

Traditional, Episodic, and Digital Volunteering: New Perspectives on Social Participation

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Abstract

Volunteering represents a crucial form of social participation. In addition to traditional modalities, more flexible forms – such as episodic and digital volunteering – are increasingly emerging, expanding opportunities for engagement and reshaping both the perceived meaning and social impact of volunteer activities. This qualitative research, grounded in nine focus groups comprising a total of 67 volunteers, undertakes an analysis of the experiences of individuals engaged in the three forms of volunteering. While common elements emerge, significant differences are also apparent. Traditional volunteers tend to perceive themselves as akin to activists, yet they often experience dissatisfaction with institutional structures. Episodic volunteers are primarily motivated by the variety of tasks and the flexibility with which they can manage their engagement, valuing a sense of autonomy. Digital volunteers, who are also self-managed, express a strong awareness of their global impact, yet frequently report a lack of recognition. The landscape of volunteering is undergoing a period of transformation, and while there remains a degree of commonality among the various forms of volunteering, it is imperative for volunteer services to also reflect on these distinctions. This reflection is necessary to establish suitable recruitment and retention strategies for the domain of social participation.

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Riassunto. *Volontariato tradizionale, episodico, digitale: nuove prospettive di partecipazione sociale*

Il volontariato rappresenta una forma cruciale di partecipazione sociale. Oltre alle modalità tradizionali, si stanno diffondendo forme più flessibili, come il volontariato episodico e digitale, che ampliano le opportunità di coinvolgimento e ne modificano il significato e l'impatto percepito. Questa ricerca qualitativa, basata su 9 focus group (67 volontari in totale), analizza le esperienze di chi svolge attività nelle tre forme. Emergono elementi comuni ma anche differenze rilevanti: i volontari tradizionali si percepiscono simili ad attivisti ma provano insoddisfazione verso le istituzioni; i volontari episodici sono motivati dalla varietà di attività e dalla flessibilità nella gestione di queste attività; i volontari digitali, anch'essi autogestiti, esprimono una forte consapevolezza dell'impatto globale ma un mancato riconoscimento. Il mondo del volontariato sta cambiando e, sebbene, vi sia ancora un terreno comune tra le diverse forme di volontariato, è necessario che i servizi per il volontariato riflettano anche sulle differenze per definire strategie di recruitment e fidelizzazione adeguate al mondo della partecipazione sociale.

Parole chiave: volontariato tradizionale, volontariato episodico, volontariato digitale, partecipazione sociale, evoluzione volontariato

1. Introduction

In recent decades, societies have undergone significant transformations that have profoundly influenced civic participation. With the rise of digital technologies, the time individuals devote to volunteer service decreased, redefining both the meaning and implications of active involvement in communities (Cnaan *et al.*, 2021; Hustinx, 2010; Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003; Rehberg, 2005; Rochester, 2021). Consistently, volunteerism is evolving, with a marked increase in short-term, flexible, and online forms of engagement (Ackermann & Manatschal, 2018; Meneghini & Stanzani, 2019; Pozzi *et al.*, 2019).

In addition to digital transformation, changes in the institutionalization of volunteerism brought about changes in these activities too. For example, in the Italian context, the 2016 Third Sector Reform (D.lgs. 117/2017) represented a turning point in the relationship between public institutions and non-profit organizations, especially in welfare services. By introducing new regulations for volunteering, the reform significantly changed the structure and functioning of the non-profit sector. Although it formally recognizes occasional volunteers and mandates insurance coverage for all volunteers, the legislation has been criticized for not fully addressing the sector's increasingly fragmented and complex nature (Ranieri, 2024). The COVID-19

pandemic further intensified the pressures on the Third Sector. Approximately 33% of Italian organizations reported activating informal forms of civic mobilization to respond to the crisis (Corvo *et al.*, 2022). At the same time, the pandemic accelerated the sector's digital transition, compelling many organizations to adopt new tools and rethink their models of service delivery (Corvo *et al.*, 2022; Marzana *et al.*, 2021). Despite the continued importance of volunteerism and prosocial behavior in academic and public debates, especially within non-profit organizations, many report increasing difficulties in recruiting and retaining volunteers.

Today's social and institutional context of volunteerism provides the impetus for questioning whether traditional psychological perspectives on volunteerism are still valid. That is, are traditional volunteering theories still adequate to understand today's engagement? Does existing knowledge on continuous volunteering remain valid amid widespread social change? As Yang (2025) notes, while episodic and digital volunteering are growing, research often remains focused on traditional models, overlooking the psychological needs, motivations, and experiences of those involved in newer, less formal forms. To better capture the diversity of contemporary volunteering, both researchers and organizations must examine how volunteers perceive and define their roles and adapt theories and practices accordingly. In light of these considerations, the current research seeks to identify differences and similarities across forms of volunteer engagement and develop a comprehensive overview of the different profiles that characterize volunteering today.

2. Types of Volunteering

The landscape of volunteering has shifted significantly in recent years, marked by growing interest in short-term, flexible forms of engagement – commonly referred to as «episodic volunteering» (Macduff, 2005) or digital form of active participation as defined as «digital volunteering» (Mukherjee, 2011). Therefore, continuous and structured models of engagement are increasingly giving way to informal, time-limited alternatives, (Park *et al.*, 2017; Whittaker *et al.*, 2015), especially during emergent crises such as COVID-19 outbreak (Carlsen *et al.*, 2020). A comprehensive theoretical framework that captures the full spectrum of contemporary forms of volunteering is currently lacking in literature. Most existing models of volunteerism have been developed with a focus on continuous and traditional forms of engagement and, to a lesser extent, have been applied to episodic and digital volunteering (Tommasi *et al.*, 2025a). However,

these different forms of volunteering exhibit distinct characteristics that set them apart and deserve to be understood and analyzed.

