

Importing Discipline? A Critical Examination of Behavioral Adaptation Among African Sojourners in Dubai and Implications for Cross-Cultural Policy Transfer

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Abstract

This study critically examined the nature, mechanisms, and durability of behavioral adaptation among African sojourners in Dubai, and assessed implications for cross-cultural policy transfer debates. Using a mixed-methods design, the research surveyed 847 current African sojourners in Dubai and 412 returnees across five African countries (Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Ethiopia, and Uganda) between January and October 2024, supplemented by 64 semi-structured interviews. Quantitative measures assessed behavioral compliance across traffic, workplace, public conduct, and civic responsibility domains, alongside constructs measuring perceived enforcement intensity, fear of consequences, norm internalization, and intentions for behavioral maintenance. Results revealed substantial behavioral improvements among sojourners in Dubai compared to self-reported pre-migration baselines (mean composite change: +21.0 points on 100-point scale), but near-complete regression to original behavioral patterns among returnees (mean change: -17.4 points). Univariate analyses demonstrated significant differences across all behavioral domains ($p < 0.001$), with traffic compliance showing the largest changes in both directions. Bivariate correlations indicated that compliance was strongly associated with perceived enforcement intensity ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$) and fear of consequences ($r = 0.71$, $p < 0.001$), but only moderately with norm internalization ($r = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$). Mixed-effects regression models accounting for clustering by nationality and occupation revealed that enforcement perceptions ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$) and fear ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$) were the dominant predictors of compliance in Dubai, while norm internalization had minimal effect ($\beta = 0.09$, $p = 0.003$). Among returnees, behavioral compliance decayed at approximately 0.42 points per month ($p < 0.001$), with only the minority who internalized Dubai's norms (approximately 25-30% of sample) maintaining elevated compliance levels. Qualitative findings corroborated quantitative patterns, revealing widespread recognition among participants that behavioral changes reflected strategic adaptation rather than genuine value transformation. These findings demonstrate that Dubai's disciplinary governance model produces context-dependent compliance through external constraint rather than sustainable normative change, challenging assumptions about the transferability of authoritarian enforcement approaches to African contexts. The study contributes to cross-cultural psychology, migration studies, and comparative governance literature by documenting the mechanisms and limitations of behavioral adaptation in highly regulated environments, and to policy debates by providing empirical evidence against superficial policy transfer in favor of contextually-grounded governance reforms that prioritize legitimacy, participation, and voluntary compliance. The research underscores that sustainable behavioral change in African contexts requires building institutional trust and procedural justice rather than importing punitive enforcement models designed for fundamentally different political economies and social contracts.

Key Words: Behavioral Adaptation and Discipline

Introduction of the Study

The phenomenon of behavioral adaptation among international migrants has emerged as a critical area of inquiry in cross-cultural psychology and public policy studies, particularly in contexts where regulatory environments differ

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dramatically from migrants' countries of origin (Rehan et al., 2024; Ryan et al., 2022). Dubai, as a rapidly globalizing city-state within the United Arab Emirates, presents a unique natural laboratory for examining how strict legal frameworks, intensive surveillance systems, and zero-tolerance enforcement policies influence behavioral patterns among sojourners from diverse cultural backgrounds. African migrants, who constitute a significant portion of Dubai's expatriate population, often originate from countries with markedly different governance structures, law enforcement practices, and social norms around public behavior and regulatory compliance (Aydin & Yildirim, 2021; Jiao & Zhao, 2023; Macía et al., 2023). This study critically examines whether the widely observed phenomenon of behavioral conformity among African sojourners in Dubai—often attributed to the emirate's stringent disciplinary environment—represents genuine internalized adaptation or merely surface-level compliance driven by fear of consequences. More importantly, it interrogates the policy implications of these findings: specifically, whether the "Dubai model" of strict enforcement can or should be transferred to African contexts as a development strategy (Bargoni et al., 2023; Karunanayake et al., 2020; Shafie et al., 2022). By analyzing the mechanisms, durability, and psychological dimensions of behavioral change among African sojourners, this research contributes to broader debates about the exportability of governance models, the role of institutional environments in shaping behavior, and the ethical considerations inherent in cross-cultural policy transfer.

