The Impact of Modern Volunteering on Local Community Experiences: The Moderating Role of Volunteering-related Ambivalence

Flora Gatti[*], Biagio Marano[**], Martina Mutti[***], Maura Pozzi[***], Elena Marta[***], Francesco Tommasi[****], Federica de Cordova[*****], Anna Maria Meneghini[*****], Fortuna Procentese[*]

Abstract

Modern volunteerism has undergone a broad transformation, which has made episodic and online forms stem. This study investigates (a) how traditional, episodic, and online volunteering affect volunteers' local com-munity experiences – meant as Sense of Community (SoC), Sense of Re-sponsible Togetherness (SoRT), and social generativity – and (b) the moderating role of volunteering-related ambivalence in this. The results show that only traditional volunteering has a positive impact on SoC, while online volunteering harms social generativity. Ambivalence plays a com-plex role: it weakens the positive impact of traditional volunteerism on SoC, yet it reverses and strengthens the effect on social generativity when it comes to online one–making it positive. The theoretical and practical implications of these results are discussed.

Keywords: traditional volunteering, episodic volunteering, online volunteering, Sense of Community (SoC), Sense of Responsible Togetherness (SoRT), social generativity

[*] Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II, flora.gatti@unina.it, fortuna.procentese @unina.it
[**] Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia, biagio.marano@unimore.it
[***] Università degli Studi di Milano, francesco.tommasi@unimi.it
[****] Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, martina.mutti@unicatt.it, maura.pozzi@ uni-catt.it, elena.marta@unicatt.it
[*****] Università degli Studi di Verona, federica.decordova@univr.it, anna.meneghini @univr.it

Riassunto. *L'Impatto del Volontariato Moderno sulle Esperienze delle Comunità Locali: Il Ruolo di Moderatore dell'Ambivalenza relativa alle Attività di Volontariato*

Il volontariato moderno sta attraversando profonde trasformazioni, che hanno portato all'emergere di forme episodiche ed online. Questo studio approfondisce (a) l'impatto del volontariato tradizionale, episodico ed on-line sull'esperienza della comunità locale dei volontari, concettualizzata in Senso di Comunità (SoC), Senso di Convivenza Responsabile (SoRT) e generatività sociale, e (b) il ruolo di moderatore dell'ambivalenza relativa alle attività di volontariato. I risultati mostrano che il volontariato tradizionale favorisce il SoC, mentre il volontariato online sembra ridurre la generatività sociale. L'ambivalenza mostra effetti complessi: indebolisce la relazione positiva tra volontariato tradizione e SoC, ma inverte in segno e rafforza la relazione tra volontariato online e generatività sociale. Si discutono le implicazioni teoriche e pratiche.

Parole chiave: volontariato tradizionale, volontariato episodico, volontariato online, Senso di Comunità (SoC), Senso di Convivenza Responsabile (SoRT), generatività sociale

1. Introduction

The transformations occurring in modern societies – characterized by increasingly hectic lifestyles, heavier workloads, and delayed opportunities for personal fulfillment (e.g., Natale *et al.*, 2016; Tonkiss, 2014) – have brought about changes in social and community dynamics and phenomena. These changes have also impacted volunteerism, which represents a complex social phenomenon producing effects on the community where such activities are carried out (Tommasi *et al.*, 2025b) – which often also overlaps with volunteers' community of belonging.

Indeed, in modern societies, new forms of volunteerism – that is, episodic and online volunteerism – emerged, characterized by different commitments in terms of time and effort, but also greater stress posed onto the digital component of the activities (Tommasi *et al.*, 2025a, 2025b), which brings individuals towards different ways of experiencing local social relationships and communities (e.g., Gatti & Procentese, 2024). Indeed, non-institutionalized and informal participation is spreading, with citizens being still active in shared activities, projects, and social movements which are relevant to their identity, goals, and life contexts (e.g., Bruno & Barreiro, 2014), promoting new forms of local active participation (e.g., Alonso & Brussino, 2019; Bruno & Barreiro, 2020; Bruno & Barreiro, 2021; Márquez *et al.*, 2020; Zaff *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, changes with regard to this phenomenon have impacted the daily life and dynamics of the local communities wherein volunteering activities take place, with effects on the psychosocial processes characterizing them.

Specifically, based on the different extents of commitment in terms of

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time, effort, and attention to the digital component, three forms of modern volunteering have been reckoned: traditional volunteering, episodic volunteering, and online volunteering (United Nations Volunteers programme, 2021).

Traditional volunteering is described as a voluntary activity carried out to offer a service to someone in need of help, for a specific amount of time, without any financial gain, and carried out as part of a Non-Profit Voluntary Organization (NPVO) (Snyder & Omoto, 2008). Specifically, Snyder and Omoto (2008) detected six main features defining traditional volunteering activities: it is (a) a voluntary action (b) aimed at providing others with a service (c) for a prolonged amount of time; (d) volunteers are only led by their own aims and values – and not by rewards or punishments; (e) volunteering activities are meant for people in need of assistance and (f) are carried out through a NPVO. Differently, episodic volunteering is characterized by a short-term voluntary commitment dedicated to specific situations (e.g., a specific event); such occasional volunteers are crucial when many volunteers are needed for a short period of time (Handy *et al.*, 2006; Macduff, 2005; Nowakowska & Pozzi, 2024; Pozzi *et al.*, 2019; Wilson, 2012).