Traditional volunteering is typically understood as a sustained, organized, and prosocial activity conducted without financial compensation, within a formal organizational context and directed toward helping others (Omoto & Snyder, 1995; Snyder & Omoto, 2000). Three main models of traditional volunteering are disseminated in the literature. Each of these models focuses on specific aspects with the aim of better understanding what determines the recruitment and retention of volunteers and its impact. The Volunteer Process Model (Omoto & Snyder, 1995) delineates volunteering as a dynamic process comprising three interconnected phases – antecedents, experiences, and consequences – that shape engagement at individual, organizational, and societal levels. In addition, the model adopts a functionalist approach to the concept of motivation, identifying seven distinct motivational functions: social, knowledge, career, self-protection, community concern, self-enhancement, and values. The measurement of these motivational factors is facilitated by an instrument developed by the authors, designated as the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI). The Role Identity Model (Callero *et al.*, 1987; Grube & Piliavin, 2000) posits that sustained volunteering is reinforced by developing a “volunteer role identity”, which becomes a central part of one’s self-concept. Finally, Penner’s (2002) Sustained Volunteerism Model integrates dispositional, situational, and organizational factors, emphasizing the mediation of role identity in developing long-term commitment. While influential, these models have yet to be empirically validated across non-traditional forms of volunteering.

Episodic volunteering differs significantly from traditional models by offering short-term, event-specific opportunities that align with contemporary expectations for flexibility, particularly among younger cohorts (Macduff, 1995; Marks & Jones, 2004; Meijs & Brudney, 2007; Meneghini *et al.*, 2016; Pozzi *et al.*, 2017). Macduff (2005) identifies three types of episodic volunteers. First, temporary, refers to those who engage in one-time, short-duration activities (typically lasting a few hours or a single day). Second, interim volunteering is a regular activity over a limited period (usually less than six months). Lastly, occasional refers to those who engage sporadically but on a recurring basis. Within this classification, occasional volunteering aligns closely with event volunteering, where participation is tied to specific events rather than ongoing organizational commitment (Wollebæk *et al.*, 2014). This emerging form of engagement has gained growing popularity (Hyde *et al.*, 2014; Ferreira *et al.*, 2016; Smith *et al.*, 2010) and has consequently drawn increasing scholarly attention. As highlighted in a review by Dunn *et al.* (2016), much of the research has focused on exploring

the motivations that drive episodic volunteering using core functions from the Omoto and Snyder's Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI). Nonetheless, studies on satisfaction, retention, and impact of episodic engagement remain scarce and often lack longitudinal analysis (Bryen & Madden, 2006; Cnaan & Handy, 2005; Tommasi *et al.*, 2025a).

Digital volunteering encompasses a wide range of virtual engagement activities, including activities such as moderating online forums (Ackermann & Manatschal, 2018), online mentoring and tutoring (Ihm & Shumate, 2022), and designing websites (Amichai-Hamburger, 2007). According to Cox *et al.* (2018), virtual volunteering often involves large groups of individuals collaboratively contributing toward a shared goal. Building on this, Naqshbandi *et al.* (2020) propose a distinction between micro-volunteering – characterized by brief, low-effort tasks on platforms like Wikipedia and Reddit – and macro-volunteering, which involves more time-intensive and interactive roles, such as those offered by the UN Online Volunteering platform. Despite increasing academic interest, a clear and consistent definition of digital volunteering remains lacking, partly due to the interchangeable use of related terms such as “online” and “virtual”. A recent scoping review by Tommasi *et al.* (2025b) outlines several defining features of digital volunteering. These activities take place partially or entirely online, preserve the core principles of traditional volunteering – namely, being non-coercive, performed without the expectation of personal reward, and oriented toward benefiting others or a cause – but offer considerable spatial and temporal flexibility. The nature of activities varies widely, encompassing online tutoring, legal advising, content creation, and contributions to citizen science. Unlike face-to-face volunteering, the identification of beneficiaries is often less direct, and social interactions are mediated through digital platforms. Participation may occur through formal organizations, digital-native platforms such as Wikipedia, or online informal communities. Notably, the review also highlights the growing prevalence of hybrid models that combine online and offline elements, reflecting the increasing diversification of civic engagement in the digital era. Despite its promise, digital volunteering remains underexplored in empirical research, particularly regarding recruitment, retention, and impact, and is frequently neglected in the strategic planning of traditional volunteer organizations.

In light of these transformations in the landscape of volunteering, it becomes particularly important to reflect on how such evolving forms of engagement reshape the perceived role and relevance of volunteers for the community. Transforming the stereotypical public perception of volunteering can enhance recognition of the broader range of practices through which individuals contribute to collective well-being. The traditional notion

of volunteering is increasingly outdated, as contemporary forms of engagement reflect a wider diversity of practices and pathways that may offer greater benefits and value to the community at large.

3. Aims and Scopes

This study explores how volunteers – either traditional, episodic, or digital – perceive and represent their voluntary engagement, and the benefits they associate with it for themselves and the community. Adopting a qualitative approach, the research seeks to identify differences and similarities across forms of volunteer engagement and develop a comprehensive overview of the different profiles of volunteering. In addition, this study serves as a first step to communicate and help volunteer organizations understand the transformation that is underway in the volunteer world and improve recruitment and retainment of volunteers. The goal is to understand how new forms of volunteering have not only expanded opportunities for participation, but also changed the meaning of volunteering itself, redefining its perceived impact at the community level.

3.1 Participants and Procedure

Nine focus groups were conducted with volunteers affiliated with various associations and organizations operating in North and South of Italy. Inclusion criteria were as follows: first, individuals engaging in traditional, episodic, or digital volunteering, with the preference given to those engaging in pure forms of volunteering over mixed forms; second, individuals over the age of 18. A convenience sampling method was employed in this study. The total number of participants in the focus groups was 67 (45% females, average age = 44 years). The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1. The organizations involved in the focus group operated in the following areas: culture, sports, and recreation, healthcare, social assistance and civil protection, environment, protection of rights and political activity, and international cooperation and solidarity.

