes face-to-face communication into hybrid face-to-face and virtual communication that violates conventional family intimacy boundaries.

Table 4. Means and Standard Deviations for Social Values

Rank	Item	Statement	Mean	SD	Level
1	10	I suffer from a lack of family communication because my family is busy with social media.	4.15	1.05	High
2	5	I often suffer from my parents’ way of thinking about my life.	4.13	1.06	High
3	6	I feel confused between pleasing my parents and living independently.	4.12	1.12	High
4	9	I respect my parents, yet I find them conservative and unreceptive to modern ideas.	4.04	1.04	High
5	7	I feel hesitant between isolating myself from society or engaging with it.	3.77	1.18	Moderate
5	8	I feel conflicted between my personal desires and what society expects.	3.77	1.22	Moderate
7	1	I take pride in our customs and traditions, yet I enjoy imitating Western youth.	3.30	1.23	Moderate
8	4	I feel tension because my family does not understand my ideas and behaviors.	2.72	1.55	Low
9	3	I hesitate between adhering to our customs and enjoying modern life.	2.00	1.56	Low
10	2	I believe that modesty and decency indicate a weak personality.	2.01	1.18	Low

4.1.2 Cultural Values

The cultural values dimension is defined as cultural identity, language, lifestyle and representations of modernity and

tradition. The highest mean was recorded for the dimension of cultural values at $M = 4.56$, indicating that there is a strong perceived relationship between social media experience and cultural views as shown in Table 5.

Students questioned the association between cultural pride and globalization. High mean scores showed pride in Arab-Islamic heritage, openness to ideas from other cultures, parental prohibitions on the Internet, and the symbolic value of foreign language use. Collectively these parameters function as cultural hybridization mechanisms for affirming local identity and cultural globalization.

This pattern demonstrates the students' understanding that social media is a cultural boundary through which international norms, language practices and behavioral models are met and selected (Table 5). The factor therefore is not cultural erosion, but reflects of a change in cultural identity through digitalization.

Table 5. Means and Standard Deviations for Cultural Values

Rank	Item	Statement	Mean	SD	Level
1	19	I am torn between pride in our Arab-Islamic heritage and embracing modern life.	4.33	0.94	High
2	17	I dislike restrictions my family imposes when I use the Internet.	4.08	1.14	High
3	16	I feel proud when I use foreign words because they signify modernity.	4.06	1.11	High
4	12	I believe bribery is an effective way to get things done despite being prohibited.	4.01	1.22	High
5	13	I hesitate between pride in Arabic and pride in English as the language of science.	3.96	1.06	Moderate
6	18	I believe youth deviance is justified as a reaction to social rejection.	3.96	1.22	Moderate
7	11	I am uncertain whether modern technologies spread knowledge or corrupt morals.	3.69	1.09	Moderate
8	15	I enjoy studying, but I feel it has lost value due to unemployment.	3.54	1.31	Moderate
9	20	I value modesty in appearance, yet fashion is necessary for individuality.	3.53	1.22	Moderate
10	14	I like to be patient and calm, but pressure makes me irritable.	3.29	1.18	Moderate

4.1.3 Religious Values

The religious values component is used to indicate moral commitment, belief in religious identity, and perceived restrictions while having a cognitive dissonance between religious norms and contemporary lifestyle. The mean score for the religious values dimension was 3.83, which represents an average overall perceived association between use of social media and religion based on Table 6.

Items with higher means highlighted conflicting values between religious obedience and individual freedom, and religious norms being seen as restrictive compared to global culture. Collectively, these indicators represent a religious negotiation pattern that provides space for moral reflection rather than the abandonment of religious values.

These results suggest that students are highly religious and are facing challenges due to secular instruction embedded within digitally-mediated global norms. The pattern is seen as focusing on perceived moral negotiation rather than religious decline.