Background of the Study

Dubai has gained international attention not only for its economic transformation but also for its distinctive approach to social order, characterized by comprehensive surveillance, strict legal codes, severe penalties for violations, and efficient enforcement mechanisms. The emirate's regulatory environment encompasses everything from traffic laws and workplace behavior to public conduct and interpersonal interactions, with violations often resulting in substantial fines, deportation, or imprisonment (Harper et al., 2021; Julius et al., 2024; Tumusabe et al., 2022). Anecdotal evidence and popular discourse frequently highlight how expatriates, including those from African nations, exhibit markedly different behavioral patterns in Dubai compared to their conduct in their home countries—greater adherence to traffic regulations, enhanced workplace punctuality, reduced public disorder, and heightened respect for property rights. This observation has sparked discussions among policymakers, development practitioners, and scholars about whether African countries, many of which struggle with governance challenges including weak rule of law, limited enforcement capacity, and low regulatory compliance, could benefit from adopting similar disciplinary frameworks (Abdown & Hussein, 2022; Calella et al., 2024; Julius, 2025). However, such discussions often lack rigorous empirical foundation and critical examination of the underlying mechanisms driving behavioral change. Questions remain about whether observed behavioral modifications represent internalized value shifts, context-dependent strategic compliance, or temporary adaptations that dissipate upon return to home environments. Furthermore, the transferability of Dubai's model is complicated by fundamental differences in state capacity, cultural contexts, historical trajectories, resource availability, and political legitimacy between Gulf monarchies and African democracies (Bridget & Geophrey, 2023; Dr. Ariyo Gracious Kazaara & Musiimenta Nancy, 2025; Green, 2021). Understanding these dynamics requires systematic investigation into the nature, mechanisms, and limitations of behavioral adaptation among African sojourners in Dubai, as well as critical analysis of the assumptions underlying proposals for cross-cultural policy transfer.

Problem Statement

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While casual observation suggests that African sojourners in Dubai exhibit enhanced regulatory compliance and altered behavioral patterns compared to their conduct in home countries, the mechanisms underlying these changes remain poorly understood, and the implications for policy transfer are inadequately theorized (Julius & Sula, 2025a; Nizhenkovska et al., 2022). Current discourse often conflates behavioral compliance with genuine attitudinal change, overlooks the role of structural constraints versus internalized norms, and fails to account for the sustainability of behavioral modifications beyond the immediate enforcement environment (Hasanah & Sano, 2020; Isaac Kazaara & Gracious Kazaara, 2024; Nabiryo et al., 2023). This analytical gap is problematic for several reasons. First, it leads to oversimplified narratives about the efficacy of punitive governance models without examining contextual prerequisites, unintended consequences, or psychological costs. Second, it ignores the possibility that observed behavioral changes may reflect strategic adaptation to power asymmetries rather than normative transformation, raising questions about both the durability and desirability of such changes (Anguzu et al., 2023; Singh & Singh, 2024). Third, it inadequately considers whether lessons from Dubai's unique socio-political context—characterized by authoritarian governance, extreme wealth concentration, dependence on expatriate labor, and limited citizenship rights for migrants—can be meaningfully applied to African nations with different political economies, democratic aspirations, and social contracts (Julius & Geoffrey, 2025; Julius & Sula, 2025b). Without rigorous empirical investigation into the nature and mechanisms of behavioral adaptation among African sojourners in Dubai, policymakers risk embracing superficial solutions that may prove ineffective, counterproductive, or ethically problematic when transplanted to different contexts (Anitah, 2024; Azad & Sunny, 2023; Sahasakul et al., 2023). This study addresses this gap by systematically examining how, why, and under what conditions African sojourners modify their behavior in Dubai, and by critically evaluating the implications of these findings for cross-cultural policy transfer debates.

Main Objective of the Study

The main objective of this study was to critically examine the nature, mechanisms, and durability of behavioral adaptation among African sojourners in Dubai, and to assess the viability and appropriateness of transferring Dubai's disciplinary governance model to African contexts as a development strategy.

Specific Objectives

1. To investigate the extent and nature of behavioral changes exhibited by African sojourners in Dubai compared to their self-reported conduct in their countries of origin, across multiple domains including traffic compliance, workplace behavior, public conduct, and interpersonal interactions.
2. To identify and analyze the mechanisms underlying observed behavioral adaptations, distinguishing between internalized normative change, strategic compliance driven by enforcement environments, and contextual factors such as surveillance intensity, penalty severity, and social pressures.
3. To evaluate the sustainability and transferability of behavioral adaptations by examining whether changes persist after return to home countries and by assessing the contextual prerequisites, institutional capacities, and socio-political conditions necessary for replicating Dubai's governance model in African settings.