Online volunteering is mainly characterized by the digital component, which allows for more informal activities, sometimes even without working with an NPVO. Indeed, online volunteerism can refer to activities like administering a website, moderating a Facebook group, contributing to a Wikipedia entry, recording a non-commercial instructional YouTube video, engaging in Couchsurfing (Ackermann & Manatschal, 2018), online mentoring and tutoring, translating, and updating a NPVO website (Ihm & Shumate, 2022). Therefore, its distinctive features are either long-term or short-term commitment, and that the activities are not necessarily regulated by a NPVO; this type of volunteerism also provides volunteers with the opportunity to integrate activities carried out in person, thus creating a hybrid form of volunteerism (Tommasi *et al.*, 2025a). The inclusion of new technologies in volunteering activities can have a twofold effect: on the one hand, by providing individuals with new opportunities for socialization, engagement, and social participation, it enhances their involvement in volunteering activities and in the community broadly speaking (Gatti & Procentese, 2022, 2024); on the other hand, carrying out volunteering activities in a technology-mediated way can limit volunteers' awareness of beneficiaries up to it becoming liminal based on the lack of direct contact and face-to-face interaction with them – who may even not belong to the same local community as volunteers (Tommasi *et al.*, 2025a). Such twofold effect also reflects in volunteers' experiences: indeed, on the one hand the preference for online forms of volunteering can be motivated by autonomy

as main source of intrinsic motivation (Kulik, 2021); however, on the other hand, online volunteers often highlight that being in contact with people from different geographic areas is a relevant matter to them too (Mukherjee, 2011).

Based on the peculiarities of these three forms of volunteering, volunteers can have different experiences and feelings as to their volunteering activities and how the latter is managed – both in relational and practical terms – within the NPVO, when present; in some cases, this can bring about feelings of ambivalence (Vadera & Pratt, 2013) – that is, the experience of internal conflict resulting from the presence of both positive and negative thoughts and feelings about something (Schneider *et al.*, 2022). Such ambivalence can derive from social and organizational dynamics, but also from individual characteristics and interpersonal differences (Schneider *et al.*, 2022). In the case of volunteerism, the former can refer to the dynamics that are internal to the NPVO, while the latter to volunteers' perceptions about the local context in which they carry out their activities and how it perceives such activities back – e.g., when they feel the significance of their activities is lost sight of (Turner *et al.*, 2006) or is not relevant to their beneficiaries, they can experience higher volunteering-related ambivalence. The latter can be linked to volunteers only engaging in small or short-term tasks within broader projects – as it can be the case for episodic volunteers (e.g., Handy *et al.*, 2006; Macduff, 2005) – or carrying out their volunteering activities in a technology-mediated way, without experiencing direct, face-to-face contact with the beneficiaries – as it is the case for online volunteering (e.g., Tommasi *et al.*, 2025a). In the same vein, based on these aspects, also the relationships with other volunteers may vary with regard to the form of volunteerism one is engaged in (Tommasi *et al.*, 2025a). That is, the specific form of volunteerism carried out may imply different rates of volunteering-related ambivalence based on its characteristics and implications.

Similarly, these forms of volunteering can also impact on volunteers' local community experiences differently, based on the different extent of involvement with the community and beneficiaries of such activities. Indeed, activities implying a strong engagement with the community where they are carried out usually bring about stronger community ties, feelings of responsibility, and intent to take care of the community for present and future generations (Mannarini *et al.*, 2024; Procentese *et al.*, 2019; Zaff *et al.*, 2010). However, episodic volunteering implies that volunteers only engage for a shorter period for the same cause, while online one that they could also not physically engage with the community of their beneficiaries at all, only intervening remotely. Additionally, strong feelings of volunteer-

ing-related ambivalence may impact how volunteers experience their community too (Pradies & Pratt, 2010; Rothman, 2011), potentially lowering the positive impact of volunteering activities on volunteers' local community experiences.

Therefore, moving from these changes in the forms of volunteering, from the specific peculiarities of traditional, episodic, and online volunteering, and from the feelings of ambivalence that may stem from such activities, the present study has a twofold aim. First, it aims to unravel the impact of traditional, episodic, and online volunteering activities on volunteers' tie to their community and responsibility for it in the present and in the future – that is, on their Sense of Community (SoC, McMillan & Chavis, 1986), Sense of Responsible Togetherness (SoRT, Procentese & Gatti, 2019; Procentese *et al.*, 2011), and social generativity (McAdams, 2001). Second, it aims to test the role of the feelings of volunteering-related ambivalence in moderating these impacts, based on the hypothesis that higher rates of ambivalence may reduce the positive effects of volunteering activities on volunteers' local community experiences.

2. Volunteering Activities and Local Community Experiences

Volunteering activities can represent a resource not only for their beneficiaries, but also for volunteers and for the whole community they take place in, as engaging in such activities within one's community of belonging can foster the tie to it (that is, SoC), responsibility-taking processes, and the desire to take care of it at the benefit of present and future generations (Mannarini *et al.*, 2018; Marta *et al.*, 2010; Omoto & Snyder, 2002; Procentese *et al.*, 2019). This can make volunteers catalysts of virtuous processes aimed at enhancing cohesions, social relationships, and individual and collective responsibility-taking within their communities.

This can be of specific relevance when volunteers are satisfied with their volunteering activities and perceive them as consistent with their own goals and values, as this can make them perceive their communities as places where the members act responsibly and support each other (Stukas *et al.*, 2005). Indeed, actively engaging in collective actions aimed at improving individual and collective life conditions in one's community – e.g., through volunteering activities – can support the social and responsibility-related dimensions of local community experiences, producing relational goods for the community as a whole (Gatti & Procentese, 2024; Mannarini *et al.*, 2024; Wollebaek & Selle, 2002). Such relationships and social cohesion, as well as responsibility-taking processes, represent core elements of

both SoC and SoRT, which can be respectively meant as the affective and cognitive components of individuals' tie to their community (Procentese & Gatti, 2022; Procentese *et al.*, 2019).

SoC refers to the feeling of being part of and tied to a given community, which is characterized by shared meanings, values, and resources (McMillan, 1996; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Sarason, 1974). It is compounded by four core dimensions, namely membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Therefore, SoC relies on community members being able to create and maintain meaningful relationships among them and with the community as a social entity, which also allows them to self-perceive as members of that community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Procentese & Gatti, 2022). Based on this, engaging in shared activities aimed at taking care of the community at different extents and in different ways – as volunteering activities can be – can promote volunteers' SoC by enhancing positive local social relationships and belongingness (Fombrun, 2005; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Mannarini *et al.*, 2023; Omoto & Packard, 2016; Omoto & Snyder, 2002; Pozzi *et al.*, 2014; Zhao & Wise, 2019).