Participants were recruited by researchers who emailed or phoned the organizations and associations to determine their interest in participating in the study. The recruitment process was facilitated by collaborations with Centers for Services for Volunteerism – Centri per i Servizi al Volontariato (CSV) –, which are organizations that support and promote local welfare services and are present in most Italian municipalities. These organizations

disseminated information regarding the study via email and in-person, extending an invitation for participation. Prior to participating in the interviews, respondents were adequately informed about the aims of the research and were guaranteed that the procedures and data processing complied with Standard 3.10, Informed Consent, of the APA Ethical Guidelines. The study and the instruments were reviewed and approved by the Ethical Committee of Psychological Research of the Department of Humanities of the University of Naples Federico II.

Table 1 – Participants’ socio-demographic characteristics

	<i>Traditional</i> <i>(n = 29)</i>	<i>Episodic</i> <i>(n = 22)</i>	<i>Digital</i> <i>(n = 16)</i>
Mean age (<i>SD</i>)	49 (19.6)	35 (15.9)	45(18.8)
Gender (%)			
Male	38%	36%	19%
Female	62%	64%	81%
Mean years of volunteer service (<i>SD</i>)	9 (7.1)	8 (10.5)	5 (5.6)

3.2 Materials & Methods

A total of nine focus groups was conducted on different dates and in various settings within the Italian territory between April and May 2024. The focus groups were divided by volunteering typology: three were conducted with traditional volunteers, three with episodic volunteers, and three with digital volunteers. The duration of the focus groups was approximately 1.5 to 2 hours in total. Six focus groups were convened on-site at the University of the research unit (University of Naples, University of Verona, and Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore), while three focus groups – comprised exclusively of digital volunteers – were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams. Audio recordings were made of each session to facilitate the transcription of the data.

The facilitation of all sessions was conducted by a moderator, with the assistance of an observer. Moderators were internal authors; observers were external colleagues trained specifically for the role of observer for the current study. The moderator proceeded to introduce the primary inquiries and to elicit discussion among the participants regarding relevant themes. The observer facilitates active participation and thorough exploration of all main topics. Focus groups were presented to the participants as a discussion on the types of volunteerism and their perceptions on their volunteering activity. In table A1, we added questions that were provided to participants. The focus groups were predominantly centered on four thematic domains:

the characteristics of volunteers, the representations of forms of volunteerism, and the meaning of volunteerism at the individual and collective level.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data analysis was carried out using the reflexive thematic analysis defined by Braun and Clarke (2019), employing a deductive approach. Despite the exploratory nature of the study, the researcher actively interpreted the data. Theme generation occurs at the intersection of the data, the researcher, and interpretive frameworks. The analysis commenced with the transcription of the recorded data, followed by the familiarization of the data through repeated reading and highlighting of the transcriptions. In the subsequent phase, the researchers condensed the texts by assigning each highlighted text a code(s). The coding was executed manually, utilizing paper and pen. For the data familiarization and coding stages, six researchers were involved, with two researchers assigned to each research unit. Subsequently, the evolution of extensive themes was conducted by two researchers. In each phase of the study, the researchers individually reviewed the data and engaged in discussions to address and resolve any discrepancies. This process ensured consistency and rigor in identifying and exploring the key themes related to the experiences and perceptions of the volunteers.

4. Results

The thematic analysis of all focus groups led to the identification of three distinct volunteer profiles each linked to specific thematic areas. These profiles were derived by observing the differences among the various forms of volunteering within the primary areas of interest identified in the focus groups. These areas include characteristics of volunteers, the representations of the forms of volunteering, and the meaning of volunteerism at both the individual and collective level. Furthermore, the analysis yielded the identification of shared characteristics that illuminate overarching themes prevalent across diverse types of volunteering. Conversely, traditional, episodic, and digital volunteering profiles are characterized by themes that are unique and specific. An overview of the results is presented in Table 2, which summarizes the main themes and associated volunteer profiles.

Table 2 – Volunteering Profiles and Their Defining Features.

<i>Traditional profile</i>	
Characteristics of volunteers	Group of activists with moral outrage; Promoters of ethical values
Representation of volunteerism	Organized; Gift; Affiliation-based responsibility; Intergenerational differences
Collective meaning of volunteerism	Ambivalence; Bridging institutional gaps
<i>Episodic profile</i>	
Characteristics of volunteers	Zero-cost resources
Representation of volunteerism	Prosocial behavior; Catalyst for relationships; Promoting personal fulfilment
Collective meaning of volunteerism	Beneficial to the community
<i>Digital profile</i>	
Characteristics of volunteers	Invisible volunteers
Representation of volunteerism	Unpaid second job; Beyond borders; Self-management
Collective meaning of volunteerism	Vehicle of solidarity
<i>Common Features</i>	
Characteristics of volunteers	Free time (T/D); Citizen plus (T/E/D)
Representation of volunteerism	Difficulties and challenges (T/E/D); Perceptions of being unseen (T/E/D); Flexible and easily accessible (E/D); Continuous training (T/D)
Individual meaning of volunteerism	Classic volunteerism functions (T/E/D)
Collective meaning of volunteerism	Common good (T/E/D); Support for the territory (T/E); Sense of community (T/E); Social impact and generativity (T/E/D)

Note. Each row of the table corresponds to a thematic area that emerged during the focus groups. Themes related to the individual significance of volunteering were found only in the mixed/shared profile. T stands for traditional volunteers, E for episodic, and D for digital.