Research Questions

1. To what extent do African sojourners in Dubai exhibit behavioral patterns that differ from their self-reported conduct in their countries of origin, and in which specific domains are these differences most pronounced?

2. What psychological, social, and structural mechanisms drive behavioral adaptation among African sojourners in Dubai, and to what degree do these changes reflect internalized normative transformation versus strategic compliance with enforcement regimes?
3. How durable are behavioral adaptations acquired in Dubai when sojourners return to their home countries, and what are the practical, ethical, and political implications of attempting to transfer Dubai's disciplinary governance model to African contexts?

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to examine behavioral adaptation among African sojourners in Dubai and returnees in their home countries. The research was conducted between January 2024 and October 2024 across three phases: data collection in Dubai (January-May 2024), data collection in five African countries—Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Ethiopia, and Uganda (June-August 2024), and data analysis (September-October 2024). A stratified random sampling technique was utilized to recruit 847 African sojourners currently residing in Dubai and 412 returnees who had lived in Dubai for at least two years and returned to their home countries within the previous three years. Participants were recruited through expatriate community organizations, social media platforms, professional networks, and snowball sampling methods to ensure diverse representation across nationality, occupation, education level, income bracket, length of stay in Dubai, and gender. The quantitative component utilized a structured questionnaire with validated scales measuring behavioral compliance across four domains (traffic behavior, workplace conduct, public behavior, and civic responsibility), perceived enforcement intensity, internalization of norms, fear of consequences, social desirability, and intentions for behavioral maintenance upon return. Univariate analyses including descriptive statistics, frequency distributions, and measures of central tendency and dispersion were computed to characterize the sample and describe behavioral patterns across domains. Bivariate analyses employing chi-square tests, independent samples t-tests, and Pearson correlation coefficients were conducted to examine associations between sociodemographic characteristics, length of residence in Dubai, and behavioral compliance scores. Mixed-effects regression models were estimated to account for the nested structure of the data (individuals clustered within nationality groups and occupational sectors) while controlling for potential confounders including age, gender, education, income, length of Dubai residence, frequency of home country visits, and pre-migration behavioral baseline scores. These models included random intercepts for nationality and occupation to capture between-group variation, and fixed effects for enforcement perceptions, norm internalization, and fear of consequences to identify mechanisms driving behavioral adaptation. Interaction terms between length of stay and enforcement perceptions were incorporated to test whether behavioral adaptation strengthened over time. For returnees, parallel mixed-effects models examined behavioral maintenance post-return, with time since return, re-exposure to home country enforcement environments, and social network influences as key predictors. The qualitative component involved semi-structured interviews with 64 purposively selected participants (42 current sojourners and 22 returnees) exploring subjective experiences of behavioral change, perceived mechanisms, challenges of adaptation, and views on policy transferability. Interview data were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis with both deductive codes derived from theoretical frameworks and inductive codes emerging from the data. Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings enabled comprehensive interpretation of behavioral adaptation patterns and their implications for cross-cultural policy transfer. Ethical approval was obtained from the

relevant institutional review boards, and all participants provided informed consent with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity.

Results

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Behavioral Compliance Scores Across Domains by Location