Table 6. Means and Standard Deviations for Religious Values

Rank	Item	Statement	Mean	SD	Level
1	30	I am torn between obeying my parents, as Islam commands, and seeking independence.	4.08	1.06	High
2	24	I am proud of my moral and religious beliefs, though peers mock me for them.	4.06	1.03	High
3	27	I wish to be religious, but I often feel unwelcome because of it.	4.04	1.07	High
4	28	I find Islamic standards challenging compared to freedoms in other societies.	4.02	1.10	High
5	29	I struggle between adhering to religion or acting freely.	4.00	1.20	High
6	22	I sense a contradiction between religious standards taught at home and public life.	3.84	1.07	Moderate
7	23	I find it difficult to reconcile modern life with religious teachings.	3.80	0.97	Moderate
8	25	I wish to uphold religious teachings, but norms hinder me.	3.55	1.18	Moderate
9	26	I notice contradictions between what people learn in mosques and practice in society.	3.52	1.26	Moderate
10	21	I feel uncertain about following religion because it restricts enjoyment.	3.39	1.28	Moderate

4.1.4 Economic Values

The dimension of economic values is conceptualized as the driver of consumption, material aspiration, financial anxiety, and social comparison directly dependent upon exposure. The economic values dimension was a mean value of 3.59, a moderately perceived association between social media experience and economic attitudes, as demonstrated in Table 7.

Items with highest means represented desire, brand sensitivity, and peer comparison, suggesting that social media visibility is related to symbolic materialization. This is more a reflection of the perceived pressure on consumers and consumer awareness of material standards than real changes in economic behavior.

Lower scores on employment anxiety and gendered economic positions indicate that structural economic problems remain real and are not fully mediated by digital experiences.

Table 7. Means and Standard Deviations for Economic Values

Rank	Item	Statement	Mean	SD	Level
1	38	I like keeping up with friends in trendy food and clothing to feel valued.	4.21	0.91	High
2	40	I choose clothes based on brand name rather than quality.	4.12	1.03	High
3	31	I buy fashionable items even if I must borrow money.	4.10	1.51	High
4	37	Fashion motivates me to buy new items even when unnecessary.	4.06	1.06	High
5	34	Advertising motivates me to buy expensive products.	3.94	1.13	Moderate
6	32	I am uncertain whether to complete my studies or learn a trade.	3.70	1.84	Moderate
7	35	I hesitate between local and foreign brands.	3.67	1.11	Moderate
8	39	I support women working but oppose expanding their fields.	3.59	1.31	Moderate
9	36	I disapprove of women working but accept their financial contribution.	3.58	1.22	Moderate
10	33	I feel anxious about my future because of unemployment.	3.57	1.22	Moderate

4.1.5 Overall Impact of Social Media on Value Dimensions

While the overall perceived relationship between cultural values and social media use was analyzed by using the four value dimensions, the greatest relationship was found between religious, economic, and social values. Overall, the average in each of these four domains was 3.84, which is a moderate level of perceived influence as presented in Table 8.

Importantly, the four value dimensions are treated as an analytically distinct, but theoretically linked factor describing a different axis of value negotiation in a digitally mediated modernization context. The “Overall Average” is a synthesized measure derived from domain-level means rather than aggregation of items to represent a diversified distribution of value systems.

This factor-based interpretation furthers the validity of these results by presenting values as organized components of social meaning rather than single questions.

Table 8. Overall Impact of Social Media on Value Dimensions

Rank	Value Domain	Mean	SD	Level
1	Cultural	4.56	11.22	High
2	Religious	3.83	6.49	Moderate
3	Economic	3.59	7.04	Moderate
4	Social	3.36	4.88	Moderate
—	Overall Average	3.84	7.41	Moderate

4.2 Inferential Statistics

To further clarify the interpretation of the inferential findings, a correlation analysis was used to show the relationship between social media use intensity and the four dimensions of value. Table 9 illustrates the strength and direction of relationships between value factors by comparing the correlation coefficients.

4.2.1 Gender Differences

Independent-samples t-tests showed that there were significant differences in the perception of the associations between the use of social media and social and economic values based on the gender. ($p < 0.05$). Males indicated a higher increase in the social value perception change, while females demonstrated a higher correlation of economic value perception. These gender differences are supported by the correlation patterns in Table 9, suggesting a gender-specific sensitivity to value domains.