Tightly connected to SoC, SoRT refers to the representations citizens have about how to live together, share spaces and responsibilities, and relate to each other in their community of belonging (Procentese & Gatti, 2019; Procentese *et al.*, 2011), based on reckoning shared visions, common goals, and planned actions to achieve them (Di Maria, 2000; McMillan, 2011). Its core components are perception of equity, feeling to be an active member of the community, perceived support from institutional referents, respect for the rules and for others, support among community members, and freedom of opinion with reference to one's community of belonging (Procentese & Gatti, 2019). However, responsibility-taking processes not only are focused on present circumstances but can also be aimed at taking care of the latter based on individuals' concerns to behave responsibly for future generations (Marcia, 2010). Therefore, social generativity (McAdams, 2001) can be tightly linked to SoRT, as the former refers to the attention not only to future generations, but also to those institutions and social practices that are considered a necessary legacy to be passed on (Fleeson, 2001). It relies on pro-social attitudes and active engagement in the community (Cox *et al.*, 2010; Morselli & Passini, 2015). Based on this, volunteering activities can be meant as flywheels for the promotion of SoRT and social generativity, as they rely on collaboration, shared norms and goals, attention to everyone's needs, active engagement, and protection and transmission of social artefacts and practices so that they survive over time (Frensch *et al.*, 2007; Snyder & Clary, 2004; Snyder & Omoto, 2008). It is

based on activities geared towards future generations or institutions (Son & Wilson, 2011) and promoting further engagement and responsibility-taking processes for the community as a whole (Haski-Leventhal *et al.*, 2018).

3. The Role of Volunteering-related Ambivalence

Volunteers can have conflicting experiences as to their activities, which can end in the simultaneous presence of positive and negative feelings about them, generating internal tension (Schneider & Schwarz, 2017; Schneider *et al.*, 2022). This ambivalence represents an internal conflict which can be related to individual experiences and beliefs, but also to a mismatch between them and the organizations they belong to (Piderit, 2000; Vadera & Pratt, 2013). At the individual level, it can depend on individuals finding themselves in a state of uncertainty regarding their goals and they activities they are engaged into (Reich & Wheeler, 2016), as well as on a stable individual tendency towards experiencing ambivalent feelings broadly speaking (Schneider *et al.*, 2022); at the organizational level, it can depend on individuals perceiving that their values, goals, ideas, and feelings do not match the ones expressed by the organization they are involved in (Wang & Pratt, 2008) and having to deal with the contradictions that emerge between their vision and the one of the organization (Ashfort *et al.*, 2014). Additionally, ambivalence can also depend on individuals experiencing a conflict between the role that they feel they play and the social structures in which they are embedded (Lüscher & Hoff, 2013; Turner *et al.*, 2006).

The answers individuals can produce to face feelings of ambivalence can be various, relying on the conflict between positive and negative emotions towards the object of ambivalence (Ashforth *et al.*, 2014), up to producing engagement-disengagement dynamics (Rothman *et al.*, 2017). These answers can produce impacts at both individual and collective levels: indeed, when the feelings of ambivalence are related to group-based or community-based activities – as it is the case for volunteering activities – they can also be directed towards the group/community itself, with effects on the social relationships and dynamics characterizing it (Pradies & Pratt, 2010), up to individuals deciding to distance themselves from it (Rothman, 2011).

However, it is worth noting that most of the ambivalence-related literature comes from organizational studies, while a lack of volunteerism-specific studies exists to authors' best knowledge. Therefore, this article can represent a starting point to deepen such issue specifically, also based on the acknowl-

edgment that it may have become more critical to volunteers' experiences as they have become more complex due to modern societal changes.

4. The Study

Based on the above-mentioned theoretical framework and on the peculiarities characterizing the modern forms of volunteerism (that is, traditional, episodic, and online), the present study aims (a) to unravel the impact of these three forms of volunteering activities on volunteers' SoC, SoRT, and social generativity, and (b) to test the role of the feelings of volunteering-related ambivalence in moderating these impacts.

As to SoC, traditional volunteering activities can enhance positive local social relationships and belongingness (Fombrun, 2005; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Mannarini *et al.*, 2023; Omoto & Packard, 2016; Omoto & Snyder, 2002; Pozzi *et al.*, 2014; Zhao & Wise, 2019) – which are among the core dimensions of this construct (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Therefore, it seems possible to hypothesize that traditional volunteering activities may support volunteers' SoC. Additionally, a similar relationship may be true for volunteers' engaging in episodic volunteering – as it still requires them to engage in shared activities aimed at taking care of their community, even though with a shorter-term perspective (Macduff, 2005). Differently, a similar relationship is not expected in the case of online volunteering activities, based on the acknowledgment that such activities can be carried out remotely – that is, they may be at the benefit of communities different from the one volunteers belong to, and volunteers may only have liminal awareness of such communities (Tommasi *et al.*, 2025a). Based on this, the following set of hypotheses is proposed:

H1: traditional (*H1a*) and episodic (*H1b*) volunteering activities positively associate with volunteers' SoC, while online volunteering activities do not associate with it (*H1c*).

As to SoRT and social generativity, traditional volunteering activities can sustain both due to them relying on collaboration, shared norms and goals, attention to everyone's needs, active engagement, protection and transmission of social artefacts and practices, and promotion of further responsibility-taking processes (Frensch *et al.*, 2007; Haski-Leventhal *et al.*, 2018; Snyder & Clary, 2004; Snyder & Omoto, 2008). Similar patterns may be hypothesized for episodic and online volunteering activities too, based on all these forms of volunteering relying on the above-mentioned core vision and values (e.g., Amichai-Hamburger, 2008). Therefore, the following sets of hypotheses are added to the previous one:

H2: traditional (*H2a*), episodic (*H2b*), and online (*H2c*) volunteering activities positively associate with volunteers' SoRT;

H3: traditional (*H3a*), episodic (*H3b*), and online (*H3c*) volunteering activities positively associate with volunteers' social generativity.