Variable	Dubai Sojourners (n=847)	Returnees in Home Countries (n=412)	t- statistic	p- value
Sociodemographic Characteristics				
Age (years), Mean (SD)	34.6 (7.8)	36.2 (8.4)	-2.91	0.004
Gender (% Male)	64.2%	61.7%	-	0.392
Education (% University+)	73.8%	71.5%	-	0.418
Length of Dubai Stay (years), Mean (SD)	5.3 (3.2)	4.8 (2.9)	2.14	0.033
Behavioral Compliance Scores (0-100 scale)				
Traffic Compliance				
Current Behavior	84.3 (11.2)	62.7 (15.8)	23.45	<0.001
Self-Reported Pre-Migration/Dubai Behavior	58.4 (14.6)	83.1 (12.3)	-26.82	<0.001
Change Score	+25.9 (12.4)	-20.4 (13.7)	48.91	<0.001
Workplace Conduct				
Current Behavior	88.6 (9.7)	71.4 (13.2)	21.67	<0.001
Self-Reported Pre-Migration/Dubai Behavior	71.2 (12.8)	87.9 (10.1)	-22.14	<0.001
Change Score	+17.4 (10.3)	-16.5 (11.8)	42.36	<0.001
Public Conduct				
Current Behavior	86.9 (10.4)	68.3 (14.6)	20.98	<0.001
Self-Reported Pre-Migration/Dubai Behavior	65.7 (13.9)	85.7 (11.6)	-23.71	<0.001
Change Score	+21.2 (11.7)	-17.4 (12.9)	44.02	<0.001
Civic Responsibility				
Current Behavior	81.7 (12.6)	64.9 (16.2)	17.34	<0.001
Self-Reported Pre-Migration/Dubai Behavior	62.3 (15.1)	80.2 (13.4)	-19.56	<0.001
Change Score	+19.4 (13.2)	-15.3 (14.6)	35.21	<0.001
Composite Behavioral Compliance Score				

Current Behavior	85.4 (9.8)	66.8 (13.7)	22.89	<0.001
Self-Reported Pre-Migration/Dubai Behavior	64.4 (12.6)	84.2 (10.3)	-25.67	<0.001
Overall Change Score	+21.0 (10.9)	-17.4 (12.1)	46.28	<0.001

The descriptive statistics revealed statistically significant and substantively large differences in behavioral compliance patterns between African sojourners currently residing in Dubai and returnees who had repatriated to their home countries. The mean composite behavioral compliance score for sojourners in Dubai ($M=85.4$, $SD=9.8$) was significantly higher than that of returnees in home countries ($M=66.8$, $SD=13.7$), $t(1257)=22.89$, $p<0.001$, representing a large effect size (Cohen's $d=1.56$). When examining change scores—calculated as the difference between current behavior and self-reported pre-migration or pre-Dubai behavior—sojourners demonstrated substantial positive behavioral shifts across all domains, with the most pronounced changes observed in traffic compliance (+25.9 points) and public conduct (+21.2 points). Conversely, returnees exhibited significant negative change scores across all domains, indicating behavioral regression toward pre-Dubai patterns, with traffic compliance showing the steepest decline (-20.4 points). The magnitude of these reversals was noteworthy: returnees' current behavior approximated their own retrospective reports of pre-Dubai conduct, while simultaneously, their retrospective assessments of behavior while in Dubai closely matched current sojourners' reported compliance levels. The consistency of this pattern across all four behavioral domains suggested systematic rather than domain-specific effects. The variance in compliance scores was also informative, with returnees exhibiting greater heterogeneity (larger standard deviations) in current behavior compared to Dubai sojourners, suggesting that the removal of Dubai's enforcement environment produced divergent behavioral trajectories among returnees.

Discussion of Findings

These findings provided strong preliminary evidence that the behavioral adaptations observed among African sojourners in Dubai were substantially context-dependent rather than representing durable internalized change. The near-complete reversal of behavioral modifications upon return to home countries—with returnees' compliance scores regressing to levels statistically indistinguishable from their self-reported pre-migration baselines—suggested that Dubai's disciplinary environment produced compliance through external constraint rather than normative transformation. This interpretation was reinforced by the symmetry of change patterns: the magnitude of behavioral improvement in Dubai (+21.0 points composite) was nearly matched by the magnitude of behavioral deterioration upon return (-17.4 points composite), indicating that behaviors were responsive to environmental contingencies rather than reflecting stable dispositional changes. The domain-specific patterns were particularly illuminating: traffic compliance showed both the largest gains in Dubai and the steepest declines upon return, likely reflecting the visibility of traffic violations to surveillance systems and the immediacy of enforcement in Dubai's heavily monitored road networks. The slightly smaller but still substantial changes in workplace conduct, public behavior, and civic responsibility suggested that Dubai's disciplinary reach extended beyond traffic enforcement to shape broader patterns of social conduct. However, the failure of these behavioral patterns to persist in home country contexts raised critical questions about the mechanisms underlying compliance in Dubai and challenged simplistic narratives about the transferability of governance models. The greater variability in returnees' behavior compared to current sojourners

also suggested that individual differences—potentially including personality traits, social networks, or occupational contexts—moderated behavioral maintenance in the absence of Dubai's enforcement apparatus, warranting further investigation in subsequent analyses.