4.2.2 Academic Level

The study by education level revealed that first and second-year students indicated that they had noticed stronger links between religious and economic values in the digital content compared to senior students ($p < 0.05$). The trend is indicative of a fact that freshmen undergraduates feel that they are more influenced by the digital moral discourse than their senior ones. As indicated in Table 9, the relationship between social media use and value measures is more significant as academic development increases, suggesting that educational maturation influences the relationship.

4.2.3 Age Differences

A one-way ANOVA determined that there were no significant differences in the most value domains by age with the exception of economic values ($p = .001$). The post-hoc comparisons revealed that the older students (aged 30 and above) were more consistent and rational in their spending behaviors. Table 9 reveals further indication of a weak association between social media and economic values among older participants.

4.2.4 Daily Social Media Usage

Considerable differences in perceived associations across social, cultural, and economic domains were identified by

daily usage duration. Those students that declared using social media for over four hours per day showed significantly ($p < 0.05$) higher levels of perceived value association. On the other hand, students engaging with social media for less than one hour per day seemed to have more consistent value orientations. As shown in Table 9, the frequency of daily use is positively correlated with cultural and economic value and thus strengthens the exposure-association relationship.

Table 9. Correlation Matrix Between Social Media Usage Intensity and Value Dimensions

Variable	Social Values	Cultural Values	Religious Values	Economic Values
Daily Social Media Use	0.41*	0.53*	0.36*	0.48*

* Correlation is significant at $p < 0.05$

5. Discussion

The main focus of this research was to look at the connections that students believe to be between social media use and their social, cultural, religious, and economic value orientations among university students in Al Ain, UAE. According to the results, there was a moderate overall association ($M = 3.84$), which means that involvement in social media relates to the way youngsters think and reorganize values in digitally mediated contexts, but it does not necessarily imply that they are setting these values. This part of the paper discusses these results by referencing Inglehart's Modernization Theory and several other sociological theories, as well as taking into account the research design limitations and alternative hypotheses.

5.1 General Influence of Social Media on Values

The findings reveal that among the perceived effects of social-media usage, the strongest correlation is seen with cultural and economic values, while social and religious values being somewhat resistant. The distinguished model of changes is in fact very close to Inglehart's theory that the processes of modernization and globalization result in a change of orientation of societies from traditional to secular-rational ones, especially in those areas which are closely related to material and expressive culture.

Cultural values showed the highest average ($M = 4.56$), which is in line with Inglehart's prediction that cultural identity and lifestyle changes will be most influenced by global exposure. Al-Ali (2023) arriving at similar conclusions, also noted that Syrian university students consuming globalized media content developed hybrid cultural orientations where they balanced their national identity with transnational influences resulting from online interactions. Students confessed to being caught between a sense of pride in their Arab-Islamic heritage and a liking of cosmopolitan modernity this being a clear example of what modernization theorists refer to as "value hybridization." The works of Sawalhiya and Fares (2023) and Al-Dahmashi (2023) also lead to the same conclusion that the Arab youth are becoming more like dual citizens who can be loyal at the same time to local and global cultural systems. Instead of the traditional values being replaced by the social-media environments, it seems that these environments are making the existence of such tensions more apparent and that the individuals involved are more conscious of them.

On the other hand, social values were the lowest scoring category of values with the mean score of 3.36, which indicates the main focus of the family on the support and the collective responsibility. Such a firmness is in line with Inglehart's statement that trust among people and norms based on kinship which are less dependent to change because they are supported through everyday interaction. This result is also in line with the findings of Al Ketbi et al. (2025), who stressed the return of the moral authority of the family and the community in the Emirati society. Still, as Faidhi (2021) has recorded in the case of Iraq, excessive and unregulated social-media use can lead to the loss of trust and increase of moral relativism, thus implying that the preservation of social values is a matter of both digital literacy and cultural regulation.