Lastly, when it comes to volunteering-related ambivalence, it seems possible to hypothesize that higher levels of volunteering-related ambivalence – with reference to volunteering activities and their management within the NVPO, but also to the perception of their impact in and relevance for the community where they are carried out – may lighten the positive effect of such activities on volunteers' local community experiences in terms of SoC, SoRT, and social generativity. Indeed, high rates of such ambivalence can end up in producing engagement-disengagement dynamics (Rothman *et al.*, 2017), which can also be referred to the social group/community to which such activities are tied (Pradies & Pratt, 2010; Rothman, 2011) based on the positive and negative emotions and thoughts volunteers can develop towards it (Ashforth *et al.*, 2014; Schneider & Schwarz, 2017; Schneider *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, also considering that ambivalence can depend on individual experiences and organizational dynamics, as well as on a stable individual tendency (Schneider *et al.*, 2022), these sets of moderation hypotheses are added:

H4: volunteering-related ambivalence moderates the relationship of traditional volunteering activities with SoC (*H4a*), SoRT (*H4b*), and social generativity (*H4c*) – that is, the higher the ambivalence, the weaker these positive relationships;

H5: volunteering-related ambivalence moderates the relationship of episodic volunteering activities with SoC (*H5a*), SoRT (*H5b*), and social generativity (*H5c*) – that is, the higher the ambivalence, the weaker these positive relationships;

H6: volunteering-related ambivalence moderates the relationship of online volunteering activities with SoRT (*H6a*), and social generativity (*H6b*) – that is, the higher the ambivalence, the weaker these positive relationships.

5. Methods

5.1 Participants and Procedures

The study was approved by the Ethical Committee of Psychological Research of the Department of Humanities of the University of Naples Federico II with protocol number 3/2024. Data collection was carried out between

December 2024 and February 2025 through an online questionnaire, via Qualtrics. Local NPVO and volunteers, social media, and word of mouth were means to spread the questionnaire to reach a nationwide sample. As a first step into participation, an explanation about ethical and confidentiality issues was presented and participants were asked to express their informed consent by putting a tick in a box; if they did not consent, the questionnaire ended immediately. Participation in the study was voluntary, and no compensation was foreseen. No IP addresses or identifying data were retained.

Four hundred and twenty-two Italian volunteers (41.2% female) aged between 19 and 80 ($M = 52.65$, $SD = 16.67$) took part in the study; 29.4% chose not to disclose their gender, 28.9% their age. Most (32.9%) had a High School diploma as their highest education title; 18.5% had a master's degree, 9.3% a bachelor's degree, 6.6% a post-degree title, and 3.8% a Secondary School diploma. As to their employment, most (25.4%) were retired; 24.9% were employees, 8.1% freelance, 5.9% students, 2.8% unemployed, 2.4% managers, and 1.4% entrepreneurs. 28.9% chose not to disclose their education level, and 29.1% their employment.

A huge number of participants (77%) reported to be engaged in traditional volunteering at the time of data collection, 37% in episodic volunteering, and 19% in online volunteering; some participants (39.6%) were engaged in different forms of volunteering simultaneously. Most participants (64.7%) had been volunteers for more than 5 years, while 25.4% for more than 1 year, 4.7% for a time comprised between 6 months and 1 year, 2.8% for a time comprised between 1 and 6 months, and 2.4% for less than 1 month.

5.2 Measures

The questionnaire included a socio-demographic section followed by specific measures, consistently with the aims of the study.

5.2.1 Volunteering Activities

Three ad hoc items were used to detect current traditional, episodic, and online volunteering activities. For each type of volunteering, respondents were asked whether they had ever engaged in that kind of volunteerism. For each item, the possible answers were "*No*", "*Yes, in the past*", and "*Yes, currently*".

5.2.2 Volunteering-related Ambivalence

Nine *ad hoc* items were pooled to detect respondents' ambivalence about their volunteering activities and NPVO, based on Luscher & Lettke (2003); see Table 1 for their wording. They aimed at detecting the ambivalence about volunteering activities and their management in the NPVO, but also about the external impact and perception of such activities. Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with each item on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

5.2.3 Sense of Community (SoC)

The Brief Sense of Community scale (Gatti & Procentese, 2020; Peterson *et al.*, 2008) comprises eight items (e.g., "I can get what I need in this neighborhood"). Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with each item on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

5.2.4 Sense of Responsible Togetherness (SoRT)

Twenty-four items (e.g., "Help new residents to become part of the neighborhood", "Respect the rules of togetherness in the neighborhood", "Get equal attention from the Institutional referents") of the Sense of Responsible Togetherness (SoRT) scale (Procentese & Gatti, 2019; Procentese *et al.*, 2019) were used – that is, based on the theoretical framework and rationale of the study, only the factors about feeling an active member of the community, respecting the rules and the others, perceiving equity and freedom of opinion, and experiencing reciprocal support within the community were selected as relevant and used. Respondents were asked to rate how often the content of each item happened in their neighborhood on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *never*, 4 = *often*).

5.2.5 Social Generativity

The Social Generativity scale (Morselli & Passini, 2015) comprises six items (e.g., "I have a personal responsibility to improve the area in which I live") aimed at detecting respondents' concerns for future generations and the contribution of their present actions to the future of the community. Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with each item on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

5.3 Data Analyses

5.3.1 Preliminary Analyses

First, since the dataset included some missing data, Little's Missing Completely At Random (MCAR) test was used to check their nature – that is, whether the missingness pattern was completely unrelated to the considered variables (Newman, 2014): if the test returns non-significant results, missing data is completely at random, and all the data can be retained for subsequent analyses.