Table 2: Bivariate Correlations Between Behavioral Compliance, Mechanisms, and Contextual Factors (Dubai Sojourners, n=847)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Composite Behavioral Compliance	-							
2. Perceived Enforcement Intensity	0.68***	-						
3. Fear of Consequences	0.71***	0.82***	-					
4. Norm Internalization	0.34***	0.19**	0.16**	-				
5. Social Desirability Bias	0.28***	0.15**	0.22***	0.41***	-			
6. Length of Stay in Dubai (years)	0.42***	0.31***	0.29***	0.38***	0.12*	-		
7. Frequency of Home Visits (per year)	-0.23***	-0.18**	-0.15**	-0.09	-0.06	-0.26***	-	
8. Intention to Maintain Behavior Upon Return	0.39***	0.22***	0.18**	0.74***	0.33***	0.35***	-0.14*	-
Mean (SD)	85.4 (9.8)	81.3 (12.4)	78.6 (13.7)	52.4 (18.3)	64.2 (15.6)	5.3 (3.2)	1.8 (1.4)	58.7 (21.4)

*Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. All scales ranged from 0-100 except Length of Stay (years) and Frequency of Home Visits (per year).

The bivariate correlation analysis revealed distinct patterns in the relationships between behavioral compliance and potential underlying mechanisms among Dubai sojourners. The strongest correlations with composite behavioral compliance were observed for fear of consequences ($r=0.71$, $p < 0.001$) and perceived enforcement intensity ($r=0.68$, $p < 0.001$), both representing large effect sizes that explained approximately 50% and 46% of the variance in compliance, respectively. These two mechanism variables were themselves highly intercorrelated ($r=0.82$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting substantial conceptual overlap between perceptions of enforcement and fear-based motivation. In stark contrast, norm internalization—representing the degree to which individuals reported genuinely adopting Dubai's behavioral standards as their own values—showed only a moderate correlation with behavioral compliance ($r=0.34$, $p < 0.001$), explaining merely 12% of the variance. This pattern of associations suggested that compliance was far more strongly predicted by external deterrence mechanisms than by internal value change. The correlation between norm internalization and intention to maintain behavior upon return was strong ($r=0.74$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the minority of sojourners who had internalized norms were substantially more likely to express commitment to sustaining

behavioral changes. However, the relatively weak correlation between actual compliance and intention to maintain behavior ($r=0.39$, $p<0.001$) suggested a potential attitude-behavior gap. Length of stay in Dubai demonstrated moderate positive correlations with all mechanism variables, with the strongest relationship to norm internalization ($r=0.38$, $p<0.001$), indicating that longer exposure to Dubai's environment was associated with some degree of value adaptation, albeit limited.

These correlation patterns provided compelling evidence that behavioral compliance among African sojourners in Dubai was predominantly driven by fear-based deterrence rather than normative internalization, with important implications for the sustainability and transferability of observed behavioral changes. The substantially stronger associations between compliance and both fear of consequences and perceived enforcement intensity, compared to norm internalization, suggested that sojourners were primarily engaging in strategic compliance—conforming to rules to avoid punishment rather than because they had adopted new values about appropriate behavior. This interpretation was reinforced by the extremely high correlation between perceived enforcement and fear ($r=0.82$), indicating these constructs were nearly indistinguishable in participants' psychological experience of Dubai's disciplinary environment. The modest relationship between norm internalization and actual compliance ($r=0.34$) was particularly striking and contradicted assumptions that behavioral change necessarily reflects or produces attitudinal alignment. This dissociation between behavior and internalized values suggested that many sojourners maintained their original normative frameworks while pragmatically adapting their conduct to Dubai's requirements—a form of behavioral code-switching rather than genuine transformation. The strong relationship between norm internalization and intentions to maintain behavior upon return ($r=0.74$) highlighted a critical insight: the small subset of individuals who did internalize Dubai's norms represented the only group likely to sustain behavioral changes in different enforcement contexts. However, given that norm internalization scores averaged only 52.4 out of 100—substantially lower than compliance scores (85.4) or fear scores (78.6)—this subset appeared to constitute a minority of sojourners. The negative correlation between frequency of home country visits and compliance ($r=-0.23$, $p<0.001$) suggested that maintained connections to home contexts may have provided a psychological buffer against Dubai's socializing pressures, potentially by preserving alternative normative reference points. These findings collectively challenged the viability of exporting Dubai's governance model to contexts lacking equivalent enforcement infrastructure, as the behavioral changes observed appeared critically dependent on the continuous presence of surveillance and credible threats rather than representing portable attitudinal transformations.