Religious values were displayed to have a moderate association ($M = 3.83$). The students kept up their moral commitments, even though they reported a perceived conflict of religious guidance with the modern lifestyle. This result is in line with the study of Al-Dahmashi (2023) who found that the moral dissonance of the Saudi youth was similar and they experienced it on Snapchat where entertainment content and social validation most of the time conflicted with the traditional moral teachings. Tarhan et al. (2023) also revealed that an excessive digital engagement of adolescents might develop addictive patterns that make self-regulation and faith adherence difficult, thus, unveiling the psychological side of moral strain in online environments. Their partial resilience could originate from the institutionalized integration of faith in education and governance that acts as a buffer against secular influences. However, the existence of alternative worldviews on global platforms may increase the questioning of one's own religiosity, thus, resulting in cognitive rather than behavioral change. The internal negotiation here reflects the same patterns as those reported by Allahverdi (2022) who found that the higher the frequency of social media application use, the stronger the perceived dependency and emotional investment among university students, thus, suggesting that habitual engagement mechanisms may underlie such cognitive dissonance.

Materialistic values as reflected in the digital marketing expenditures ($M = 3.59$) depict a lifestyle orientation that is largely influenced by the marketing of digitally consumed goods and services. Nevertheless, the trend ought not to be understood as a direct shift of behaviors. It could be the case that students simply recognize the social pressures more since social media makes these kinds of aspirations always visible and therefore, they may not be adopting them in a straightforward way. Therefore, the pattern found may be a reflection of increased awareness of cultural change instead of actual shifts in the value hierarchy. Such a subtle interpretation is in line with the findings of Barqawi et al. (2023) who stated that Emirati teenagers consider social media a useful tool through which they can get reliable health and educational information, thus digital engagement is not necessarily aimed at materialistic ends but can serve developmental ones too. At this point, Hafeez et al. (2020) maintains that social media, though it creates more educational opportunities, changes the youth's moral priorities and thus the need for pedagogical interventions that develop critical awareness.

5.2 Influence of Demographic Variables

When comparing boys and girls, male students indicated that they perceived stronger effects of social media in the social sphere, while girls associated them more with the economic one. The result probably mirrors gender-specific ways of online engagement and individualized advertising, at least, rather than being due to the differences in the values of males and females. As the data is based on self-report, these perceptions might also reflect gender-specific recognition of the influence factor rather than actual differences in behavior.

In a similar manner first- and second-year students showed a higher degree of perceived value conflict than senior students which implies that developmental maturity and the accumulation of media literacy skills can help to moderate the perception of influence. Nevertheless, this argument should be taken with a grain of salt since cross-sectional data cannot determine whether decreased sensitivity over time is due to actual value stabilization or cohort differences.

Longer daily use was found to be positively associated with higher perceived association in most domains. While this could be taken as evidence for the exposure–effect hypothesis (Hameed et al., 2022), it can also be explained by the presence of a self-selection bias, i.e., individuals who are already more sensitive to digital culture may choose to spend more time online. The differences in age were small and only existed in economic values where older students were characterized by more financial prudence—again in line with modernization theory that puts emphasis on life-cycle effects when it comes to value adaptation.

5.3 Limitations and Theoretical Implications

The varying association patterns demonstrate the support for Inglehart's Modernization Theory as well as, at the same time, the indication of differences between regions. These strong cultural and economic relationships are part of global trends in the direction of expressive individualism and consumerism. And the persistence of social and religious values demonstrates that the Gulf societies are in the process of a hybrid type of modernization: that is, technological progress is coming along with cultural continuity.

Nevertheless, these other explanations are necessary too. It is possible that the cultural sensitivity to values is not the consequence of fundamental changes, but rather the visibility of them: social media shares trends, a way of speaking and a lifestyle; differences in culture can be more obvious than changes in religion or marriage. Similarly, the supposedly economic power could be the saturation effect of software marketing rather than the value's intrinsic reorientation. By recognizing these interpretative options, the study becomes more analytically transparent and it is less likely that the authors will make excessive generalizations.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

These results should be considered in light of several methodological limitations. The cross-sectional design of the study does not allow for causal inference, so the relationships between social media use and value orientations suggest correlation rather than change. The limited sample size ($N = 105$) of a single university also restricts the extension of the findings beyond the Al Ain area. In addition, the use of self-reported perceptions may be subject to social-desirability or recall bias, especially in the case of religious and moral aspects. Hence, the identified patterns should be considered as reflective perceptions of value tension, coming from the respondents, rather than direct evidence of value change.