Then, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with principal axis factoring and promax rotation was run to address the factor structure of the volunteering-related ambivalence scale. The sphericity was checked using Bartlett's test and the adequacy of sampling using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure.

Last, the factor structure of all the measures in the study was checked through Confirmatory Factor Analyses (CFA) with Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) with its 90% confidence interval (CI) were observed to evaluate the model fit (MacCallum & Austin, 2000). For CFI, if the value is equal to or greater than .90 and .95, the fit is good or excellent respectively; for RMSEA, if the value is equal to or smaller than .06 and .08, the fit is good or reasonable respectively (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Reliability of each measure was checked through Cronbach alpha (α).

5.3.2 Hypotheses Testing

To address all the hypotheses, a moderation model was run using the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) path analysis: current volunteering activities with reference to the three types of volunteering were included as the independent variables (0 = *No*; 1 = *Yes*), SoC, SoRT, and social generativity as the dependent ones. The volunteering-related ambivalence was included as the moderator after being centered. Age was included in the model as a control variable; participants having not disclosed their age were thus excluded from this analysis.

The absence of outliers was checked using the leverage value and Cook's D (Cousineau & Chartier, 2010): leverage values should be lower than 0.2 and Cook's D lower than 1. The significance of the effects was tested using a bootstrap estimation approach with 10,000 samples (Hayes, 2018): the bias-corrected 95% CI was computed by determining the effects

at the 2.5th and 97.5th percentiles; the effects are significant when 0 is not included in the CI.

To facilitate the interpretation of the significant interaction effects, the Johnson-Neyman technique (Johnson & Neyman, 1936) was used: it locates the regions of the moderator where the effect of the independent variable on the outcome is significant (Preacher *et al.*, 2006, 2007). The regions of significance are those where 0 is not included in the 95% CI for the plotted slope (Bauer & Curran, 2005; Preacher *et al.*, 2006).

6. Results

6.1 Preliminary Results

The Little's MCAR test, *Chi-square* (70) = 85.162, *p* = .105, suggested that the missing data were MCAR; therefore, all data was retained.

The EFA suggested a two-factor structure for the volunteering-related ambivalence scale (see Table 1): one factor referred to the ambivalence about internal dimensions of volunteering activity and NPVO (e.g., activities and the related emotions, rules, collaboration vs. desire for more autonomy), while the other to the ambivalence about the external impact of such activities on the local community and the role of NPVO. Bartlett's test, *Chi-square* (36) = 1,319.053, *p* < .001, and KMO measure, .834, reported good results.

Indices of model fit and reliability for all the study measures are in Table 2, descriptive statistics and correlations for all the variables are in Table 3.

6.2 Hypotheses Testing

The leverage value was always lower than 0.07, while Cook's D lowest and highest values were 0 and 0.47, indicating the absence of significant values affecting the analyses.

The performed model only partially confirmed the hypotheses (see Table 4). Indeed, only traditional volunteering showed a positive association with participants' SoC – supporting H1a and H1c, but not H1b; differently, only online volunteering showed a significant association with social generativity, yet such association was negative – that is, H3 was fully disconfirmed. No volunteering type showed significant associations with SoRT, so that H2 was not confirmed too.

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Table 1 – EFA factor loadings for the volunteering-related ambivalence scale

Item	Factors	
	Activity-oriented	Impact-oriented
1. I have ambivalent feelings about my volunteering activity.	.696	
2. When I think about my volunteer activity, I experience both positive and negative emotions.	.647	
3. I often have conflicting thoughts with respect to my volunteer activity.	.977	
4. I often have conflicting thoughts about the structure and rules of the organization in which I volunteer.	.496	
5. When collaborating with other volunteers, I frequently experience a contrast between the pleasure of working together and the desire for greater autonomy.	.456	
6. I often feel a contrast between the desire to volunteer without the support of an organization, and the acknowledgment that an organization can offer useful support.		.397
7. When volunteering, I experience a contrast between the acknowledgment that I am contributing to the common good and the doubt whether my efforts bring real benefits to people.		.479
8. I often experience a contrast about the fact that my volunteering activity contributes to helping the community but at the same time fails to solve the broader problems of society.		.834
9. When volunteering, I experience a contrast between the importance of contributing to social justice and the realization that Institutions should be in charge of it in the end.		.803
Explained variance (%)	41.35	8.94
Cronbach α	.82	.76
Total Cronbach α	.85	

Note. n = 377.

Table 2 – Summary of reliability coefficients and fit indices for all the study variables

Variables	α	CFI	RMSEA	RMSEA 90% CI
Volunteering-related ambivalence [a]	.85	.95	.07	[.05, .09]
Sense of Community [b]	.88	.98	.06	[.03, .08]
Sense of Responsible Togetherness [b]	.95	.92	.07	[.07, .08]
Social generativity [c]	.85	.99	.04	[.001, .09]

Note. [a] n = 377; [b] n = 352; [c] n = 307.
α = Cronbach alpha; CFI = Comparative Fit Index; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; CI = confidence interval.

Volunteering-related ambivalence showed significant moderation effects on both the significant relationships emerged – that is, the relationships between traditional volunteering activities and SoC, and between online volunteering activities and social generativity.

Specifically, the Johnson-Neyman technique showed that the relationship between traditional volunteering activities and SoC was significant

and positive when volunteering-related ambivalence was rated 2.40 or lower, with its strength decreasing as ambivalence increased (see Figure 1); therefore, H4a was confirmed. That is, when individuals experienced quite low levels of volunteering-related ambivalence – with reference to their organization, but also to their impact and management within the community – the relationship between their activities as traditional volunteers and their SoC was positive, yet when feelings of volunteering-related ambivalence were present the strength of this relationship decreased as ambivalence increased up to it becoming non-significant.