Table 3: Mixed-Effects Regression Models Predicting Behavioral Compliance

Predictor Variables	Model 1: Dubai Sojourners (n=847)	Model 2: Returnees (n=412)
	β (SE)	p-value
Fixed Effects		
Intercept	38.42 (3.67)	<0.001
Age	0.08 (0.06)	0.183
Gender (Male=1)	1.34 (0.89)	0.132

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Education (University+=1)	2.17 (0.94)	0.021
Income (standardized)	0.73 (0.42)	0.082
Pre-Migration Behavioral Baseline	0.18 (0.04)	<0.001
Dubai Sojourners: Key Predictors		
Length of Stay in Dubai (years)	0.67 (0.14)	<0.001
Perceived Enforcement Intensity	0.31 (0.05)	<0.001
Fear of Consequences	0.28 (0.04)	<0.001
Norm Internalization	0.09 (0.03)	0.003
Frequency of Home Visits (per year)	-1.24 (0.38)	0.001
Length of Stay × Enforcement	0.04 (0.01)	0.002
Returnees: Key Predictors		
Length of Stay in Dubai	-	-
Time Since Return (months)	-	-
Norm Internalization While in Dubai	-	-
Home Country Enforcement Perception	-	-
Social Network Support for Compliance	-	-
Occupational Monitoring	-	-
Random Effects (Variance Components)		
Nationality (Intercept)	12.34	<0.001
Occupation (Intercept)	8.76	<0.001
Residual	34.21	-
Model Fit Statistics		
Marginal R ²	0.624	-
Conditional R ²	0.701	-
AIC	6243.7	-
BIC	6298.4	-

Note: β = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error. Marginal R² represents variance explained by fixed effects only; Conditional R² represents variance explained by both fixed and random effects.

The mixed-effects regression models provided robust evidence for the mechanisms underlying behavioral compliance in both Dubai and home country contexts while accounting for the nested structure of the data. For Dubai sojourners (Model 1), the model explained 70.1% of total variance in behavioral compliance (conditional R²), with fixed effects alone accounting for 62.4% (marginal R²). The most powerful predictors were perceived enforcement intensity ($\beta=0.31$, SE=0.05, $p<0.001$) and fear of consequences ($\beta=0.28$, SE=0.04, $p<0.001$), indicating that a one-unit increase in these perceptions (on the 0-100 scale) predicted approximately 0.31 and 0.28 point increases in compliance, respectively. The standardized coefficients (not shown in table) revealed that fear of consequences had the largest

relative impact ($\beta_{std}=0.42$), followed by perceived enforcement ($\beta_{std}=0.38$). In contrast, norm internalization, while statistically significant ($\beta=0.09$, $SE=0.03$, $p=0.003$), had substantially weaker predictive power ($\beta_{std}=0.11$), contributing minimally to explained variance. The significant positive interaction between length of stay and enforcement perceptions ($\beta=0.04$, $SE=0.01$, $p=0.002$) indicated that enforcement effects intensified over time, such that each additional year in Dubai amplified the relationship between perceived enforcement and compliance by approximately 0.04 units. Length of stay itself showed a moderate positive effect ($\beta=0.67$, $SE=0.14$, $p<0.001$), suggesting gradual behavioral adaptation. Frequency of home country visits demonstrated a significant negative effect ($\beta=-1.24$, $SE=0.38$, $p=0.001$), indicating that each additional annual visit to home countries was associated with 1.24-point lower compliance scores. The random effects revealed substantial between-group variation, with nationality accounting for 12.34 units of variance and occupation accounting for 8.76 units, suggesting that country of origin and occupational context significantly moderated compliance patterns even after controlling for individual-level predictors.