Next studies using longitudinal or mixed-methods designs could establish whether these perceived correlations lead to behavioral or generational trends. Comparative studies across the Gulf countries would help to understand the impact of the national context on the relationship between digital modernization and traditional social structures.

5.5 Practical Implications

Summarizing the results first of all, one can say that social media is the environment in which people perceive moral and cultural negotiations taking place rather than a factor that causes moral redefinition. The students in the UAE are busy trying to balance their old traditions and globalized digital culture, which leads them to a situational pluralism of values. This shift

gives a clear example of the theory put forward by Inglehart that modernization causes adaptive reinterpretation as a new development rather than a process of secularization. When the authors' views are placed within the context of modernization theory, the study indicates how the young people from the Gulf region turn out to be a case of selective modernization – they are ready to continue with the global expressive practices, but at the same time, they uphold local ethical standards.

6. Conclusion

This research tasked itself to explore the impact of social-media use as perceived by students in Al Ain UAE on the four main value domains, social, cultural, religious, and economic. The study was conducted through a descriptive quantitative design and the results proved a moderate but multidimensional correlation between social-media activity and students perceived value orientations, with cultural values having the strongest bonds and social values the most stability.

The findings suggest that social media is an arena for moral and cultural discussion based on the notion of a “win-win” between two cultures; and these results lend support to Inglehart’s Modernization Theory that in fact, people under global modernization pressures drift away from the traditional thinking and embrace expressive and material values. Emirati students seem to be in a selective modernization stage, where they desire to maintain religious and community values but they also go about doing so in global and digital culture.

The findings also showed that the strength of perceived associations varied significantly by gender, academic level, and usage intensity. Male students were more likely to associate social values with the internet, while female students were more likely to see its influence on the economy, which is probably due to the different kinds of online socialization and consumers' trends the two genders experience. Freshers seemed to be more aware of digital culture than seniors, which could imply that maturity and critical literacy might be factors that influence the perception of moral negotiation over time.

More importantly, such patterns should be seen as correlations of perceived value tension rather than evidence of change. They show that the youth are highly aware and conscious of the moral ambiguities of digital life in a rapidly modernizing society.

On a wider scale, this study contributes to understanding of digital socialization across the region by showing that modernization of very connected societies does not destroy the old traditions but puts them into new communications spaces. It is an understanding that can fit the way that young people of various cultures express themselves online, so that they can re-evaluate their own morals, rather than reject them completely.

On the practical level, these results suggest that an ethically engaged digital experience in social and educational settings is necessary. Higher learning institutions should use digital ethics, cultural identity, and the practice of value-based reflection to develop curricula oriented beyond moral instruction that includes critical thinking and contextual awareness. Public and institutional awareness programs also need to respond to the benefits and pressures of social media use, emphasizing balance, digital self-regulation and culturally informed participation.

Families, educators and cultural institutions can be a good mentor on the community level by making a conversation about digital influence rather than simply relying on the authority of unfettered regulation. This engagement could help the exploration of digital spaces by young people, and also provide a sense of morality and social responsibility.

Lastly, future research could add these findings in longitudinal and mixed-method analyses and comparisons to better understand how the nature of the negotiation of perceived value differs over time and among Gulf states. It would be interesting to see further insertion of methods into qualitative research and digital ethnography to gain a better understanding of how youth develop meaning and identity within increasingly mediated hybrid cultural environments created by digital modernization.

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Authors contributions

Dr. Mastur Rehim conceptualized the study, designed the research framework, supervised the methodological procedures, and led the overall manuscript preparation. Dr. Ouassila Yaiche contributed to the literature review, theoretical grounding, and development of the research instrument. Dr. Nora Guenifa coordinated data collection, conducted statistical analyses, and contributed to the interpretation of results. Mariam Sultan AlShamsi, as a postgraduate student (researcher), assisted in data collection, preliminary data organization, and initial drafting of selected sections under academic supervision. All authors reviewed, revised, and approved the final version of the manuscript and take responsibility for its content.

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