Table 3 – Descriptive statistics and correlations for the study variables

Variables	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Volunteering-related ambivalence [a]	2.79 (1.22) [e]	-					
2. Sense of Community [b]	2.72 (0.91) [f]	.071	-				
3. Sense of Responsible Togetherness [b]	2.97 (0.55) [g]	-.093	.524 ***	-			
4. Social generativity [c]	5.14 (1.29) [e]	.157 **	.294 ***	.350 ***	-		
5. Current volunteering activity: traditional [d]	0.77 (0.42) [h]	-.055	-.020	.082	.106	-	
6. Current volunteering activity: episodic [d]	0.37 (0.48) [h]	.005	.077	.114 *	.054	.045	-
7. Current volunteering activity: online [d]	0.19 (0.39) [h]	-.023	-.063	-.043	.001	.092	.043

Note. [a] $n = 377$; [b] $n = 352$; [c] $n = 307$; [d] $n = 422$.
[e] 1-7 range scale; [f] 1-5 range scale; [g] 1-4 range scale; [h] $0 = No$, $1 = Yes$.
*** $p < .001$ (2-tailed); ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed); * $p < .05$ (2-tailed).
M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

Differently, the relationship between online volunteering activities and social generativity was significant and negative when volunteering-related ambivalence was rated 1.1 or lower, yet significant and positive when it was rated 3.7 or higher; in the first case, the strength of the relationship increased as ambivalence decreased, while in the second one the strength of the relationship increased as ambivalence did (see Figure 2). Therefore, the results mismatched H6b: when individuals experienced low levels of volunteering-related ambivalence, the relationship between their activities as online volunteers and their feelings of social generativity was negative and the strength of this relationship increased as ambivalence decreased; conversely, when individuals experienced quite high levels of ambivalence, this relationship was positive, and its strength increased as ambivalence did.

H4b, H4c, H5, H6a, and H6b were not matched by the results, as these

relationships emerged as non-significant – that is, volunteering-related ambivalence did not play a significant moderator role in the other hypothesized relationships.

Table 4 – Conditional effects

| Predictors	Dependent variables					
	SoC		SoRT		Social generativity	
	B (S.E.)	95% CI	B (S.E.)	95% CI	B (S.E.)	95% CI
Control effects						
Age	-0.002 (0.003)	[-0.01, 0.004]	0.01 [**](0.002)	[0.002, 0.01]	0.01 (0.01)	[-0.004, 0.01]
Conditional effects						
Current volunteering activity: traditional	0.93 [**] (0.38)	[0.18, 1.66]	0.36 (0.21)	[-0.04, 0.77]	0.60 (0.49)	[-0.35, 1.59]
Current volunteering activity: episodic	-0.28 (0.30)	[-0.85, 0.33]	-0.11 (0.17)	[-0.43, 0.24]	-0.12 (0.41)	[-0.91, 0.69]
Current volunteering activity: online	-0.54 (0.35)	[-1.20, 0.17]	-0.24 (0.19)	[-0.61, 0.14]	-1.08 [*] (0.46)	[-1.99, -0.18]
Volunteering-related ambivalence	0.22 (0.12)	[-0.06, 0.43]	0.02 (0.06)	[-0.11, 0.13]	0.17 (0.14)	[-0.14, 0.42]
Current volunteering activity: traditional x Volunteering-related ambivalence	-.028 [*] (0.13)	[-0.51, -0.01]	-0.11 (0.07)	[-0.24, 0.03]	-0.14 (0.16)	[-0.43, 0.18]
Current volunteering activity: episodic x Volunteering-related ambivalence	0.13 (0.10)	[-0.08, 0.32]	0.07 (0.06)	[-0.05, 0.19]	0.08 (0.13)	[-0.17, 0.34]
Current volunteering activity: online x Volunteering-related ambivalence	.012 (0.13)	[-0.14, 0.37]	0.04 (0.07)	[-0.01, 0.19]	0.40 [**] (0.14)	[0.11, 0.68]

Note. n = 300.
[**] $p < .01$ (2-tailed); [*] $p < .05$ (2-tailed).
S.E. = Standard Error; CI = Confidence Interval.
The moderator was centered.

Figure 1 – Interaction effect of Traditional Volunteering Activities and Volunteering-related Ambivalence on SoC
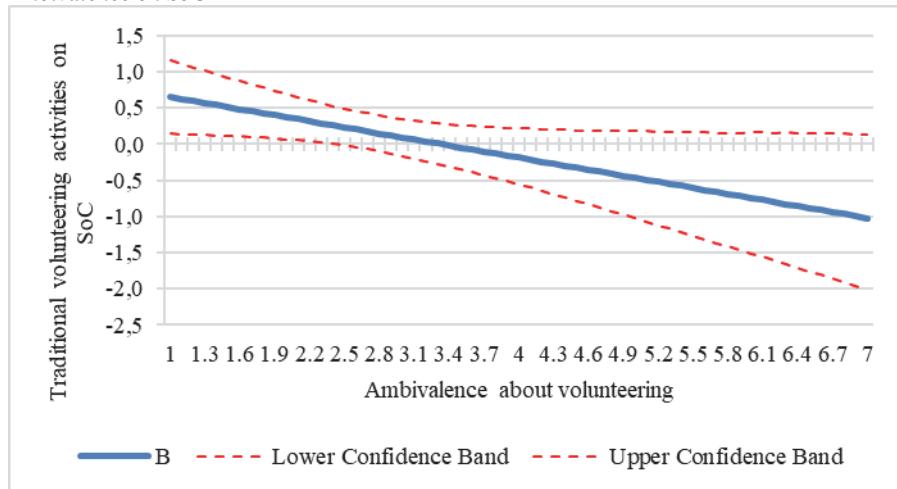
Figure 2– Interaction effect of Online Volunteering Activities and Volunteering-related Ambivalence on Social Generativity
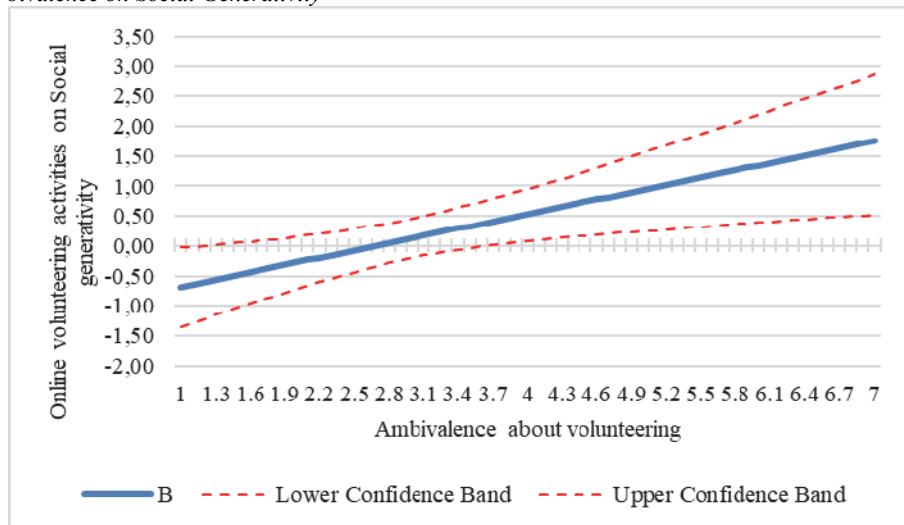
7. Discussion