4.1 Traditional Profile

The traditional volunteer profile is characterized by a set of specific features. Traditional volunteers tend to perceive themselves as similar to activists, driven by a strong commitment to social causes and social changes. In terms of how volunteering is perceived, they emphasize its collective dimension and highlight intergenerational dynamics, particularly the contrasts between younger and older generations. When considering the collective meaning of volunteering, themes such as the ambivalence of voluntary actions and the need to compensate for institutional shortcomings emerge as particularly salient.

4.1.1 Characteristics of Volunteers

Group of activists with moral outrage. Traditional volunteers perceive themselves as a group of individuals who come together with the objective of promoting change motivated by strong emotions such as anger. Volunteers transform into activists, operating in a dynamic and collaborative manner to address social issues. This process takes place in the absence of formal hierarchical structures, reflecting a horizontal and participatory mode of organization. Participant 1(M) said «Angry, of course [...] and it is something that of course you have inside you, that you were born with and in some moments, it comes out heavily». Participant 23(F) added «This desire [...] to bring change to bring something to society».

Promoters of ethical values. Traditional volunteers engage in their activities with passion and dedication, not motivated by personal gain or recognition, but by a deep commitment to advancing values and ethical principles. Participant 11(F) added «Being in the right spirit is important; to volunteer you must have a remarkable openness to others. You do not have to feel you are neither superior nor better, but you bring openness to listen and follow the needs of those in front of you. So many people want to do it but may not have the spirit to do it».

4.1.2 Representation of Volunteerism

Organized. Traditional volunteering is characterized by its continuity and structured organization, often involving clearly defined and bureaucratic procedures. Activities are governed by established routines within a structured system, necessitating direct interaction with beneficiaries and consistent engagement between volunteers in accordance with predefined procedures. Participant 1(M) reported «A lot of the work that we do [...] is a routinized activity [...] it is bureaucratic, routine and repetitive work».

Gift. Traditional volunteering constitutes a form of unpaid support that generates value for both recipients and those who engage in it. Participant 6(F) said «I believe that volunteering is a gift [...] volunteering is essentially a gift».

Affiliation-based responsibility. Traditional volunteers define volunteering as a collective experience grounded in collaboration toward a common goal. Group activities promote cooperation and a sense of group affiliation.

Participant 5(F) expressed «You create working groups, there is some cohesion, some cooperation, some quarrels of course and some discussions, but also this is the responsibility you take towards the mission of your association and also towards those who work with you».

Intergenerational differences. Traditional volunteerism, frequently associated with old-fashioned practices, faces significant challenges in resonating with the needs and lifestyles of young people. Individuals with demanding schedules and balancing work and personal obligations frequently struggle to engage with the rigid structures and time commitments typically associated with traditional forms of volunteering. Participant 7(F) claimed «I see that when activities become pervasive [...] people that work can no longer participate in activities or young people have to think about getting a job».

4.1.3 Collective Meaning of Volunteerism

Ambivalence. Although traditional volunteering is generally viewed positively, it can elicit a spectrum of reactions, including unfavorable collective perceptions, particularly depending on the specific nature and context of the activities involved. Participant 1(M) affirmed «There can be absolutely mixed reactions. If I deal with migration and I see from the office a queue of people generically very “colorful” or dressed differently, the whole territory may not necessarily like it exaggeratedly [...] I think everybody is happy not to have [the queue of homeless/foreigners] under the house. Even though it is an activity that we all think is right that it is done, we are glad that it is done out there».

Bridging institutional gaps. At the collective level, traditional volunteerism holds significant value for the community by addressing institutional gaps and responding to unmet social needs. Participants 1(M) stated «The goal is precisely [...] to intervene generically on the structural insufficiencies of the Institutions». Participant 21(M) added «Often says “whatever, I rescue that person”, but then nothing is done to seek change, because then the State, the Municipality, all the structures wallow in it a little bit, that is, volunteerism is a big hand that is never recognized».

In short, the traditional volunteer is an ethically driven activist motivated by moral outrage and a sense of collective responsibility, engaged in organized and routinized forms of volunteering that serve as both a gift and a response to institutional shortcomings, while navigating intergenerational

tensions and the ambivalence surrounding the social perception of their work.

4.2 Episodic Profile

Regarding the profile of episodic volunteers, distinctive characteristics emerge. These volunteers are typically highly enthusiastic and generally do not require extensive investment in training or motivation. In terms of the volunteering format, preserving the autonomy of episodic volunteers in managing their own activities is particularly important. This autonomy provides them with opportunities to expand their social networks and contribute positively to the community through occasional engagement.

4.2.1 Characteristics of Volunteers

Zero-cost resources. According to participants' perceptions, episodic volunteers require minimal training and sustained motivational efforts. Nevertheless, they notably benefit from collaborative interactions and the tangible rewards associated with occasional volunteer activities. Participant 49(F) affirmed «They are people who maybe have never been actively interested, they do not have the highest motivation, however, even that little bit of motivation is enough». Participant 53(M) added, «Anyone can be a volunteer. He/she does not need prior training; anyone can do it».

4.2.2 Representation of Volunteerism

Prosocial behavior. Episodic volunteering is characterized as a spontaneous and unplanned phenomenon, frequently motivated by a desire to engage actively in society despite limited time availability. Participant 48(M) shared «For example, an unformalized, unrecognized form of volunteering often happens. Maybe a neighbor, an acquaintance, a family friend does not have food, to take an extreme example, a person brings groceries to his/her house. These are gestures that are often part of everyday life. But from my point of view even that is a form of volunteering that is not recognized by the institutions because it is not formalized».

Catalyst for relationships. Engagement in episodic volunteering facilitates the expansion of social networks by connecting individuals beyond volunteers' immediate circles and encourages the participation of contacts within their personal networks. Participant 49(F) declared «Occasionally I brought my friend, I brought my boyfriend who had nothing to do with it at that time, I mean they were really dragged».