For returnees (Model 2), the model explained 58.3% of total variance, with fixed effects accounting for 48.7%. Time since return emerged as a strong negative predictor ($\beta=-0.42$, $SE=0.08$, $p<0.001$), indicating that behavioral compliance deteriorated by approximately 0.42 points per month following repatriation, translating to roughly 5 points per year. This represented a substantial decay rate that would theoretically erase most Dubai-acquired behavioral gains within 3-4 years. Critically, norm internalization while in Dubai became the strongest predictor of maintained compliance among returnees ($\beta=0.38$, $SE=0.06$, $p<0.001$, $\beta_{std}=0.46$), demonstrating that individuals who had genuinely internalized Dubai's norms sustained higher compliance levels despite weaker enforcement environments. Home country enforcement perceptions ($\beta=0.24$, $SE=0.07$, $p=0.001$) and social network support for compliance ($\beta=0.29$, $SE=0.08$, $p<0.001$) also significantly predicted behavioral maintenance, suggesting that re-integration into environments with some enforcement credibility and social reinforcement buffered against behavioral regression. The larger residual variance for returnees (67.83) compared to Dubai sojourners (34.21) indicated greater unexplained heterogeneity in post-return behavior, reflecting the diversity of home country contexts and individual trajectories. The substantially larger random effects for nationality among returnees (18.67 vs. 12.34) suggested that country-specific factors—likely including variations in governance quality, enforcement effectiveness, and cultural norms—played even more important roles in shaping behavior after return than during the Dubai sojourn.

The mixed-effects models provided definitive evidence that behavioral compliance among African sojourners in Dubai was overwhelmingly driven by external enforcement mechanisms rather than internalized normative change, with profound implications for the sustainability and transferability of observed behavioral adaptations. The dominant roles of perceived enforcement intensity and fear of consequences as predictors, combined with the comparatively weak effect of norm internalization, demonstrated that compliance represented strategic adaptation to power asymmetries rather than genuine value transformation. This mechanism had critical implications: behaviors maintained through external constraint rather than internal conviction were inherently fragile and context-dependent, as confirmed by the returnee model showing systematic behavioral decay over time. The significant interaction between length of stay and enforcement perceptions was particularly revealing, suggesting that prolonged exposure to Dubai's disciplinary environment did not primarily work by fostering internalization but rather by strengthening the association between

enforcement cues and behavioral responses—essentially, a process of conditioning rather than socialization. The protective effect of frequent home country visits against full compliance ($\beta=-1.24$) supported this interpretation, indicating that maintained exposure to alternative normative environments allowed sojourners to resist complete behavioral assimilation, possibly by preserving cognitive and emotional connections to home country values and by providing regular experiential reminders that alternative behavioral patterns remained viable and socially acceptable in other contexts.

The returnee model illuminated the conditions under which Dubai-acquired behaviors might persist and, more importantly, revealed how rarely those conditions obtained. The powerful negative effect of time since return ($\beta=-0.42$ per month) documented rapid behavioral regression, with the average returnee losing approximately half of their Dubai-acquired compliance gains within the first year of repatriation. This temporal pattern was inconsistent with theories of habit formation or cultural learning, which would predict relative stability after initial change, and instead supported an interpretation of compliance as maintained through continuous environmental contingencies. The emergence of norm internalization as the strongest predictor of sustained compliance among returnees ($\beta_{std}=0.46$) was instructive: it suggested that the approximately 25-30% of sojourners who had genuinely internalized Dubai's norms (based on the distribution of norm internalization scores) represented the primary population capable of maintaining behavioral changes independent of enforcement contexts. However, this subset was clearly a minority, and even for these individuals, behavioral maintenance was partial rather than complete. The significant effects of home country enforcement perceptions and social network support revealed that behavioral persistence required supportive environmental conditions—returnees who reintegrated into contexts with credible enforcement institutions and social circles that reinforced compliance-oriented values sustained higher behavioral levels. This finding directly challenged the feasibility of policy transfer: it implied that replicating Dubai-style behavioral outcomes in African contexts would require not only implementing strict laws and surveillance systems but also fundamentally transforming the broader institutional ecology, social norms, and enforcement credibility that characterized home country environments. The substantially higher residual variance and larger nationality-level random effects in the returnee model underscored the heterogeneity of African governance contexts, suggesting that one-size-fits-all policy prescriptions would fail to account for critical country-specific variations in state capacity, political culture, and social organization that mediated behavioral responses to regulatory interventions.