The transformations that occurred in modern societies have brought about changes in social and community dynamics and phenomena, among which volunteerism is no exception. As an effect of these changes, new forms of volunteerism – that is, episodic and online volunteerism – have stemmed, characterized by different commitments in terms of time and effort, but also greater stress posed onto the digital component of the activities (Tommasi *et al.*, 2025a, 2025b). Based on this, the present study aimed at unraveling the impact of modern forms of volunteering – that is, traditional, episodic, and online – on volunteers' local community experiences (in terms of SoC, SoRT, and social generativity), also paying attention to the role of their volunteering-related ambivalence. The hypotheses were only partially confirmed, showing that these three forms of volunteering have different impacts on volunteers' local community experiences and that the moderating role of their volunteering-related ambivalence has unexpected effects too.

First, as to the impacts on volunteers' local community experiences, the only form of volunteerism enhancing volunteers' tie to their community of belonging was the traditional one. On the one hand, this significant and positive relationship stands consistent with the established literature suggesting that engaging in shared activities aimed at taking care of the community can enhance positive local social relationships and belongingness (Fombrun, 2005; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Mannarini *et al.*, 2023; Omoto & Packard, 2016; Omoto & Snyder, 2002; Pozzi *et al.*, 2014; Zhao & Wise, 2019) – which represent core dimensions of SoC (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In a similar vein, the non-significant relationship with online volunteering activities stands consistent with these activities fostering volunteers' only liminal awareness of the individuals and communities that are beneficiaries of their actions, since they are carried out remotely (Tommasi *et al.*, 2025a). However, it should also be considered that digital volunteers may rather experience a broader SoC – that is, not limited to their local community of belonging, but tied to a sort of global community. Indeed, in some cases their activities are carried out for the benefit of broader communities, which are not localized but rather reckoned at the global level (e.g., volunteers working with the United Nations). On the other hand, the lack of relationship with episodic volunteering activities is unexpected, since these activities still require direct contact with beneficiaries and communities where they take place – even though with a shorter-term perspective (Handy *et al.*, 2006; Macduff, 2005; Nowakowska & Pozzi, 2024; Pozzi *et al.*, 2019; Wilson, 2012). This may suggest that such short-term commitment – which is mainly dedicated to spe-

cific situations (e.g., a given event) – may hinder this kind of volunteers from investing in their tie to their community, maybe because their attention and care are totally focused on the specific goals and situations they have to address instead of focusing on the broader picture too.

Additionally, the only form of volunteering showing an impact on social generativity is the online one – yet this association is negative – and no form of volunteering showed a significant relationship with SoRT. Taken together, this suggests that modern volunteerism may have taken a shift from the original values and goals moving volunteers – even when it comes to traditional volunteerism. Indeed, even though it relies on shared norms and goals, attention to everyone's needs, active engagement, protection and transmission of social artefacts and practices (Frensch *et al.*, 2007; Snyder & Clary, 2004; Snyder & Omoto, 2008), it seems like modern volunteerism has lost its potential to promote further engagement and responsibility-taking processes for the community as a whole among volunteers, as it was rather suggested by previous studies (e.g., Haski-Leventhal *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, with specific reference to the negative relationship emerged between online volunteerism and social generativity, this result suggests that carrying out volunteering activities remotely may rather reduce volunteers' attention to and concern for future generations and for those institutions and social practices that are considered a necessary legacy to be passed on (Fleeson, 2001). This may depend on online volunteers being much more focused on the tasks they have to carry out rather than on the beneficiaries on such tasks or on the broader impact such activities can have – which would stand consistent with the acknowledgment that remote volunteering activities may produce a liminal awareness of the beneficiary individuals and communities (Tommasi *et al.*, 2025a).