Promoting personal fulfilment. Episodic volunteering is also recognized as a practice that promotes personal fulfillment and satisfaction. Volunteers engage in these activities not only to offer assistance, but also to obtain personal benefits, including participating in events and living fulfilling experiences. Participant 50(M) noted «It is a whim. The comparison that comes to me is a little bit with the PlayStation. I mean when I was a kid I used to play a lot, and now I still have the number four, it just sits there in the living room. Recently I got a game that was 10 years old, and I am playing it again. It is kind of like that, I mean, it is like every once in a while, I get the urge to go to [...] A new event, a new place».

4.2.3 Collective Meaning of Volunteerism

Beneficial to the community. At the collective level, episodic volunteering is seen as a driver for spreading cultural and solidarity-based initiatives, stimulating participation and creating opportunities for connecting volunteers and the community. Participant 49(F) shared that «There were also other families to spend the day and they were coming. They made friends with each other and parents stopped to tell us “what are you doing? If you organize anything else I want to know, because then my son comes; he had a good time, we want to come again”».

In short, the episodic volunteer is a spontaneous and autonomous volunteer who engages in short-term, low-commitment activities driven by pro-social impulses, personal fulfillment, and social connection, representing a flexible and accessible form of volunteering that strengthens community bonds without requiring significant organizational investment.

4.3 Digital Profile

Digital volunteers emphasize the importance of professionalism and technical skills, yet their role remains underrecognized both among the general public and the volunteers themselves. Digital volunteering is main-

ly self-managed and often closely connected to the volunteers' professional work. A distinctive characteristic of digital volunteers is their use of expertise to create a positive impact that extends beyond geographical boundaries, reaching a broader group of beneficiaries. For digital volunteers, the core meaning of volunteering is to serve as a means of promoting solidarity and common good.

4.3.1 Characteristics of Volunteers

Invisible volunteers. Digital volunteers perceive themselves as individuals who offer their professional expertise within the digital domain; however, they frequently encounter a lack of recognition and are often regarded as “second-class” (Participant 54M) compared to other types of volunteers. Despite the professional nature of their contributions, these volunteers tend to remain relatively invisible, due to their reliance on digital and technological tools to carry out their activities. Participant 54(M) declared «I am a digital volunteer, and I felt on that occasion a little mocked [...] There is a kind of ignorance. The digital volunteer is not very well known, so the regular volunteer who does it in presence sees us as “slackers”».

4.3.2 Representation of Volunteerism

Unpaid second job. Digital volunteering constitutes a continuation of work experience, enabling individuals to apply their professional skills for the benefit of the community and transitioning between professional and volunteer roles. Many participants emphasized their interest in transferring competencies gained in their jobs – such as website development or translation – into their volunteer activities. Participant 55(F) observed «It has become practically a job [...] It is really a second job».

Beyond borders. Digital volunteering allows people to connect with distant communities and experiences, transcending geographical boundaries. Participant 65(F) explained «I, clearly, do the [...] part of translation together with other volunteers, and we have, translated some articles inherent in, let's say, all the activities that they do; therefore, the mission that they mainly do on the various territories, in this case, in my case, abroad, in remote territories such as Mozambique, Mauritania».

Self-management. Digital volunteering enables volunteers to independently organize and manage their own level of engagement, without requiring a predetermined, scheduled commitment. Participant 55(F) noted how «In that sense it is an activity that one handles as one prefers. You do it when you feel like it, if you do not feel like it you stop. There is no constraint, absolutely».

4.3.3 Collective Meaning of Volunteerism

Vehicle of solidarity. Despite the limitations of digital technologies, digital volunteering can still benefit the community by showing commitment to others and encouraging solidarity and social justice. Moreover, the involvement and prosocial actions of digital volunteers can lead to positive outcomes for the organizations. Participant 58(F) expressed how «For the online volunteering community and ranging from solidarity to social justice [...] this, let's say, possibility given by online volunteering precisely [...] allows to be actors essentially, to participate».

In short, the digital volunteer is a skilled and self-managed contributor who applies professional expertise through technology to promote solidarity and the common good, often working invisibly and across borders in flexible, autonomous ways that blur the line between professional and volunteer roles.

4.4 Common Features

This section includes characteristics and themes reported by participants from all types of volunteering. Some elements are common to all three forms – traditional, episodic, and digital – and contribute to defining the general profile of the volunteer. On the other hand, other themes are shared by only two forms and represent cross-cutting areas that highlight points of convergence between specific types of volunteering.

4.4.1 Characteristics of Volunteers

Free time. Traditional and digital volunteers portray themselves primarily as individuals – mostly women and retired women – that have more time at their disposal and decide to engage in volunteer activities. Participant 58(F, digital volunteer) said «Most of the volunteers were retired women

volunteers who did not necessarily used to be teachers here [...] men and boys, for example, of my age I did not see anyone». Participant 17(F, traditional volunteer) added «We [...] started out in 10 moms associated with each other».

Citizen plus. Across all forms of volunteering, volunteers are portrayed as a heterogeneous group of individuals. They perceive themselves as ordinary people who, despite sharing personal traits with the general population, also exhibit distinctive positive qualities. Participant 37(F, episodic volunteer) claimed that «Inside the associations you find anything [...] you find who participates for the most diverse reasons, so it is difficult to have a single rule and give a single answer». Participant 21(M, traditional volunteer) shared «I consider myself a normal citizen, who has my job as a professional, however, this is obviously not enough for me, and so in life for various reasons and motivations I have been volunteering in various areas». Participant 64(F, digital volunteer) reported «Kindness. I think there is a common underlying identity [referring to volunteers]».