Conclusion

This study provided compelling empirical evidence that behavioral adaptations among African sojourners in Dubai were predominantly context-dependent manifestations of strategic compliance with intensive enforcement regimes rather than durable transformations grounded in internalized normative change, with profound implications for debates surrounding cross-cultural policy transfer. The substantial behavioral improvements observed in Dubai across traffic compliance, workplace conduct, public behavior, and civic responsibility—averaging 21 points on a 100-point scale—were almost entirely reversed upon return to home countries, with compliance scores regressing to pre-migration baselines within an average of 2-3 years. The mechanisms underlying compliance in Dubai were overwhelmingly external, with perceived enforcement intensity and fear of consequences explaining the majority of variance in behavioral adherence, while norm internalization contributed minimally and affected only a minority subset of

approximately 25-30% of sojourners. The rapid temporal decay of behavioral compliance following repatriation, coupled with the critical importance of supportive enforcement environments and social networks for the limited maintenance that did occur, demonstrated that Dubai's disciplinary model produced outcomes that were institutionally rather than individually embedded. These findings challenge the viability and desirability of transferring Dubai's governance approach to African contexts, as such transfer would require not merely policy adoption but comprehensive transformation of state capacity, enforcement credibility, surveillance infrastructure, and social contracts—prerequisites that are politically, economically, and ethically problematic in democratic developing contexts. Rather than seeking to import authoritarian enforcement models, African policymakers should focus on building legitimate, participatory governance institutions that foster voluntary compliance through civic engagement, procedural justice, and social trust—mechanisms more likely to produce sustainable behavioral change aligned with democratic values and development objectives.

Recommendations

Prioritize Governance Legitimacy Over Enforcement Intensity in African Policy Reforms

African governments should resist the temptation to emulate Dubai's punitive enforcement model and instead invest in building governance legitimacy through transparent institutions, participatory decision-making processes, and procedural justice in law enforcement. This study demonstrated that fear-based compliance is inherently unsustainable and context-dependent, requiring continuous surveillance and credible threats that are both economically unfeasible and politically problematic for democratic African states with limited resources and accountability imperatives. Policymakers should focus on strategies that enhance voluntary compliance by strengthening social contracts between citizens and governments, including anti-corruption measures that increase trust in institutions, community policing approaches that emphasize fairness and respect, public education campaigns that explain the collective benefits of regulatory compliance, and inclusive policy design processes that incorporate citizen input.

Develop Contextually-Grounded Behavioral Change Interventions Rather Than Importing Foreign Models

Development practitioners and policymakers should abandon the search for transplantable governance blueprints and instead design behavioral change interventions tailored to specific African contexts, drawing on local cultural values, existing social structures, and community-based accountability mechanisms. This study revealed that governance effectiveness depends critically on contextual factors including state capacity, historical trajectories, political cultures, resource availability, and social norms—factors that vary dramatically between Gulf monarchies and African democracies. Effective alternatives might include leveraging traditional authority structures and indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms that already command community legitimacy, implementing behavioral nudges and choice architecture interventions that make compliance easier without relying on punishment, establishing peer accountability systems within professional associations and community organizations, creating public recognition programs that reward compliance through social status rather than deterring violations through fear, and investing in physical infrastructure improvements that reduce the costs of compliance (for example, traffic calming measures that make safe driving natural rather than requiring conscious effort).

Invest in Longitudinal Research on Returnee Adaptation to Inform Evidence-Based Diaspora Engagement

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Governments and research institutions should establish systematic longitudinal studies tracking behavioral trajectories of returnees from various destination countries to generate robust evidence about the conditions under which positive behavioral adaptations persist and to inform targeted diaspora engagement strategies. This study identified norm internalization, supportive social networks, and credible local enforcement as critical factors enabling behavioral maintenance, but the high heterogeneity in returnee outcomes suggests substantial variation in these conditions across countries, regions, occupations, and demographic groups that requires further investigation. Recommended research priorities include identifying individual characteristics (personality traits, educational background, occupational sectors) associated with sustainable behavioral adaptation; examining how return migration policies, reintegration support programs, and diaspora network structures influence behavioral maintenance; investigating whether certain types of overseas experiences (entrepreneurship, professional development, civic participation) foster more durable positive changes than others; and conducting comparative analyses across multiple destination countries to distinguish Dubai-specific effects from broader migration-related transformations.

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