Lastly, as to the role of volunteering-related ambivalence, the two significant moderations suggest that experiencing feelings of ambivalence can impact the effect of the engagement in such activities on volunteers' local community experiences regardless of the form of volunteering; episodic volunteering seems the only exception to this, which may again be due to the shorter-term commitment with the activity and organization, based on an activity-oriented perspective rather than on one careful to the broader picture. Specifically, when it comes to traditional volunteering, lower levels of volunteering-related ambivalence allow a stronger impact of these activities on volunteers' SoC. This stands consistent with previous literature suggesting that feelings of ambivalence about group-based or community-based activities – as it is the case for volunteering activities – may rather trigger disengagement processes towards these groups/communities (Pradies & Pratt, 2010), up to individuals deciding to distance themselves from

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them (Rothman, 2011). Instead, when it comes to online volunteering, the results require further attention. Indeed, on the one hand, the feelings of ambivalence enhance the negative relationship between online volunteerism and social generativity when ambivalence is low, while on the other hand they sustain the positive relationship among them when ambivalence is medium to high. Overall, this may suggest that in the case of online volunteerism ambivalence plays an unexpected, paradoxical, role. Indeed, when ambivalence is at its lowest, carrying out online volunteering activities can support volunteers' social generativity, which sounds consistent with volunteers aiming at improving individual and collective life conditions for present and future generations (Mannarini *et al.*, 2018; Marta *et al.*, 2010; Omoto & Snyder, 2002; Procentese *et al.*, 2019) – even when volunteering activities are carried out remotely. However, when feelings of ambivalence are higher, such relationship becomes even stronger, suggesting that, when volunteers experience conflicting feelings about their online volunteering activities and their impact, the more they engage in such activities the more they focus on future generations and how to pass on the needed legacy to them (Fleeson, 2001). As to this, engaging in such activities may represent a path to face the perception of a stronger need to take care of current circumstances at the benefit of future generations, yet the fact that such activities are carried out for broader – and less localized – communities may also end up in volunteers experiencing higher levels of ambivalence as to the management, perceptions, and impacts of such activities.

Taken together, the findings of this study highlight several theoretical and practical implications for understanding and managing the modern forms of volunteering. From a theoretical perspective, the evidence that only traditional volunteering significantly enhances SoC suggests the importance of direct and long-term interactions in fostering meaningful social bonds at the local level. Indeed, a sustained commitment – grounded in stable relationships and active participation – represents a key component for the promotion of belongingness and social ties (e.g., Gatti & Procentese, 2024; Procentese *et al.*, 2019; Zaff *et al.*, 2010). However, the lack of effects from episodic and online volunteering calls for a critical reflection on how modern volunteerism has evolved, potentially shifting toward more individualistic and task-oriented approaches rather than fostering new paths towards and opportunities for genuine community development. The implications of such evolution still need to be better unraveled and understood.

Therefore, on the practical side, these results suggest the need to better understand how to support the engagement of volunteers – particularly episodic and digital ones – so that they can become involved enough into their activities to experience the positive effects of volunteerism engagement.

Organizations may invest in tools and practices that can help bridge the relational gap typical of remote or short-term volunteering experiences – for instance, by introducing hybrid activities or promoting opportunities for shared discussions, dialogue, and encounters. Moreover, the role of ambivalence emphasizes the importance of considering the emotional dimension of volunteers' experiences: providing spaces for discussion and psychological support can help reduce uncertainty and strengthen the alignment with the organization's mission and values.

7.1 Limitations and Future Directions

It is also important to acknowledge some limitations of the present study.

First, memory bias and response fatigue issues should be considered since these findings are based on self-reported data. Further, based on the recruitment strategies, a self-selection bias may have occurred, even though such strategies allowed to reach a broad and heterogeneous range of participants, providing more validity to the results. Despite this, it should also be mentioned that the sample is not representative.

Last, due to the cross-sectional design of the study, inferences about the direction of causality in the described relationships should be avoided. Indeed, it is also possible that individuals experiencing higher levels of SoC, SoRT, and social generativity may be more prone to engage in volunteering activities – be them traditional, episodic, and/or online – due to their tie and feelings of responsibility towards their community and based on their care for future generations.

Based on this, future studies might endeavor to further disentangle the relationships between local community experiences and modern volunteering activities, up to unpacking the differences bringing individuals to opt for a type of volunteering rather than another one, and those related to the impacts each type of volunteering can have on volunteers' experiences of their community and volunteering organizations. Additionally, deepening the relationship between online volunteerism and the structure and functioning of modern NPOVs could represent another useful future direction, as new forms of living the organizational life are emerging based on volunteers' contemporary experiences. Related to this, future studies might take into account the relational and organizational dynamics characterizing NPOVs, and the ambivalence related to such dynamics, to deepen the knowledge of volunteerism-related ambivalence and how the latter shapes across the different forms and experiences of volunteerism.

8. Conclusion

This study provides significant insights into how modern forms of volunteering contribute to volunteers experiencing their local community as contexts they are tied to and where individuals take and share responsibilities for their present and future life conditions. Indeed, volunteerism, as a social phenomenon, suffers the influence of social transformations – e.g., the changes occurring in modern community experiences (e.g., Gatti & Procentese, 2024; Natale *et al.*, 201; Tonkiss, 2014).

The results highlight important differences between traditional and modern forms of volunteering – that is, episodic and online volunteering – revealing both the strengths and limitations in their impacts on volunteers' community-related experiences. First, traditional volunteering emerged as a key factor in strengthening SoC, likely due to its long-term, relational, and locally rooted nature; this supports the idea that consistent and direct involvement in one's community fosters the development of meaningful social ties and a stronger sense of belonging. On the other hand, the non-significant or negative effects of modern forms of volunteering raise critical questions about whether these new forms can allow cultivation of authentic and lasting community engagement and development.

Furthermore, the role of volunteering-related ambivalence appears complex too. Indeed, while feelings of ambivalence seem to weaken the positive relationship between traditional volunteering and SoC, they unexpectedly strengthen the positive relationship between online volunteering and social generativity when they are at moderate to high levels. This paradox suggests that ambivalence is not necessarily an obstacle but can also serve as a catalyst for redefinition of one's volunteering-related commitment, when volunteering takes place in less structured or remote contexts.

Taken together, the results paint a complex and evolving picture of contemporary volunteering, in which social and technological transformations are redefining motivations, strategies, and outcomes of participation at both individual and collective levels. At the theoretical level, this suggests a growing need to revisit traditional models of volunteering to take into account new forms of engagement; at the practical level, this requires organizations to develop innovative strategies to promote engagement in its different forms, provide emotional support, and facilitate meaning making processes among volunteers, while unlocking the transformative potential of all types of volunteer participation.

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