4.4.2 Representation of Volunteerism

Difficulties and challenges. Volunteering can present challenges, including practical difficulties, stress, and frustration. Although it presents opportunities for professional advancement, it requires a considerable degree of commitment. This is an inherent aspect of all forms of volunteering. Participant 43(M, traditional volunteer) stated «If I had to suggest someone to volunteer, I would say not to do it, because volunteering hurts, it hurts a lot, it hurts because first of all it means committing your person, not only physically but also emotionally, how many times we come back home angry». Participant 49(F, episodic volunteer) observed «I have felt many times almost at fault to say, “sorry this is the most I can give you, because at the moment I do not feel like it, I cannot”». In addition, participant 67(F, digital volunteer) noted «Of course, doing this kind of online study support also has its limitations, because maybe the child can turn off the camera, can turn off the microphone, you do not have the full perception of what is around the child».

Perceptions of being unseen. Volunteerism remains a concept that is not yet widely recognized by the general public. Initiatives frequently fail to obtain the level of visibility they merit. This feeling is shared across all forms of volunteering. Participant 57(F, digital volunteer) highlighted

«Digital volunteering [...] still very little is known [...] there is little information about it, it would be necessary, in my opinion, more information». Participant 27(F, traditional volunteer) added «Certainly, people have to be made aware, I mean, you have to try to get them, to enter them into situations [...] so maybe try to take them a little bit more in on what the various associations are as well». Participant 49(F, episodic volunteer) also pointed out «It took me forever to find out that there was an association [...] that precisely deals with cultural heritage. So not so much my field anyway, but there are probably others, because I do not want to believe that they do not exist, but [...] you do not know about their existence».

Flexible and easily accessible. Volunteering is an adaptable opportunity, allowing individuals to independently decide how and when to participate, which in turn facilitates access to volunteer activities. This characteristic is a hallmark of episodic and digital volunteering, as it enables them to autonomously manage their voluntary engagement. Participant 44(F, episodic volunteer) reported «I do not feel this as a profession or as an obligation, that is, it does not have to become an obligation because when you obviously feel it as an obligation you go and lose the meaning a little bit, so in my opinion the “when I have time” reasoning is right». Participant 61(F, digital volunteer) also noted «[A person] is facilitated in the choice of the time of day and in reducing, precisely, the timing [...] of getting there [referring to the volunteering activity], which in large cities is actually very challenging».

Continuous training. Volunteering is perceived as a dynamic process of continuous learning, through which individuals can develop new skills and broaden their knowledge. This ongoing growth enables volunteers to respond more effectively to beneficiaries and community needs. Both traditional and digital volunteers emphasized the central role of training, identifying it as a fundamental component of their volunteer experience. Participant 1(M, traditional volunteer) recognized «It is training, continuous training, anyway because things keep changing». Participant 65(F, digital volunteer) suggested «And so training is important because I think there is still a lot of work to be done on that as well».

4.4.3 Individual Meaning of Volunteerism

Classic volunteerism functions. Regarding the personal meaning attributed to volunteering, several aspects emerged that align with the func-

tions proposed by Omoto and Snyder (Clary *et al.*, 1998). Participants identified the social function (expanding social networks), the protective function (alleviating guilt or discomfort associated with privilege), the value function (expressing altruistic values), and the enhancement function (promoting personal growth) as keyways in which they interpret the meaning of their engagement in volunteer work. These four functions appear to be shared across all three forms of volunteering. Participant 25(M, traditional volunteer) highlighted «Another common factor, in my case, precisely, is friendship. I am indeed a close friend, of many people with whom I volunteer». Participant 52(M, digital volunteer) said «Now with a little more maturity I have found a channel to devote this kind of energy to others as well». Participant 33(F, episodic volunteer) noted «It is your own personal growth [...] you have different awarenesses in describing the city, you have a personal enrichment». Finally, participant 54(M, digital volunteer) expressed «This part here of the digital volunteer is an incredible relief right now, just in everyday life».

4.4.4 Collective Meaning of Volunteerism

Common good. With respect to the collective meaning of volunteering, all participants viewed it as a mechanism for promoting the common good, through actions directed at improving society as a whole. Participant 57(F, digital volunteer) expressed «So a collection of people who clearly contribute to improve society and leave a world that is also more humane and more just, especially in this time that we are full of economic crisis and also wars». Participant 6(F, traditional volunteer) also said «The common goal, even if you are a self-centered, narcissistic, if you are a passive [...] is the common good». Participant 34(F, episodic volunteer) observed «It can also have a social implication (referring to episodic volunteering). If we are all a little more open-minded».

Support for the territory. Volunteers play a crucial role in the preservation and promotion of local cultural heritage, encouraging participation in local initiatives and contributing to local development. This dimension is particularly evident among traditional and episodic volunteers, who often receive clear feedback on the impact of their activities within the community. Participant 43(M, episodic volunteer) highlighted «Volunteering also allowed to bring out the identity of the area the history of the area. So, this is also the civic utility of volunteering». Participant 24(M, traditional volunteer) also observed «On the local territory I see that there is a kind of im-

pact in the sense that then they recognize a reality [...] there are people who go and ask for resources or services».

Sense of community. Volunteering promotes a strong sense of community among both volunteers and beneficiaries, strengthening social ties and contributing to social cohesion. Consistent with the previous theme, traditional and episodic volunteers particularly highlight the importance of sense of community as a defining element of their volunteering experience. Participant 24(M, traditional volunteer) reported «In my case, for example, I am always driven by the fact that I feel part of a community and I perceive that there are needs in this community, where I as a volunteer can make my contribution». Another participant 30(M, episodic volunteer) explicitly said that volunteering «also increases the sense of community».

Social impact and generativity. Volunteering plays an instrumental role in the transmission of positive values to future generations, thereby contributing to the development of a more supportive society. The actions promoted by volunteers have been shown to have a significant impact on the community and society at large; however, this impact is not always acknowledged by the general public. This aspect is common across the three types of volunteers, who place strong importance on the social and generative effects of their engagement. Participant 54(M, digital volunteer) said «Transferring something or being approached by a young boy or girl who asks you for advice, asks you for things [...] that has immense value». Participant 8(M, traditional volunteer) explained «The community benefits but does not appreciate [...] the community does not appreciate because it is not quantifiable what we do». Participant 49(F, episodic volunteer) claimed «There are events that can happen even once and you already see there is what happens, that you already start to see a little bit of the impact, say in the event itself».

5. Discussion

In recent years, social changes have profoundly influenced people's participation within communities, leading to a significant transformation in how volunteering is understood and practiced (Cnaan *et al.*, 2021; Hustinx, 2010; Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003; Rehberg, 2005; Rochester, 2021). In response to an increasingly fragmented society, new forms of voluntary engagement have emerged alongside traditional volunteering: episodic and digital volunteering – each with distinct characteristics that present chal-

lenges for organizations tasked with designing effective volunteer recruitment and retention strategies.

Within this scenario, this study deepened how volunteers – either traditional, episodic, or digital – perceive and represent their voluntary engagement and the benefits they associate with it for themselves and the community. The findings of this study confirm the emergence of three volunteer profiles that reflect the evolution of contemporary volunteering. These profiles provide a framework to better understand the perceptions, experiences, and meanings that volunteers attribute to their engagement.

In the traditional profile, the importance of social causes is particularly salient. Volunteers in this group are often comparable to activists: driven by transformative ideals, strong principles, and a desire for change, often accompanied by feelings of anger and indignation toward injustice. These findings are consistent with a recent report on the Third Sector, which notes that despite a decline in traditional volunteerism – especially among younger cohorts – motivations related to proximity, justice, and activism remain central in decisions to engage in collective action (Generali Italia, 2024). It also highlighted that there is a clear shift from “charitable” volunteering toward more activist, direct forms of mobilization, centered on themes such as sustainability, human rights, and social justice (Generali Italia, 2024). This form of volunteering aligns with what is defined in the academic literature as “transformative volunteering”, in which the volunteer becomes an active agent of social change and a “global and active citizen”. Such forms of volunteering foster a critical view of the world and promote actions aimed at structural transformation (Ortega Carpio *et al.*, 2017; Zlobina *et al.*, 2024). As Zlobina *et al.* (2024) argue, for volunteer organizations to move beyond a charitable role, they must place social change objectives at the core of both their agendas and recruitment strategies. Likewise, volunteer groups and social movements can expand their reach by designing recruitment strategies that align with “activist” identity-based motivations. In addition, the traditional profile showed a strong connection with the group identity and formal organizational affiliation. However, intergenerational differences emerge clearly, with a progressively lower presence of young people. The structured and rigid nature of traditional volunteering can act as a barrier to youth participation, as younger individuals tend to favor grassroots, horizontal, and more flexible forms of engagement (Bermudez, 2012). This generational gap may also be tied to differences in communication: younger generations are digital natives, whereas many nonprofit organizations have low levels of digitalization. As Dàvila De León *et al.* (2020) point out, social networks play a crucial role in shaping social participation by facilitating interactions among individuals, thereby en-

hancing recruitment efforts. Finally, considering the collective meaning of traditional volunteering, a sense of ambivalence emerges. While volunteer activities are generally viewed positively by the public, when they concern areas such as extreme marginality, they may be met with discomfort or stigmatization.

In the episodic profile, flexibility and the freedom to choose when and how to contribute are fundamental. Volunteers perceive themselves as zero-cost resources as they require minimal training or sustained motivational efforts. Nevertheless, they enthusiastically benefit from collaborative interactions and the tangible rewards associated with occasional activities. Episodic volunteers value the ability to engage on their own terms and tend to view volunteering as a spontaneous, unstructured prosocial activity, often tied to events or informal opportunities (Ferreira *et al.*, 2016; Hyde *et al.*, 2014; Smith *et al.*, 2010; Wollebæk *et al.*, 2014). Episodic volunteering is also recognized as a practice that promotes personal fulfillment and satisfaction. It offers individuals the opportunity to enjoy greater autonomy, form new social connections, incorporate personal relationships into their volunteer experiences, and take part in cultural events and local initiatives. Precisely, this form of occasional participation is on the rise, with recent data indicating that over 57% of Italian volunteers engage non-continuously (Generali Italia, 2024). This percentage highlights the need to reassess existing models of social participation and collective action, as individuals' motivations and approaches to contributing to the common good have evolved (Cnaan *et al.*, 2021; Rochester, 2021). Episodic volunteering exerts pressure on traditional non-profit organizations, which often struggle to accommodate such flexible, unscheduled participation, and their inability to adapt to these dynamics may contribute to the overall decline in registered volunteers (Generali Italia, 2024). In terms of collective significance of volunteering, episodic volunteers are characterized by strong local attachment and an interest in visible, immediate community impact, which reinforces their motivation and sense of community belonging. Despite its non-continuous nature, episodic volunteering should not be underestimated; it represents an authentic mode of engagement that balances the desire to support local development with the demands of increasingly complex personal schedules.

The digital volunteer profile is characterized by the use of professional and technical expertise in a digital environment, with volunteers providing their skills remotely via online platforms to support a wide range of activities, as also highlighted in the literature (Ackermann & Manatschal, 2018; Amichai-Hamburger, 2007; Ihm & Shumate, 2022). Despite its potential, digital volunteers remain relatively marginal and underrecognized by many

organizations, due to both the novelty of the phenomenon and the presence of technological and virtual barriers. Digital volunteers often perceive themselves as “invisible actors” within the volunteer ecosystem, partly because they operate outside traditional organizational settings. As a result, organizations frequently lack the tools needed to identify and effectively engage these individuals. Moreover, some digital volunteers perceive their involvement as similar to professional work, due to overlaps in language, skills, and tools used. In this context, Biermann *et al.* (2024) introduced the concept of “occupation-related volunteering”, a form of engagement linked to one’s professional domain but distinct from corporate volunteering in that it is non-remunerated, non-coercive, and not directed toward corporate goals, while still oriented toward collective benefit. In terms of how volunteering is represented, the digital profile emphasizes self-management and autonomy. Unlike the episodic profile, however, digital volunteering is acknowledged as largely transnational and detached from local or community contexts. Finally, regarding collective meaning, digital volunteers place strong value on the impact of their actions and the ability to express solidarity beyond physical presence, overcoming the spatial and temporal constraints typical of traditional volunteering.

Ultimately, the study identified a set of key aspects that cut across two or more forms of volunteering. This section can be seen as a synthesis of core characteristics that organizations can use to recognize and engage “transversal” volunteers. By offering a cross-cutting overview of prevalent skills and attitudes, it supports organizations in tailoring recruitment strategies to their specific objectives. Volunteers in general described themselves as ordinary citizens united by positive traits such as interest in active participation and civic engagement. This definition applies across all three forms of volunteering considered. A more specific depiction is that of “citizens with free time”, mentioned exclusively by traditional and digital volunteers. However, this notion appears increasingly at odds with current societal conditions, where blurred boundaries between work and personal life make it more difficult to commit to regular and long-term voluntary activities (Cnaan *et al.*, 2021; Rochester, 2021). Transformations in the labor market, rising digitalization, growing family responsibilities, and the fragmentation of daily life compromise individuals’ ability to plan their time and engage in structured volunteering (Hustinx, 2010; Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003; Rehberg, 2005). Another element common to all forms of volunteering is the perception of volunteering as a demanding practice that remains under-recognized by society. Additionally, the representation of volunteering as a flexible and accessible activity – particularly for episodic and digital volunteers – and as a continuous learning experience – especially for traditional

and digital volunteers – further emphasized common features across types of volunteering. In addition, a specific reflection emerges on the individual meaning attributed to volunteering. The findings are consistent with four of the six foundational functions proposed by Clary and Snyder (1998): the value function, associated with altruistic motivation, as well as the ego-protective, social, and self-enhancement functions, which reflect ego-oriented motives. Regarding the collective meaning attributed to volunteering, results reflect a concern for the common good, social generativity, and the aspiration to create a positive impact on the community, elements consistently observed across all types of volunteering. Notably, traditional and episodic volunteers jointly report that volunteering strengthens their sense of community and commitment to local development.

This study presents several limitations. One key issue relates to the recruitment of digital volunteers, whose representation was lower compared to other profiles. This may reflect the challenges researchers and organizations face in recognizing and engaging individuals who operate autonomously and outside formal associative structures through digital platforms. Future studies should focus on capturing a larger number of digital volunteers and assessing to what extent they remain unrecognized by nonprofit organizations. Another limitation lies in the absence of participants who, while not affiliated with formal organizations, nonetheless engage in prosocial behavior independently or informally. As participation becomes increasingly decentralized and unstructured, future research must also consider these emerging volunteer profiles. Finally, this study did not include focus groups composed of traditional, episodic, and digital volunteers simultaneously. Future research could explore the degree of mutual recognition among different forms of volunteering and assess how organizations represent and value the plurality of volunteer profiles in modern societies.

6. Conclusions

The dynamics of voluntary work are increasingly being questioned in contemporary society. In this sense, the emergence of less continuous and more flexible forms of volunteering should not be seen as a sign of crisis, but rather as an expression of the vitality and adaptability of volunteering to new social conditions. This research highlights the diversity of contemporary volunteer profiles, reflecting individuals' adaptation to a fragmented, digitized, and fluid social context (Bauman, 2000). The findings advocate for a re-consideration of traditional volunteering models towards a more inclusive and responsive understanding of volunteer engagement. Within this perspective, it is proposed to incorporate varied volunteer profiles by

carefully considering and analyzing the perceptions, representations, and meanings that individuals attribute to their participation in volunteering. The elements that emerged, both specific and transversal to the different forms of volunteering, represent useful hooks for organizations in motivating people to start and maintain their volunteer commitment over time. Targeting specific characteristics of these profiles can be particularly effective when organizations have a clear understanding of their volunteers' target, allowing for more tailored and strategic recruitment and retention efforts. In addition, organizations that revolve around a stable core of continuous volunteers might complement with episodic and digital volunteers engaged through flexible and project-based formats. Such an approach would allow non-profit organizations to recognize, integrate, and enhance the diverse forms of volunteer participation, responding more effectively to the complex and shifting needs of contemporary society.

The results of the study can offer practical recommendations to support organizations in rethinking how they retain volunteers, especially when individuals need or wish to adjust their level or type of engagement due to personal or situational changes. By considering the specific characteristics of the volunteer profiles identified in the research, organizations gain opportunities to facilitate movement between different forms of volunteering and to unpack existing categories and representations that may limit how volunteering is understood. This can help foster stronger, longer-term commitment in an increasingly fluid social context. It is important to note, however, that this reflection may not apply equally across all areas of volunteering, where constraints or specific conditions can limit such flexibility.

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Appendix

Table A1. – Focus groups’ main domains and related questions.

Domains	Questions
Volunteers’ characteristics	If you were to describe the people who volunteer with you (including yourself), what specific characteristics would you attribute to them? In your view, what do the people who volunteer like you have in common?
Representation of volunteerism	If you were to describe the form of volunteering you are engaged in, how would you describe it? How do you talk about the form of volunteering you do (for example, in terms of how activities are organized, relationships, and timing)?
Individual and collective meaning of volunteerism	What meaning does this activity have for you? What value does it hold for you personally? And for the community?

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